Sans doute commence-t-on à comprendre l’immense dette de reconnaissance contractée envers le grand libérateur de la musique moderne.1

Olivier Messiaen wrote prolifically about his own music. Although the seven-tome *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d’ornithologie* is his most imposing endeavor in this domain,2 the much slimmer *Technique de mon langage musical*, described by Richard Taruskin as “one of the most systematic expositions any composer has ever given to the mechanisms of his art,”3 remains Messiaen’s best-known text. Since its publication in 1944 *Technique* has played a central role in disseminating Messiaen’s ideas and establishing his international reputation. A staple among modernist manifestos,
it has been essential reading for young composers and key in the study of Messiaen’s music. Yet in spite of its importance, and although recent scholarship has shown increased interest in Messiaen’s creative sources, its overt demonstrations of musical borrowing remain unexplored. We argue that *Technique* reveals how Messiaen composed by borrowing. It has not previously been considered from this angle, because Messiaen did not fully equip his readers to decipher his words.

The straightforward descriptions of borrowing found in *Technique*, such as the following discussion of “melodic periods,” offer a provocative starting point:

> Here . . . we shall see some shadows of former times float by, we shall salute some great names of modern times; but all these borrowings . . . will be passed through the deforming prism of our language, will receive from our style a different blood, an unexpected melodic and rhythmic color in which fantasy and research will be united to destroy the least resemblance to the model.6

There is little doubt that the terms “borrowings” and “model” are used by Messiaen to describe a system for generating melodic material by transforming existing music. Messiaen explains that the “deforming prism” of his language masks the origins of borrowed material by replacing its essence, its very “blood,” with the trappings of his personal “style.” To illustrate the prism’s efficacy he furnishes a list of varied examples (T138–150) and then reveals their eclectic sources:

Examples 138 and 139 evoke Ravel; who would have believed that? Examples 140 and 141 have Adam de la Halle for a patron; that is even more unlikely. . . . 142 mixes Mozart and Manuel de Falla. 143 unites Béla Bartók and André Jolivet, with a touch of bird style. . . . 144 and 145 are completely bird style. The repeated notes of 146 are allied to Hindu music. 147 and 148 proceed from Russian songs. . . . Examples 149 and 150 refer to Rameau; they are far away from him!8

According to Messiaen, his project to “destroy the least resemblance to the model” has succeeded. And indeed it has. The melodic and rhythmic markers of his personal style, such as modes of limited transposition and

7. Throughout this article examples from *Technique* are indicated with a capital “T”; thus “T138” indicates Example 138.
added rhythmic values, effectively define the sound of T138–150. Yet the mechanics of these melodic transformations are not clear. Verbs such as “evoke,” “proceed from,” and “refer to” only partly account for the relationship between source and creation. Messiaen mentions only composers as his models, not specific works. This leaves the reader in doubt. Might T138–150 be based on abstract elements of style rather than specific passages of music? Without further guidance, the reader is left to assume so.

Messiaen conceived borrowing by parameter, in much the same way that *Technique* divides his “musical language” into melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic processes. Having shown in T138–150 that he transforms existing melodies, in T223–229 he deploys the deforming prism to alter existing harmonies. The meaning of “Let us look at the works of our contemporaries and try to draw the essence from them” seems clear, but even when Messiaen provides precise excerpts from the music of Debussy and Ravel as his harmonic models, his transformations of these models remain difficult to understand. Ultimately, the remarks on borrowing in T138–150 and T223–229 are overshadowed by a multitude of imaginative new terms and musical examples. Messiaen describes borrowing in coded language, providing only a few of his sources, and never explicitly stating that borrowing is central to his creative process. This has created an impasse that prevents readers of *Technique* from following his furtive lead.

Of course, Messiaen openly affirmed that he worked with certain kinds of exogenic material. His reuse of plainchant, birdsong, “Hindu rhythms,” and Andean folksong has long figured in studies of his music. And although the borrowing described in *Technique* has not been discussed as such, many previous authors have identified individual instances of borrowing. Among them, Robert Sherlaw Johnson pointed out melodic borrowing from Joanny Grosset’s article on Indian music for the *Encyclopédie de la musique et dictionnaire du Conservatoire*; Serge Gut remarked on Messiaen’s use of a harmonic formula from *Wozzeck*; and Matthew Schellhorn and Jennifer Donelson both described cases of Messiaen’s harmonic borrowing from Stravinsky’s *Les noces*. In more recent contributions Tobias Janz and Christopher Dingle have discussed Messiaen’s reuse of particular Mozartian melodic contours;

9. Ibid., 7: “*The Technique of My Musical Language*, language considered from the triple point of view, rhythmic, melodic, harmonic.” Messiaen’s *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d’ornithologie* is also conceived by parameter: “rythme” (rhythm), “couleur” (harmony), and “ornithologie” (birdsong, or melody).


Olivier Latry and Loïc Mallié have observed cases of borrowing in Messiaen’s organ works (without systematically affirming that they are borrowings); Julian Anderson has noted some of Messiaen’s borrowings from André Jolivet; and Wai-Ling Cheong, in her work on Messiaen’s harmonic language, has drawn attention to two key examples of harmonic borrowing from Debussy.13

The present article pursues the numerous clues left in Messiaen’s writings to elucidate the vital role played by borrowing throughout the composer’s œuvre. Focusing on Messiaen’s unique relationship with the music of Claude Debussy, we describe how the facets of what we call his “borrowing technique” form a consciously conceived and coherent compositional process. We argue that the volume, centrality, and variety of borrowing across the whole of Messiaen’s musical output distinguish it from the modeling, allusion, and quotation of nineteenth-century composers such as Schumann and Brahms. Messiaen’s borrowings also differ from the more recognizable patchwork and collage techniques of twentieth-century composers such as Ives and Berio. Critically, Messiaen’s recourse to borrowing arises from a practical need for material. While it seems at times charged with extramusical and even personal meaning, Messiaen did not intend his borrowing to be recognizable to the musical public at large. His practice of admiring, analyzing, and borrowing from Debussy spanned his entire creative life, from his student compositions of the late 1920s to his final works.14 Messiaen borrowed from Pelléas et Mélisande first and foremost, but we have also found material derived from the Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune, Debussy’s piano works, and one song, “La flûte de Pan.” The cases studied here are limited to harmonic, rhythmic, and gestural borrowing and are summarized in the Appendix at the end of the article.15

Our discussion unfolds in two parts. In the first we describe our sources and methods for identifying Messiaen’s borrowings and we define those borrowings in relation to previous scholarship on Messiaen and on musical borrowing in general. This section closes with an overview of Debussy’s particular importance for Messiaen’s development as a musician. In the second part of the article we consider Messiaen’s borrowing from Debussy in...
terms of compositional strategy, using four groups of musical examples to demonstrate the volume and longevity of this activity. The first of these illustrates Messiaen’s techniques of harmonic transformation, showing how different harmonizations of Mélisande’s theme became examples for *Technique* that were also occasionally used in Messiaen’s compositions. The second group of examples focuses on the way Messiaen might have created meaning through the association of his musical programs and his sources, highlighting the potential riches and present limits of interpreting Messiaen’s borrowings. The third group describes Messiaen’s gestural borrowing and shows how he reused particular hand movements from Debussy’s piano works. The fourth and most important group illustrates how Messiaen composed by combining borrowed materials and describes his techniques for stitching together material from disparate sources. The range of examples in the article covers the entirety of Messiaen’s seventy-year career and establishes a more complete picture of his creative relationship with the music of Debussy, as well as his borrowing technique in general. None of the demonstrations in the four groups of examples is thematically hermetic: questions of transformation, meaning, gesture, and composing with borrowings permeate the article as a whole. Our concluding remarks situate Messiaen the borrower in relation to mid-twentieth-century assumptions about what it means to compose, and suggest that Messiaen’s process, while unique, may resonate with the practices of his contemporaries.

**How We Work—How Messiaen Worked**

Even though Messiaen does not discuss borrowing in texts written after *Technique*, two findings made early in our research suggested that the fragmented evocations of borrowing in T138–150 and T223–229 could be extended and consolidated to shed light on the composer’s creative processes. First, the empirical cross-referencing of clues left by Messiaen in his autoanalytical writings led us to a few of his models. For example, Messiaen designates T150, material he also used in “Amen des étoiles, de la planète à l’anneau” (*Visions de l’Amen*, 1943) as “[referring] to Rameau,” and possessing a form “whose shape has some analogy to that of a rigadoon.”

16 These allusions to a specific composer and type of work made it possible to identify the second “Rigaudon” from Rameau’s Suite in E as T150’s model (see Examples 1a and 1b). Analysis showed that Messiaen’s reference to Rameau was not a post-composition observation of coincidental similarity, but that T150 was consciously crafted from Rameau’s score. Furthermore, it was possible to

16. Messiaen, *The Technique*, 39. To orient readers less familiar with Messiaen’s works we regularly indicate the date of completion for whole works according to the catalogue in Hill and Simeone, *Olivier Messiaen* (2008), 541–69.
reconstruct the steps that led from the “Rigaudon” to the melodic material of “Amen des étoiles, de la planète à l’anneau.” These include reworking Rameau’s melody within the third mode of limited transposition, rhythmic transformations, motivic recomposition, and a tempo change. In turn, it was clear that Messiaen used the same “Rigaudon” to compose the slow sections of “Noël” the following year (Vingt regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus, 1944; see Example 1c).17 Secondly, we found traces of Messiaen’s borrowing technique in the sketches for Visions de l’Amen, his only sketches currently available for study.18 Follow-up research on the names of composers and references to their works in the sketches also led us back to a number of Messiaen’s models and allowed us to understand their relationship to Messiaen’s music. Considered together, the numerous traces of borrowing in both Technique and the sketches for Visions de l’Amen suggested that the practice was more central to Messiaen’s creative process than had previously been suspected.

Our research is based on the simultaneous exploration of three immense corpora: Messiaen’s music; the body of music he loved, played, and analyzed; and his writings. Each type of source yielded new examples of borrowing. Harmonies and rhythms foreign to Messiaen’s usual vocabulary can create ungrammatical burrs in the grain of the musical language that signal the presence of foreign material. Confirmed borrowings from Messiaen’s sources sometimes alerted us to the existence of others found in the same vicinity. Finally, Messiaen’s analyses of his own music and the music of others contain a wealth of clues (such as the “Rigaudon” reference we have just seen) that pointed to examples of musical borrowing, notably in his frequent remarks that one passage of music “makes one think” of another.

Example 1a  Rameau, Suite in E, second “Rigaudon,” mm. 1–8 (Pièces de clavecin, ed. Camille Saint-Saëns, Paris: Durand, 1895)

Modéré, solide et décidé ($q = 63$)
Messiaen’s diverse writings played an important role in the confirmation of suspected cases of borrowing. The many veiled allusions to borrowing in these texts greatly simplified a confirmation process that would otherwise have relied on different methods with less convincing results. Triangulation between references in the composer’s writings, his scores, and his sources excluded uncertain associations made by eye or ear alone. Establishing a reliable foundation of confirmed borrowings eventually allowed us to recognize certain constants in Messiaen’s technique and occasionally to forgo triangulation in the later stages of our study.

Technique, the Traité, and Messiaen’s complete Pelléas analysis form the bulk of the “triangulating sources” for this article. Most of Messiaen’s

19. On processes for confirming less clear-cut cases of borrowing, see Peter Burkholder’s remarks in “Uses of Existing Music” and “Borrowing,” 8.
published Debussy analyses are gathered in Tome 6 of his *Traité*, a volume primarily drawn from teaching notes. These address certain scenes from *Pelléas*, but not all of them. In the absence of the composer’s copy of the score, which contained his complete notes on the opera, we have consulted the transcription of Messiaen’s full analysis in Yvonne Loriod’s copy of the vocal score. The congruence of Loriod’s notes with the fragmentary analyses published in the *Traité* confirms that they record Messiaen’s observations.

Although created from his teaching notes, Messiaen’s published Debussy analyses are inseparable from his activity as a composer in that they focus on the passages he reused in his own works. As Timothy Cochran observes, “the composer’s eye has an agenda by definition: it mines works for new material in order to fulfill creative goals; it values particular styles, techniques and aesthetics; it navigates past music from the perspective of the present and filters its material through structural concepts.” We would modify this vision by arguing that Messiaen’s published analyses are repurposed by-products of his search for raw material, an early and essential part of his compositional process. Although “structural concepts” also occasionally emerge in the process, Messiaen’s primary motivation for analysis was the hunt for remarkable musical material in the form of reusable melodic, harmonic, or rhythmic formulas. As an example we might consider the composer’s repeated discussion of the passage from Debussy’s prelude “Brouillards” shown in Example 2a. Messiaen understood this excerpt as the presentation of a cell followed by its development through the simultaneous augmentation and diminution of different rhythmic values. Cochran reads Messiaen’s analyses of this rhythmic variation as “an extension of predilections that guide his own work,” an “implicit point of intersection between compositional and


21. They include commentary on act 1, scene 1, two analyses of act 1, scene 3, and notes on the interludes following acts 2 and 3. Claude Samuel indicates that Yvonne Loriod had to choose between approximately ten different versions of Messiaen’s analysis of the first act of *Pelléas* in order to create the text that is published in the *Traité*: Loriod, “Commentaires sur les traités,” at twenty-one minutes and twenty-five seconds.

22. The date and conditions of Loriod’s transcription remain unknown. Loriod’s copy of *Pelléas et Mélisande* was donated to the library of the Paris Conservatoire between 1994 and 2000 as part of the “Legs Messiaen”; see Bongrain, *Messiaen 2008*, 91. For the four sections of Loriod’s score that correspond to scenes analyzed in the *Traité*, see Loriod MSS, 1–25, 39–54, 103–4, 157–58.


24. Messiaen analyzes or comments on this rhythmic formula in the *Traité* on no fewer than four occasions, three of these references occurring in Tome 6: Messiaen, *Traité*, 1:268, 6:8, 84–85, 155–57.
analytical values,” and shows that Messiaen the composer later employed the
techniques he observed in Debussy’s score.\textsuperscript{25} We would argue, however,
that Messiaen’s remarks, while describing an abstract process, also point to
the appeal of a particular musical object in its own right. We can affirm as
much because we know that Messiaen reused Debussy’s rhythms in both the
fourth of his \textit{Cinq rechants} (1948; see Example 2b) and the solo piano work
\textit{Cantéyodjayâ} (1949).\textsuperscript{26}

If quotation is distinguished by “the use of actual material from a piece”
and noticeable prominence in the new musical texture, and allusion is ne-
cessarily intentional, recognizable, and meaningful,\textsuperscript{27} then Messiaen’s use of
such rhythms is neither quotation nor allusion. While he intentionally

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{25} Cochran, “Messiaen and the Composer’s Eye,” 142–45.
  \item \textsuperscript{26} On Messiaen’s use of the “Brouillards” rhythms in \textit{Cantéyodjayâ}, see the Appendix to
    this article as well as Balmer, Lacôte, and Murray, “Jolivet Revisited.”
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Metzer, \textit{Quotation and Cultural Meaning}, 4; Reynolds, \textit{Motives for Allusion}, 6. It
    should be said that Reynolds leaves an escape-hatch in his concept by qualifying that allusions
\end{itemize}
Messiaen, *Cinq rechants*, “IV,” mm. 11–17 (Paris: Rouart, Lerolle et Compagnie, 1949)

**Example 2b**

Messiaen borrows from his sources, he does not want us to recognize that he has done so. Compare the fourth of the *Cinq rechants*, for example, with Paul Dukas’s citation of Mélišande’s theme in *Ariane et Barbe-Bleue*, complete with a footnote in the score, or with the same composer’s audible allusions to the *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* in *La plainte au loin du faune*. Messiaen’s borrowing from Debussy differs from that of his former teacher.

He might only be recognizable to the “ideal audience” of the composer, although such examples constitute a minority in his study.
As he affirmed in *Technique*, his transformations “destroy the least resemblance to the model.” While the rhythmic content of Messiaen’s score remains nearly identical to Debussy’s, Messiaen’s parametrical isolation of Debussy’s rhythm allows him to transform its setting profoundly. Adjusted to new pitches, the “Brouillards” rhythm is paired with a rising and falling melody of parallel tritones. It is also combined in a new counterpoint with an upper line that adapts three motives from the opening of the melody “Jâti ândhri” (marked X, Y, and Z in Example 2c). Messiaen found “Jâti ândhri” in the same encyclopedia article as the celebrated 120 déci-tâlas. Example 2b comprises the first B section of an ABABABA form, the rest of which is also created from borrowed material. The A sections of the fourth *Rechant* are based on the melodic transformation of an Andean folk melody, “Mol’e, mol’e,” that Messiaen borrowed from the same source as much of the melodic material used in the song cycle *Harawi*. Unlike the musical textures of the nineteenth-century European tradition, in which one or more allusions to exogenic sources might be set within an otherwise original form, the whole of Messiaen’s movement is generated from borrowing. The “Brouillards” rhythm is so effectively absorbed by the surrounding texture of transformed musical borrowings that it, like its neighbors, has gone unnoticed. This sort of structure may have been what Boulez was referring to when he described Messiaen as “accepting materials or techniques from every quarter and then subjecting them to a radical stylistic treatment that enables them without too much difficulty to be integrated in a total overall conception.”

In addition to identifying or confirming musical borrowings, Messiaen’s analyses can also shed light on the way he deployed borrowed material in his works. In the *Traité* he described the “Brouillards” rhythm with the terms

Example 2c  Joanny Grosset, transcription of “Jâti ândhri,” mm. 1–6

“anacrouse-accent-désinence,” placing the “accents” on the highest pitches of the melody. In the fourth Rechant he places the melodic climaxes on the same values and adds a literal accent, one not present in Debussy’s score, on the rhythmic value attached to Debussy’s high notes. Messiaen not only borrows from “Brouillards” but his analysis of it guides him as he composes with its rhythm. The “Brouillards” rhythm is just one example of the way his analyses tend to gravitate around moments that interested him on a creative level. Once this is understood, their constellations of isolated observations begin to read like a collector’s log describing a vast territory of potential creative material.

The triangulation of sources we have just described enables the study of Messiaen’s music in terms of the composer’s intentional and intertextual creative decisions. Messiaen’s intentions matter not because we imagine him to be the sole authority for understanding his music, but because we seek to understand how he composed. The potential of our approach for illuminating Messiaen’s uses of existing music might be illustrated by comparing our reading of a climax in “Amen du Désir” (marked Y in Example 3a) with Caroline Rae’s remarks on the same passage. Rae’s study likens the climax to passages of Liszt’s Après une lecture du Dante (see Example 3b), whereas we have argued that, improbable as it may seem, Messiaen’s model for the climax (and the harmonic material that precedes it) is found in the vocal score of Massenet’s opera Manon (see Example 3c).

Rae, an accomplished pianist and former student of Yvonne Loriod, is intimately familiar with Messiaen’s music. Her study imagines a genealogy of Messiaen’s piano technique through tactile references to its forerunners in the Romantic piano repertory, notably among the works of Chopin and Liszt. The passages she invokes from Après une lecture du Dante share with “Amen du Désir” the “surging crescendos of an orchestral dimension leading to successions of accented chords in which multiple registers are sounded to prolong the extended FFF” and the depression of the sustaining pedal throughout dramatic climaxes. However, while it is extremely probable that Messiaen knew Liszt’s work, it is impossible to confirm whether the specific connections that Rae makes can be linked to Messiaen’s creative process.

In contrast, Manon would seem an unlikely source for a piece of mid-twentieth-century piano music if one were not aware of Messiaen’s special affection for Massenet’s opera. Our observations are based on Messiaen’s

32. The borrowed “Brouillards” rhythmic formula also retains traces of its original melodic profile as well as the final C♯ of its first phrase.
33. Rae, “Messiaen and the Romantic Gesture,” 251–53. Rae cites mm. 102–3 and mm. 308–9. Since both demonstrate the same techniques we reproduce only the first.
36. On Messiaen’s interest in Massenet’s music, see Balmer and Murray, “Jules Massenet.”
Example 3a continued

Rall. \( \textit{molto} \) Un peu plus lent \( \textit{Pressez} \)

Example 3b  Liszt, \textit{Après une lecture du Dante}, mm. 102–3 (\textit{Années de pèlerinage: Deuxième année: Italie}, Paris: Durand, 1919)
analysis of “Amen du Désir,” in which he mentions that a short chord progression heard just before the climax in question (marked with an asterisk in Example 3a) is “found in Manon.” This fleeting evocation, combined with Messiaen’s pedagogical uses of specific harmonic formulas from Manon, led us back to a much longer progression (X in Example 3c), which, at pitch, is borrowed from Massenet, enriched with an added voice creating a chain of parallel seconds with the existing upper line (X in Example 3a), and then developed and fragmented in an upward sequence. This sequence leads to the climax that reminded Rae of Liszt (Y in Example 3a). As it happens, Massenet’s progression leads to a similar climax (Y in Example 3c). The harmonies are not the same, but the modeling of Messiaen’s “paroxysm,” as he calls it, is likely based on Massenet. Messiaen did indeed craft the gestures after his own experiences at the keyboard, as Rae suggests, but it would seem that this particular transfer resulted from his study of Massenet’s opera as a harmonic model rather than from the experience of pounding out Liszt’s Dante sonata.

Many composers work with existing music in one way or another, and many are borrowers, such that Messiaen’s habits may be situated in a broader context. Peter Burkholder has encouraged this comparative approach to musical borrowing since demonstrating Charles Ives’s various uses of existing

37. Messiaen, Traité, 3:250–51: “on trouve cet enchaînement dans Manon de Massenet.”
music and their frequent relation to older traditions.\textsuperscript{38} Similarly, Messiaen’s take on borrowing might be considered in relation to that of other nineteenth- and twentieth-century composers. His use of folksong links him to predecessors such as Bartók, whereas his guarded attitude invites comparison with Stravinsky’s covert use of traditional Russian materials as described by Taruskin.\textsuperscript{39} Messiaen’s combination of elements from disparate sources can be related to what Burkholder calls “collages” and melodic “patchworks” in the music of Ives. But his transformation of his materials makes them unrecognizable. They fail to evoke the act of “remembering past events” or “stream-of-consciousness” typical of Ives’s comparable efforts or, for that matter, the collage works of Berio and Rochberg.\textsuperscript{40} In Messiaen’s music borrowing is hidden, fragmented by parameter, and has largely gone unnoticed.\textsuperscript{41}

This article concentrates on the hows of the compositional process, leaving aside certain whys, notably questions of influence. Harold Bloom’s concepts relating to “anxiety of influence” among nineteenth-century poets and their later musicological applications in the work of Kevin Korsyn and others might be adapted to interpret Messiaen’s borrowings as “misreadings” of Debussy,\textsuperscript{42} but such forays into Freudian psychology and literary theory lie beyond the ambitions of our present project. In passing, however, we might echo Christopher Reynolds’s reticence concerning the usefulness of Bloom’s theories for discussing composers (such as Messiaen) who borrow as frequently from anonymous or traditional sources as from “towering pillars of the canon.” As Reynolds puts it, “There are many motivations for allusion other than struggling against a domineering and all-capable father; there are strong reasons to create other than sublimation or wish fulfillment.”\textsuperscript{43} The ecumenical diversity of Messiaen’s sources, particularly their even and largely irony-free deployment within his music, threaten to flatten the hierarchies upon which Bloom’s theories repose. Furthermore, Messiaen’s profound and public love of Debussy’s music does not fit into Bloom’s adversarial model, in which strong artists, not necessarily formal innovators, resist influence and only unconsciously yield to past models by writing against them.\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{38} See notably Burkholder’s “Uses of Existing Music,” \textit{All Made of Tunes}, and “Borrowing.”
\textsuperscript{39} Taruskin, \textit{Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions}.
\textsuperscript{41} Alongside conscious compositional borrowing, other types of allusion and authorial intertextuality exist in Messiaen’s music but are not considered here. These include his evocation of traditional forms and genres such as the rondeau, fugue, theme and variations, prelude, \textit{intermède}, and fanfare, not to mention his use of canon and isorhythm or his timbral references to Balinese gamelan in works such as the \textit{Trois petites liturgies} and \textit{Turangalîla-Symphonie}.
\textsuperscript{42} See Korsyn, “Towards a New Poetics,” and Straus, \textit{Renaking the Past}.
\textsuperscript{43} Reynolds, \textit{Motives for Allusion}, 15–16, 166–67. On musicological applications of Bloom’s theories, see Taruskin, “Revising Revision,” and Scherzinger, “‘New Poetics.’”
\textsuperscript{44} See Taruskin, “Revising Revision,” 356–57.
Messiaen’s relationship with the music of Debussy may be complicated, but it is not antagonistic in this sense.

**Why Debussy?**

Messiaen’s oeuvre as a whole grants an exceptional place to the music of Debussy, from the evocative titles of his *Préludes* (1929) to his perennial analyses of *Pelléas et Mélisande*. As a young music critic Messiaen measured premières against works by Debussy and regularly invoked Debussy’s music in interviews, teaching tools, lectures, and prefaces. Debussy is the most frequently cited composer in Messiaen’s interviews with Claude Samuel; four of Messiaen’s *Vingt leçons d’harmonie* (1939) refer to Debussy in their title; Debussy’s name heads a chapter of *Technique*, and an entire tome of the *Traité* is devoted to his music, aesthetic, and legacy. Debussy’s music also possessed the power to strike an intensely emotional chord in Messiaen. At fifty he recalled “weeping like a fountain” the first time he sang and played *Pelléas*, and he is said to have avoided analyzing “La chevelure” when studying the *Chansons de Bilitis* with his students because the song invariably brought him to tears.

While Debussy is omnipresent in Messiaen’s writings and analyses, and is often framed in terms of influence, Messiaen’s manner of articulating that influence evolved. From the late 1930s through the 1950s he openly affirmed that Debussy was an important creative source for his music. Subsequently, as his reputation grew, he distanced himself from these earlier declarations, continuing to admire Debussy but downplaying his influence. During this same period, however, *Pelléas* remained an essential element of Messiaen’s autobiography. When speaking about his early encounters with Debussy’s music, Messiaen invariably mentioned the importance of *Pelléas*. The structure of these recollections follows a pattern established in 1952:

To finish, a marvelous story that I have often told my students at the Conservatoire de Paris: it is the story of a young boy aged nine and a half who from

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45. This section (“Why Debussy?”) is partly adapted from Balmer and Murray, “Repenser la réception.”
46. See Médicis, “Olivier Messiaen.” Hereafter, *Pelléas et Mélisande* will be referred to as “*Pelléas*.”
49. See Balmer and Murray, “Repenser la réception.”
the age of eight had an unstoppable passion for music, played the piano and composed with typical awkwardness. He came to Nantes in 1918, with his family, and there met his first harmony teacher who took a liking to him from the first instant and refused any payment for the lessons he gave. After six months, pupil and teacher needed to separate because the little boy went to Paris with his family. What did the teacher give to the child as a souvenir of these beautiful lessons? A classic work, a harmony treatise? No: he gave him a score which at the time was the height of daring (rather like serial music, or musique concrète, or a sonata by Pierre Boulez nowadays). He gave him Pelléas et Mélisande by [Claude] Debussy! This present served to confirm the young pupil’s vocation, and point him in the direction he wanted. The pupil was me; the master was Jean de Gibon.50

Messiaen repeatedly recounted this musical epiphany in texts written from the 1950s to the 1980s.51 The story soon became solidly anchored in his biographies, with the result that Gibon’s gift has long been understood as a watershed moment in Messiaen’s life.52 Not only did Pelléas determine Messiaen’s vocation, it marked the end of his provincial childhood and his passage to the professionalizing rigor of the Paris Conservatoire. Furthermore, by placing the Pelléas story before a description of those studies, Messiaen’s narrative asserts his intellectual precocity and independence from institutional influence.

Study of Pelléas also constituted a rite of passage in Messiaen’s classes, completing the cycle of transmission begun with Jean de Gibon. Commentary in the Traité, almost certainly by Yvonne Loriod, affirms, “Every year, Olivier Messiaen analyzed [Pelléas] for his students, playing it at the piano, singing it, always adding new remarks. He knew Pelléas et Mélisande so well that he analyzed it from memory.”53 In the Traité Loriod also describes the second of two analyses of act 1, scene 3, as Messiaen’s final analysis. On his deathbed he returned to the score that had inspired him to become a composer, effectively making Pelléas the alpha and omega of his life in music. These considerations, together with the prominence of musical examples from Pelléas in Technique, make Messiaen’s reuse of Debussy’s opera a natural starting point for exploring the mechanics of his borrowing techniques.


51. See Goléa, Rencontres, 27 (interview of 1958); Boivin and Haine, “Trois entretiens,” 35 (1958); Samuel, Entretiens, 124 (1967); Cadieu, “Olivier Messiaen,” 184 (1968); Szersnovicz, “Olivier Messiaen,” 39 (1987); and Massin, Olivier Messiaen, 38 (1989). (We refer to “texts written” rather than the interviews themselves because Messiaen’s interviews, although presented as oral exchanges, were carefully constructed texts that often underwent several drafts before reaching publication.)

52. See, for example, Halbreich’s adaptation of the Pelléas gift anecdote, which is a clear but unattributed paraphrase of Messiaen’s own accounts: Halbreich, Olivier Messiaen, 28.

Harmonic Transformations of *Pelléas et Mélisande*

Many of the harmonic examples in *Technique* are transformations of passages in *Pelléas*. Here we consider two groups of such examples: those based on Mélisande’s theme and those based on the opening of act 3, scene 1. Together they demonstrate the range of techniques used by Messiaen to transform borrowed harmonies for his music. In the *Traité* he explains that he particularly loves act 1, scene 3, of *Pelléas*, “because of the beauty of its harmonies and its orchestration, and especially because of the setting, which is perfectly suited to Debussy.”

He further describes the scene’s opening as “the prettiest harmonization of Mélisande’s theme,” situating it as the theme’s locus classicus (see Example 4a). This moment remarked on by Messiaen the pedagogue is also the source of a harmonic formula used by Messiaen the composer. His reference to Mélisande’s theme in describing T276 (Example 4b) allowed us to connect this formula from the “List of Connections of Chords” to a specific passage in *Pelléas*, the opening of act 1, scene 3. Messiaen reduces Debussy’s harmonies and sets them to a new rhythm, a simple non-retrogradable unit that he often used. But the presentation of T276 does not analyze the harmonies.

**Example 4a**  Debussy, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, act 1, scene 3, m. 1 (vocal score, Paris: Durand, 1902–7, p. 39)

Devant le château.

*Lent, mélancolique et doux*

54. Ibid., 6:81: “J’ai préféré ce 3e tableau du 1er acte, à cause de la beauté de ses harmonies et de son orchestration, et surtout à cause du décor qui convenait parfaitement à Debussy.”

Music examples from Messiaen’s *Technique* are reproduced from the French edition of 1999.

55. Loriod MSS, 39: “Ici, plus jolie harmonisation [du thème de Mélisande].”

56. Messiaen, *The Technique*, 53: “276 is a contraction of the theme of Debussy’s Mélisande.”
indicate where they can be found in Pelléas, or show the formula at work in Messiaen’s music. For the casual reader, the provenance and sense of T276, like the collection of chord progressions in which it is found, has remained enigmatic.

The meaningful connection of T276 to the Mélisande theme makes it a good starting point for exploring how Messiaen created the harmonic examples of Technique. Messiaen’s particular manner of reducing Debussy’s harmonies, his “contraction” as he terms it, is a transformation that prepares the borrowed excerpt for life grafted into the harmonic fabric of a new composition. As already mentioned, Messiaen refers to the alteration of borrowed melodies and harmonies as a “transforming ‘vision’” or “deforming prism.”

More than a simple reduction, the deforming prism homogenizes the harmonies of the scene’s first three beats, condensing them within the range of the vocal score’s lower two staves. The Debussian rocking between neighboring harmonies is abbreviated to a simple expansion and contraction subsuming both figuration and chord tones. In the upper voice Mélisande’s theme is reduced to its melodic essence: a rising and falling fourth.

Example T266 bears no commentary but is a very similar expansion and contraction topped by a rising and falling fourth (see Example 4c). Building on the previous analysis, we located its source just a few measures after that of T276, at Mélisande’s words “Et quelles forêts, quelles forêts tout autour des palais! . . .” (see Example 4d). We can assume that Messiaen was sensitive to the presence of Mélisande’s theme at this particular moment because, although it is absent from the vocal score, Yvonne Loriod added the theme as played by the violins to her transcription of Messiaen’s notes.

Unlike T276, which is only associated with Mélisande, or T266, which bears no commentary at all, Messiaen indicates that T224 comes from act 4, scene 4, of Pelléas. Most importantly, he uses T224 in an illustration of harmonic borrowing at work in his music. The model for T224 is found just before the portentous closing of the castle gates, linking the two

57. “Transforming ‘vision’” is our own translation of “ce ‘regard’ transformateur” (page 72 of the 1999 French edition of Technique), which is inadequately translated in Messiaen, The Technique, 52, as a “transforming ‘look.’” For references to the “prisme déformant,” see Messiaen, Technique, 33, 46 (Messiaen, The Technique, 32, 39).

58. Messiaen transcribes this progression in his analysis of the scene: Messiaen, Traité, 6:83.
clauses of Mélisande’s “Si, si, je suis heureuse, mais je suis triste...” (see Example 5a). To create T224 (Example 5b) Messiaen eliminated Mélisande’s A♭ and added a mezzo-forte to her theme as it appears in the left hand of the vocal score.59 This marking, absent from both the vocal and the orchestral scores of Pelléas, brings Mélisande’s theme to the fore and reinforces the presence of her character in a harmonic formula that circumvents her voice.60

Messiaen indicates that he uses sequence to transform T224 into T225 (see Example 5c). While it is true that the first measure of T225 is sequenced down a minor third, sequence alone cannot account for its content, notably the upper line and first-beat D minor triad not present in T224. These differences might lead one to assume that Messiaen’s “deforming prism” is a

59. In the orchestral score Mélisande’s theme is played by the English horn.
60. It should be recalled that the vocal score of Pelléas et Mélisande is not a reduction but a version of the score that predates the opera’s orchestration.

Example 5b  Messiaen, T224
metaphor for free reinterpretation rather than the careful transformation of existing elements. The relationship between T224 and T225 can only be understood by returning to the passage from which T224 is drawn (Example 5a). Doing so reveals that the D minor chord on the first beat of T225 punctuates Pelléas’s “heureuse” at the end of the phrase that precedes Mélisande’s. The new upper line of T225 uses pitches from Mélisande’s melody (the B and A of her “heureuse” and the G of her “triste”) to enrich the borrowed harmonies. Although Messiaen does not make the connection, a later example, T233, sequences T225 a further term downward (see Example 5d). Messiaen presents T225 and T233 as examples of the way he might theoretically compose a sequence. Devoid of performance indications, they are unfinished, precomposed elements of the composer’s workshop waiting to be deployed within a new piece of music.

In T226 (Example 5e), through what he calls “another transformation” of T224, Messiaen finally unveils the deforming prism in use in one of his works, the piano prelude “Un reflet dans le vent . . .” Unlike T225, T226 draws exclusively from the progression in T224. Messiaen derives two and a half measures of his prelude from the harmonies in T224 and their downward sequence (see the harmonies marked X and Y in Examples 5b and 5e). Textural and rhythmic transformations set T224’s harmonies in a volatile arpeggiated texture that blurs chord changes, staggering them between the pianist’s hands. Had the composer not pointed out this brief moment of harmonic borrowing, it would likely have remained unnoticed amid the intricate fingerwork. Messiaen’s circu- litous presentation obscures as much as it reveals and makes it difficult for the reader of Technique to understand the relationship between Pelléas and “Un reflet dans le vent . . .” Even those who manage to understand the operations of T224–226 are unlikely to conclude that borrowing is central to the composer’s creative method.

61. Messiaen, The Technique, 52.
Messiaen’s use of T225 would have made for a clearer demonstration of his harmonic borrowing. Much longer than the formula used in “Un reflet dans le vent . . . ,” Messiaen employs T225 at pitch in the prelude “Instants défunts,” where it is revoiced and enriched with a new melodic line (see Example 5f). Furthermore, the song “Le collier” (Poèmes pour Mi, 1936) uses the extended version of T225 seen in T233 (see Example 5g).
Although the progression is transposed, and although the harmony on the first beat is revoiced, the borrowing in “Le collier” sounds more like Pelléas because the vocal part of Messiaen’s setting draws directly from the Debussian formula instead of transforming it with a new melodic line as in “Instants défuntas.”
The Debussian borrowings of Messiaen’s *Préludes*, composed in 1928 and 1929, bring to mind Rachel Brunschwig’s recollections of the Dupré organ class during those years. Brunschwig noted that to prepare organ improvisations Messiaen “kept little numbered pieces of paper in his pockets on which he noted harmonic formulas, modal turns, progressions, some of which had been collected from Debussy’s music.”\(^{62}\) It seems likely that the formulas of those early improvisations were similar to those that Messiaen used in his *Préludes* and later included as examples in *Technique*.

Thus far we have shown Messiaen applying simple transformations to his harmonic models: selective reduction, sequence, the addition of new voices, and the use of new rhythms and textures. Sometimes he combined several of these procedures to effect more complex changes. Two versions of a simple two-chord progression heard before Méliande’s song from the tower at the opening of act 3, scene 1, demonstrate this point. The first is a complicated accumulation of transformations presented by Messiaen in T189–192. The second is a more straightforward reuse of Debussy’s sequential development of the same harmonies later in the same scene, at the unforgettable moment when Pelléas wraps himself in Méliande’s hair, an episode that has caused the entire scene to be known as the “scène des cheveux.” Messiaen himself regularly used this sobriquet to describe both the scene and the characteristic two-chord progression that he isolates in T189—the rising movement, under a B pedal, from a root position A minor triad to a root position D major triad.

Example T189 is found in a section of Chapter 13 entitled “Use of Added Notes.”\(^{63}\) In this passage Messiaen explores two approaches. The first is the addition of notes to traditional chord types.\(^{64}\) The second, and the object of our attention here, is the addition of notes to borrowed harmonic progressions, an important component of his deforming prism. Although most of the musical examples in this chapter of *Technique* illustrate the first category of added notes, T189–192 refer to the second category and involve borrowed harmonies. Messiaen explains that T189 is transformed to make T190, which, with different added notes, becomes T191. He in turn shows T191 at work in T192, an excerpt from the opening of his song “La maison” (*Poèmes pour Mi*). Although the transformation of T189 into T191 is more complicated than Messiaen implies, it is possible to deduce his process,

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64. Such as a sixth or augmented fourth added to major or minor triads, dominant seventh chords, or dominant ninth chords.
a series of simple transformations, each a different facet of the deforming prism (see Example 6a):

1. Redistribution: the common tone A from the chord progression A minor–D major is moved to the bass and the “added note” B, which formerly spanned three octaves, is compacted into a single upper voice.
2. Transposition: the progression is transposed up a major second.
3. Sequence: the resulting two-chord progression is sequenced up a minor third.
4. Partial retrogradation: the order of chords in the second term of the sequence is reversed.
5. Repetition: placed in a new rhythm and meter, the resulting four-chord progression is repeated to produce T190.
6. Enrichment: T190 is enriched with added notes and octave doubling to produce T191.
7. New texture and setting: in “La maison” (T192, Example 6b) Messiaen creates the piano part by alternating the left and right hand of T191, with the voice doubling the formula’s upper line.

Over the course of act 3, scene 1, Debussy uses the same progression, revoicing it to create rocking empty fifths in the lower voices. It is first heard on page 127 of the vocal score, at the moment when Mélisande’s hair envelops Pelléas, and is further developed on the following page in an inexact sequence (see Example 7a). The harmonies are the same as those heard in T189, but Debussy transposes the earlier progression down a major third (the new pedal is G rather than B). This new formulation led to our identification of several other borrowed passages in Messiaen’s works. These in turn allowed us to infer that his inclusion of T189 in Technique is a decoy that masks his borrowing of this sequence from later in the same scene of Pelléas. Messiaen’s association of T189 with the later sequence results from observing Debussy’s development of harmonic material over the course of a key dramatic passage.

65. T190 also returns as T230 at the head of a list of harmonic sequences.
66. In relation to the root of each chord Messiaen adds an augmented fourth (F), a second (F♯), a second (A), and an augmented fourth (G♯), on the first, second, third, and fourth chords respectively.
67. In addition to the excerpt from “La maison” given here we have identified two further uses of the harmonies in T191. In m. 9 of “Ta voix” (also from Poèmes pour Mi) the progression from “La maison” is further developed by an upward tritone sequence, effectively creating a four-stage sequence from the original pair of borrowed chords. The earliest occurrence of the formula in Messiaen’s music is hybridized with a borrowed gesture in the prelude “Le nombre léger,” and is illustrated in Example 10.
68. The same chords are present in other transpositions on pages 127 and 128 of the vocal score. In her copy of the score (Loriod MSS, 128) Yvonne Loriod notes that Messiaen found the passage in Example 7a “the most harmonically refined” (“le plus raffiné harmoniquement”).
69. Messiaen, Traité, 2:103; Messiaen and Loriod-Messiaen, Ravel, 45.
Example 6a  Harmonic transformations of Debussy’s *scène des cheveux* progression in Messiaen, T189–191

![Diagram of harmonic transformations in T189](image)

Example 6b  Use of T191 in T192 (T192 is an excerpt from Messiaen, *Poèmes pour Mi*, “La maison,” mm. 2–3)

![Diagram of use of T191 in T192](image)
In place of Debussy’s inexact sequence, the terms of Messiaen’s sequence are strict transpositions of one another. He uses his version of the sequence in several ways. In the central section of “Dieu parmi nous” (La Nativité du Seigneur, 1936) the sequence begins at the same pitch level as in Example 7a and its characteristic bass stands out in the contrasting registration of the organ pedals (see Example 7b). When the same sequence is used in the Rondeau for piano (1943) it is texturally closer to its model than in “Dieu parmi nous” (see Example 7c). A fragment of the sequence is introduced by a dominant seventh chord that recalls the pitch level and spacing of the F minor chord that opens the sequence in Example 7a, before shifting back to the level of the scene’s opening (A minor to D major under a B pedal). Messiaen’s earliest borrowing of the sequence, in La Sainte Bohème, an unpublished work for chorus and orchestra composed in 1930 for the qualifying round of the Prix de Rome, confirms that, like T224 and its

Example 7c  Messiaen, *Rondeau*, mm. 8–10 (Paris: Leduc, 1943)
variations, this formula was present in the composer’s lexicon from the very earliest stages of his creative career (see Example 7d). Although in *La Sainte Bohème* Messiaen does not retain Debussy’s upper pedal or use the harmonies at either of the original pitch levels described above, he appends the falling four-note melodic line that follows the sequence in Debussy’s score (see Example 7a), a motive that first appears with the descent of Mélisande’s hair. This melodic appendage to the main business of harmonic borrowing might be compared to Example 3, where we saw Messiaen supplement his harmonic borrowing from *Manon* with textural borrowing from an adjacent climax in Massenet’s score.

This first group of examples (Examples 4–7) has explored Messiaen’s ambiguous revelations of harmonic borrowing in *Technique*, his methods for transforming borrowed harmonies, and the relation of those methods to developments he observed in Debussy’s music. The variants of the Mélisande theme (in T224–226, T233, T266, and T276) and of the scène des cheveux progression (in T189–192) were collected, analyzed, transformed, and incorporated in a harmonic glossary that Messiaen presented in *Technique* as representative of his personal musical language. They involve a range of harmonic transformations that Messiaen used either alone or in combinations:

1. Transposition
2. Repetition (as well as sequence, which combines transposition and repetition)
3. Reordering (including full and partial retrogradation)
4. Revoicing and/or reduction (including octave displacements)
5. Selective or systematic thinning or enrichment (including the addition of new voices with new melodic lines)

The list might be rounded out with the substitution of new rhythms, meters, or instrumental textures. Although these are not strictly harmonic transformations, they can have consequences for the alignment of harmonies (as seen in Example 5e). It is useful to keep in mind Messiaen’s frequent use of


71. Messiaen uses this same sequence in two pedagogical texts: in the final chant donné of the *Vingt leçons d’harmonie*, where it is mixed with other formulas typical of Messiaen’s language to constitute a lesson in a watered-down version of Messiaen’s own style, and in a set of harmonic formulas attributed to Messiaen and transcribed by Pierre Boulez during his harmony studies; see Balmer and Murray, “Pierre Boulez.” Following the observations of Hamer and Murray in “Olivier Messiaen,” Christopher Dingle identified an instance of this progression in “Demeurer dans l’Amour . . . ,” the fifth movement of *Éclairs sur l’Au-delà*: Dingle, *Messiaen’s Final Works*, 207.

72. Unlike T224–226 and T233, Messiaen never shows T266 or T276 used in an original composition. We have so far been unable to identify instances of these formulas at work.
borrowed harmonic elements at their original pitch level when identifying examples of his borrowing: for him, transposing a harmony also significantly changed its color.\footnote{See Messiaen, \textit{Traité}, 7:104.}

The foregoing examples confirm that a profound reappraisal of \textit{Technique} is in order. In the case of T225, T233, and T189 we have seen how Messiaen muddied the relationship between his music and its sources, passing over clearer applications of his borrowing technique in silence. In the case of Example 5 it was only possible to understand how a passage of “Le collier” was created from \textit{Pelléas} by following leads suggested by the sound of the excerpt, a close reading of \textit{Technique}, and consultation of Yvonne Loriod’s annotated copy of the opera. By connecting clues found in scattered sources, by working with Messiaen’s music, his writings on his music, and his writings on the music of Debussy, we have been able to reconstruct his analytical and compositional processes. In this sense, the study of borrowings we have outlined here is similar to the study of sketches. Messiaen’s borrowings make it possible, in the absence of sketch materials, to deduce certain of his compositional decisions.\footnote{Paul Berry similarly remarks that Brahms scholars, in the absence of sketches and drafts, use the composer’s allusions to existing works to retrace his compositional process: Berry, \textit{Brahms among Friends}, 7.}

\section*{The Hermeneutics of Messiaen’s Borrowing}

Messiaen is known for the programmatic texts he wrote to accompany his music. As we become more aware of his technique of composing with existing...
musical formulas, the potential for hermeneutic interpretation of his music increases. Ostensibly, Messiaen would have been capable of imitating music stylistically without directly borrowing from it. The choice to borrow, therefore, seems weighted with significance, a sign of the composer’s desire to inscribe his work with intertextually charged meaning. Furthermore, in cases such as the borrowing from *Manon* in “Amen du Désir” illustrated in Example 3 Messiaen’s borrowings seem to align with the content of his programs. The program for “Amen du Désir” opposes two “themes of desire” one pure, one tormented.\(^7\) The “pure” theme borrows melodic contours from “Deh vieni, non tardar,” one of Susanna’s arias in *Le nozze di Figaro*, in which, though innocent herself, she pretends to be eagerly awaiting the Count. A portion of Messiaen’s “tormented” theme, the music seen in Example 3, is based on harmonic material from “Manon, Sphinx étonnant,” Des Grieux’s passionate declaration in the fourth act of *Manon*.\(^7\) In his study of allusion in nineteenth-century music Christopher Reynolds refers to this sort of alignment between program and borrowing as an “assimilative allusion,” one in which “some aspects of the meaning and musical character of the earlier motive” are present at the moment of its reuse. The one-to-one correspondence in “Amen du Désir,” however, is exceptional within Messiaen’s practice as we have been able to observe it. More frequently his borrowings either defy interpretation altogether or give rise to possible cases of what Reynolds terms “contrastive allusions,” in which the composer’s reuse of existing musical elements serves, through a degree of contrast or opposition, to comment upon them.\(^7\) Such examples offer potential for linking Messiaen’s craft as a composer to his aspirations as a theologian and interpreter of texts. On the basis of the sources currently at our disposal, however, we would advise caution in relation to any interpretation of his borrowing, particularly in the absence of corroborating sources. Although certain examples in the present article seem strong candidates for hermeneutic interpretation, many others have no clear link to Messiaen’s paratexts. On a more practical level, Messiaen’s reuse of existing music is far too fundamental to the basic and local operations of his creative process for it to be a systematic conveyor of plausible meaning. We would argue that although Messiaen’s borrowed formulas may sometimes be deployed in meaningful ways, his use of existing music arises first and foremost from his need for material and his admiration for particular musical objects. It is with these caveats in mind that we approach Examples 8 and 9.

In the previous section we saw how two harmonic formulas from the *scène des cheveux* of *Pelléas* play an enduring role in Messiaen’s music. A third

\(^7\) Messiaen, “Note de l’Auteur.”
\(^7\) A full analysis of the borrowing from Mozart and Massenet is given in Balmer and Murray, “Jules Massenet.”
formula from the same scene, drawn from the moment when Pelléas sings, “Je ne souffre plus au milieu de tes cheveux” (I suffer no longer amid your hair; Example 8a), is situated a few pages after the formula illustrated in Example 7 (“Je les tiens dans les mains, je les tiens dans la bouche . . .”).

The earliest uses of this three-voice formula are found in the second of the five exercises contributed to *Vingt leçons de solfège modernes* (1934) and the “Chant donné dans le style de Pelléas et Mélisande” in Messiaen’s *Vingt leçons d’harmonie* (1939). In both cases the harmonic formula is transposed and coupled with rhythmic and melodic motives that Messiaen would later describe as typical of Debussy. While earlier creative uses of this formula

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**Example 8a** Debussy, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, act 3, scene 1, mm. 169–71 (vocal score, Paris: Durand, 1902–7, p. 133)

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78. Messiaen does not provide a detailed analysis of this scene in the *Traité*, but the analysis transcribed by Yvonne Loriod describes this moment as an interesting change in harmonic color and gives precise harmonic *chiffrages*: Loriod MSS, 133.

79. Messiaen, *Traité*, 6:15, 31. On such rhythms and their possible significance for Messiaen, see Cochran, “‘Pebble in the Water.’” On further links between Messiaen’s pedagogical
May have escaped our attention, these pedagogical texts suggest that it was present in Messiaen’s harmonic vocabulary for some time before it took to the stage in one of his compositions. He used the formula at pitch first in “Impropères,” the second of two Chœurs pour une Jeanne d’Arc written in 1941 (see Example 8b), and then again in T236, a harmonic sequence used to build two sections of “Amen de l’Agonie de Jésus,” the third movement of the Visions de l’Amen, probably composed in 1942 (see Example 8c).

Messiaen’s “Impropères” were written for Portique pour une fille de France, a Vichy-sponsored pageant on the life of Joan of Arc, and make reference to the Improperia, which are typically sung on Good Friday. The “Impropères” of Portique were used to liken Joan’s burning at the stake to Christ’s Passion, and reproduce the antiphonal setting of the traditional Catholic liturgy, with several verses sung in a simple two-voice setting. This texture is created by shedding the descending lower line that doubles Pelléas’s “Je ne souffre plus . . .” and retaining the plaintive rocking motion of the upper two voices. The formula is used at pitch and in the same spelling, and the phrase is closed with a rising and falling melisma that develops Debussy’s rocking half-step motion.

In “Amen de l’Agonie de Jésus,” a musical depiction of Christ’s agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, Messiaen uses all three voices of the Debussian formula to spectacular ends, treating it in a two-part sequence that is crowned with a new line of octaves descending in chromatic motion. As in previous examples, Messiaen uses the deforming prism of sequence to develop the borrowed harmonic formula and build an entire section from just a few of Debussy’s harmonies. The borrowed formula of three harmonies is presented and then transposed down a minor second. This block of three plus three is subsequently repeated four times with varying rhythmic augmentations and diminutions to create a fifteen-measure formal section. Messiaen marks each repetition of the two-part sequence with a sforzando above the right hand. (Later in the movement the same material returns with an additional rhythmic pedal, generating a second section of nineteen measures.) The new line of descending octaves played in the right hand straddles the Debussian formula in the left hand, echoing the momentary four-voice harmony that opens the texts and his original compositions, see Balmer and Murray, “De l’harmonie” and “La classe de Messiaen.”

80. See Kayas and Murray, “Portique pour une fille de France” and “Olivier Messiaen and Portique.” The score for the Joan of Arc choruses was created by Nigel Simeone and Tom Owen in 2008 from performance materials found by Lucie Kayas in the archives of Radio France (Maison de la Radio, Ch 559); we are grateful to these scholars for sharing their materials with us. On the theological use of the Improperia and speculation as to why Messiaen did not speak of his Chœurs in later years, see Schloesser, Visions of Amen, 283–84.

81. Messiaen’s reference to Pelléas in his own analysis of this passage lends credibility to our independent identification; he does not, however, indicate the moment from which the material is borrowed: Messiaen, Traité, 3:246. See also T236 of Technique.
Example 8b  Messiaen, Deux chœurs pour une Jeanne d’Arc, “Impropères,” mm. 5–7 (from a score reconstructed from parts conserved in the archives of Radio France: Maison de la Radio, Paris, Cb 559)


Pelléas excerpt (see the first harmony in the boxed zone of Example 8a). In Debussy’s score the E♭ is also heard in the uppermost voice, completing a melodic line from the previous measure. Messiaen uses this E♭ to launch his descending octaves. In his review of the work’s premiere, Arthur Honegger took special notice of the added melody, describing it as an “anguished theme of extraordinary expressive intensity that turns at great length on the same three notes (C♯, D, E♭).” 82 The melody is in fact composed of four notes,

82. Honegger, “Première auditions: Olivier Messiaen à la Pléiade,” Comedia 98, May 15, 1943, reprinted in Honegger, Écrits, 566: “thème angoissé qui tourne longuement sur les trois mêmes notes (do dièse, ré, mi bémol) qui est d’une intensité expressive extraordinaire.”
descending from E♭ to C, and was probably first conceived as a line of parallel major sixths over the descending line traced by Pelléas’s “Je ne souffre plus au milieu de tes cheveux” and its extension in the piano reduction. Instead of running parallel, however, the right hand’s divergent rhythmic pattern brings harmonic variety to each repetition of the formula. The added melody also helps to unify and articulate the form of “Amen de l’Agonie de Jésus,” in that its prominent E♭, an important melodic pole for the entire movement, forms an enharmonic link with the D♮ of the previous section.

Marked “dououreux, en pleurant” (painful, weeping), this section of “Amen de l’Agonie de Jésus,” like the “Impropères,” seems to draw on the emotional intensity of Pelléas’s “Je ne souffre plus au milieu de tes cheveux.” It should be remarked that Debussy himself is making a contrastive gesture here, coordinating the appearance of chromatic voice leading with the moment at which Pelléas says his suffering has come to an end. Messiaen’s analysis takes notice of this harmonic “color change” and his borrowing of these harmonies binds Christ’s agony and Pelléas’s ecstasy in an unexpected and bewildering dialogue. There are many ways in which the connection between Pelléas’s ecstatic immersion in Mélisande’s hair and Christ’s agony in the garden might be interpreted. Both passages involve an element of foreshadowed suffering. One might further underline Pelléas’s negation of the verb “souffrir” and its important place in Messiaen’s note on his movement: “Jesus suffers and weeps. . . . A long silence broken by a few pulsations evokes the suffering of this time; unspeakable suffering, translated, in small part, by the sweat of blood.”

Is Messiaen commenting on Pelléas’s blindness to a situation that is steadily guiding him toward certain death? Is he drawing on Pelléas’s denial of the suffering that the accompanying harmonies presage? Might it even be that the potentially controversial parallels between the suffering of Christ and the suffering of a profane, sexualized character such as Pelléas are responsible for Messiaen’s relative silence on his Debussian borrowings? These are speculations, but it is evident that Messiaen’s program for “Amen de l’Agonie de Jésus” casts his uses of the secular Pelléas in a particular Christianizing light.

A second and equally thorny example explores whether Messiaen’s borrowings were intended to be understood by the composer alone or whether they communicated meaning within the confines of his intimate relationships with other musicians. Paul Berry poses a similar question in his study of Brahms’s allusions, noting that “Where sufficient evidence survives regarding the prior associations that a certain passage of music most likely carried for a particular friend of the composer, one can then plausibly

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83. Loriod MSS, 133.
84. Messiaen, preface to Visions de l’Amen (no page numbers): “Jésus souffre et pleure. . . . Un grand silence, coupé de quelques pulsations, évoque la souffrance de cette heure; souffrance indicible, que traduit un peu la sueur de sang.”
reconstruct a range of possible implications for its reanimation in a new musical and interpersonal situation. Like Pelléas, Prélude à l’aprèsmidi d’un faune occupies a prominent place in Messiaen’s biography and creative palette. According to Yvonne Loriod, Messiaen played and analyzed the Prélude in his first harmony class of May 1941. Over the following decades he frequently presented the work to his students, commenting on its form, harmonies, rhythms, melodic profiles, and relationship to Mallarmé’s poem. In those lectures it is likely that he discussed the passages he later highlighted in the Traité, including two measures of the Prélude that Messiaen reads through the lens of Pelléas, a practice common in his other Debussy analyses and one that underlines the opera’s central role in his vision of Debussy’s music. For Messiaen, the harmonies of these measures are comparable in their “intense emotion, tremendous in its bleeding softness,” to a passage that accompanies Mélisande’s death. In the Traité, his selective reduction of these measures eliminates most of the string parts as well the pedal E (see Example 9a). Having winnowed off this chaff, he alters what remains to create formula T275 (Example 9b). While the lower voices of this formula are identical to Messiaen’s selective reduction, in the right hand Debussy’s melodic arabesque is gathered into trenchant sevenths and seconds that subsume the functions of chord tones, neighbor notes, and appoggiaturas into new block harmonies. Messiaen also halves the rhythmic values and emulates Debussy’s harmonic repetition by reiterated the transformed one-measure unit.

Messiaen composed with this formula from Prélude à l’aprèsmidi d’un faune twice during the same period, but in very different contexts. Messiaen left no indication of his reuse of Debussy’s harmonies in Technique, the Rondeau, and the Liturgies. The connection made here resulted from knowledge of the harmonic examples of Technique and the passages that caught Messiaen’s interest in his analyses of Debussy.

Example 9a  Messiaen, Traité, 6:38

85. Berry, Brahms among Friends, 26.
86. See Hill and Simeone, Olivier Messiaen (2005), 111, and Boivin, La classe de Messiaen, 31–32. On rethinking this period of Messiaen’s life, see Balmer and Murray, “Olivier Messiaen.”
87. See Boivin, La classe de Messiaen, 434–46, and Messiaen, Traité, 6:28–40.
88. Messiaen, Traité, 6:37: “une émotion intense et terrible dans sa douceur sanglante.”
89. Messiaen left no indication of his reuse of Debussy’s harmonies in Technique, the Rondeau, and the Liturgies. The connection made here resulted from knowledge of the harmonic examples of Technique and the passages that caught Messiaen’s interest in his analyses of Debussy.
harmonies from T275 appear at pitch, have new expressive markings, and are not repeated (see Example 9c). The same harmonies also appear at pitch in a meditative setting for orchestra and choir at the opening of “Antienne de la Conversation intérieure (Dieu présent en nous . . .),” where they are transformed by the unison choir of women’s voices softly singing the swooping “Mon Jésus, mon silence, / Restez en moi” to the accompaniment of muted strings, ondes Martenot, and vibraphone punctuated by birdsong-style commentary in the solo piano (see Example 9d).

How might knowledge of this textual intersection change our understanding of Messiaen’s “Antienne”? If there is a meaning to be gleaned, is it linked to Debussy’s faun, to the death of Mélisande, or perhaps to some event in Messiaen’s personal life? Here it might be fruitful to reflect on a possible relationship between Debussy’s sensual faun and the mystic, carnal union binding the faithful to Christ as developed in Messiaen’s text for this first movement of the Liturgies, which, according to the composer, “speaks of the Presence of God . . . in us.”

90. Messiaen, Conférence de Kyoto, 12: “parlent de la Présence de Dieu . . . en nous.”
that Yvonne Loriod and Olivier Messiaen first met in the harmony class where Messiaen analyzed the Prélude. Within the space of a few years Loriod would play Messiaen’s Rondeau to receive her premier prix at the Conservatoire, and also premiere the piano solo of his Trois petites liturgies. During that time she evolved from a prize pupil to the most privileged insider of Messiaen’s musical world. Although we do not know whether Loriod recognized Messiaen’s borrowing from the Prélude, she, if anyone, was equipped to do so. And yet, as Paul Berry observes in relation to Brahms’s musical allusions, “rhetorical potential need not imply

communicative function. A borrowing from a source whose recognition would have been rhetorically charged for a given listener need not inevitably have been designed for that listener to apprehend allusively; instead the rhetorical potential latent in the mere act of conjuring up remembered music may have served the composer’s own private ends, regardless of later reception.”⁹² While this case further exemplifies the possibilities and perils of interpreting Messiaen’s borrowings, our words of caution are not a call for a purely formalist analytical approach. Between these poles we might consider the importance of Messiaen’s creative imagination, his love of music, and his affection for the purely sonorous and sensual aspects of harmony. These affinities create meaning on a personal and musical level. It would be overly simplistic to assume direct programmatic reference for every borrowed fragment, but we can assume that, in examples such as those just discussed, Messiaen’s use of borrowed material flows through a network of personal associations, both musical and otherwise. His programs, borrowings, and commentaries sometimes align in suggestive formations, even as they resist univocal interpretation.

Gestural Borrowing from Debussy

Messiaen discovered and redeployed Debussy’s music through the interface of the keyboard. Not only did he play orchestral works such as Pelléas and Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune at the piano, but he showed special interest in Debussy’s piano works, particularly the Préludes, Estampes, Images, and Études. Messiaen’s analyses in Tome 6 of the Traité further reveal that he retained certain gestures of Debussy’s piano works in his own compositions for keyboard instruments. Two examples of gestural borrowing from Debussy’s piano music are considered here (Examples 10 and 11): a quintuplet figure from “Cloches à travers les feuilles” and a second, less specifically sourced movement described by Messiaen as “accords arrachés” (ripped chords). As what Messiaen terms “formulas of accompaniment,”⁹³ both can be used to animate harmonic material and create texture. In the quintuplet the left and right hands alternate movement from the thumbs outward to the fingers (see Example 10a), whereas the accords arrachés involve movement inward from the little finger to the thumb in both hands (see Example 11a). The difference between these gestures and more ordinary solutions for transforming block harmonies into accompaniment (such as the alternating chords of Example 6b) is that Messiaen associates them with particular moments in Debussy’s music. In responding to the physical demands of navigating the keyboard, such gestures differ from the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic

⁹² Berry, Brahms among Friends, 35.
⁹³ Messiaen, The Technique, 54.
borrowing we observe elsewhere in this article. To those who would argue that these movements might be involuntarily summoned from Messiaen’s muscle memory, we counter that his analyses of Debussy evoke each hand movement with keen bodily awareness and in connection to specific models.

The “Cloches à travers les feuilles” quintuplet (Example 10a) appears in Messiaen’s oeuvre on four occasions spanning twenty years. These represent variations on working with the gesture either as a “formula of accompaniment” similar to its original use in Debussy’s composition or as a hand-alternating toccata gesture not present in Debussy’s score. In the prelude “Le nombre léger” the *scène des cheveux* chords of Example 7 are briefly animated with the earliest instance of the “Cloches à travers les feuilles” gesture, creating a hybrid of Debussian harmony and gesture from two different sources, the earliest known use of both formulas in Messiaen’s music (see Example 10b). Here, the quintuplet of “Le nombre léger,” much like the *Pelléas* harmonies already seen in the prelude “Un reflet dans le vent . . .” (Example 5e), is altered to a greater degree than it would be in later compositions.

94. A similar quintuplet figure, though with a different intervallic composition, is found in Debussy’s prelude “Les fées sont d’exquises danseuses.”
In contrast, the most obvious example of the Debussy quintuplet is found in a work written just a few years later, “Transports de joie d’une âme devant la gloire du Christ qui est la sienne,” the third movement of L’Ascension for organ (1932). Beginning on the same pitches as Debussy, Messiaen sets the figure and its development in his second mode of limited transposition, building an arch of tritone transpositions (see Example 10c). With relatively little alteration Debussy’s quintuplet is deployed in a new melodic context and is transformed using Messiaen’s mode, melodic sequence, and the resonant soundworld of the full organ.

In “Amen des Anges, des Saints, du chant des oiseaux” (Visions de l’Amen, 1943) Messiaen reuses quintuplets in an ostinato figure that accompanies the return of the movement’s initial theme (see Example 10d). In this case Messiaen passes Debussy’s pitches through the filter of a dominant ninth chord with an added sixth in A major, the principal key area of the movement. The pitch names are the same as in the original Debussy excerpt, but Debussy’s F♮ and G♮ become F# and G#. Messiaen’s passing reference to Debussian pianistic writing in his analysis of this passage,95 in tandem with the earlier and more evident usage in “Transports de joie,” lends further support to the hypothesis that this quintuplet descends from “Cloches à travers les feuilles.”

Finally, Cantéyodjayâ (1949) offers a fourth version of the Debussy quintuplet in action (see Example 10e). Removed from its original tessitura, intervallic content, and expressive markings, the quintuplet figure, which Messiaen qualifies as a “blurry decor, built of thirds and fourths,”96 becomes nearly unrecognizable. If considered in isolation, the connection to Debussy might seem implausible. When studied in association with the previous three examples, however, it is clear that this quintuplet is a new version of the same gestural borrowing, one transformed by Messiaen with different tools for integration into a different texture. This is a prime example of the way a critical mass of previously confirmed borrowings can assist in the confirmation of a seemingly tenuous case. Individual instances of borrowing that


96. Ibid., 6:114: “décor flou, fait de tierces[s] et de quartes.” Note the semantic link between the “irridescent mist” (“buée irisée”) of Debussy’s indication and Messiaen’s description of his transformation of this figure as “blurred” (“flou”).
Example 10c  Messiaen, L’Ascension, “Transports de joie d’une âme devant la gloire du Christ qui est la sienne,” m. 18 (Paris: Leduc, 1934)

initially seem unique are in fact often reused and renewed in different contexts over the course of several decades.

Whereas the “Cloches à travers les feuilles” quintuplet sometimes remains attached to vestiges of its original melodic and rhythmic profile, the rapid, simultaneous thumbward arpeggiation that Messiaen refers to as “accords arrachés” is purely gestural. He first observes this technique in his analysis of the étude “Pour les sonorités opposées,” one of his rare studies of Debussy’s later works. In his description of the accords arrachés gesture, he traces the étude’s ancestors in Debussy’s preludes and its relation to his own Vingt regards and the soundworld of the organ. Measure 63 of the étude (see Example 11a)

recalls fragments, first of an organ-like effect (contrary motion arpeggios in a soft cymbale) in “La Puerta del Vino,” and later the accords arrachés in contrary motion in the eighteenth of the Vingt regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus, “Regard de l’Onction terrible,” but here, all is gentle.97

This passage of “Pour les sonorités opposées” has the same contrary motion and descending chordal texture as “La Puerta del Vino” (see Example 11b), but unlike Debussy’s prelude and Messiaen’s “Regard de l’Onction terrible” (see Example 11c) it does not lead the pianist’s hands to interlock. Years later Messiaen would transport the interlocking accords arrachés gesture from the piano of “La Puerta del Vino” to the keyboard of the organ in “Les deux murailles d’eau” (Livre du Saint Sacrement, 1984). Here, like the two walls of water in the movement’s title (marked “les vagues dressées” at this moment in the score), the organist’s hands draw progressively closer before meeting and intermingling (see Example 11d). The consistency with which Messiaen refers to this gesture as “arraché” in scores written some forty years apart, as well as in his Debussy analyses, confirms their common paternity.


Combining Borrowed Materials to Compose

Heretofore it has been necessary to focus primarily on individual cases of borrowing in order to describe the various transformational methods of Messiaen’s borrowing technique. This final section (Examples 12–20) focuses...
on the way the composer combines elements of disparate origin in order to build composite textures and forms. Four points of focus illustrate four different strategies:

1. Assembled rhythmic variations in *Cinq rechants*.
2. The alignment of Debussian rhythms with harmonic and melodic materials of different origin in *Harawi*.
3. The extended juxtaposition of three harmonic formulas from Debussy’s *Images* in “La bouscarle.”
4. The use of common motivic material to link borrowed formulas in “Bail avec Mi” and “La Transubstantiation.”

In the fifth of his *Cinq rechants* (1948) Messiaen assembles and develops rhythmic elements found in the music of Debussy and André Jolivet to give an illusion of rhythmic continuity. The opening and close of the movement are framed by a spoken effect in the basses and tenors that recalls the “teu keu” syllables of double-tonguing wind instruments. The effect is used to voice only the attacks of rhythms that, in their original contexts, are composed of longer, sustained durations. The movement’s close, our focus here, aligns three similar rhythmic propositions. In measures 78–83 the spoken effect, not heard since the introduction (mm. 10–13), is reintroduced *pianissimo* in the bass parts (see Example 12a) beneath the *fortissimo* counterpoint sung by the upper voices. The effect is developed by the tenors in measures 84–86 (see Example 12b), before leading to a canon between the basses and tenors in measures 89–97 (see Example 12c). This canon is based on the rhythm first heard in measures 10–13 and serves to close the frame opened at the beginning of the work and develop that earlier rhythm while also relating it to the intervening propositions heard in measures 78–83 and 84–86. All three rhythms share an opening salvo of thirty-second notes followed by a gradual, decay-like effect of more widely spaced attacks.


**Example 12b** Messiaen, *Cinq rechants*, “V,” mm. 84–86, tenors (Paris: Rouart, Lerolle et Compagnie, 1949)
Messiaen creates this passage by juxtaposing existing elements that caught his attention during his intertextually oriented analyses. As a whole, it imitates the “rhythmic variations” he describes in remarks on irrational rhythmic patterns in the music of Debussy, Ravel, and Jolivet. Example 12a is based on a rhythm found in Debussy’s “Reflets dans l’eau” that Messiaen describes as a “short [value] tied to the long” (see Example 12d), while the canon of Example 12c (as well as the first use of the “teu keu” effect in mm. 10–13) is based on a passage of Jolivet’s “Danse nuptiale” (see Example 12e).

The result might be described as assembled variation. Rather than developing a single rhythmic motive through traditional processes of addition, elimination, augmentation, or diminution, Messiaen uses rhythms found in the music of Debussy and Jolivet to create an illusion of traditional development at a local level. Homogeneity is fabricated from the heterogeneous and, paradoxically, the result for the listener is the same. Messiaen does use the tools of traditional rhythmic development to hone the joinery of his rhythmic variations: by shaving two thirty-second notes off the opening of Debussy’s rhythm he adjusts it to the dominant texture. Moreover, he may have composed the intermediary excerpt in Example 12b himself, a sort of variation on the “Reflets dans l’eau” rhythm (with similar proportions and three instances

98. Ibid., 2:407–18.
99. Ibid., 6:4: “brève liée à longue.” As in the case of the rhythmic formula from “Brouillards” discussed above, Messiaen associates this formula with an effect of “langor” (“alanguissement”).
of the “short tied to the long,” but without the triplets). It may also be a carefully selected (and possibly adjusted) found object from an unidentified existing work.

Example 12, which leaves aside the melodic borrowings of the same passage to focus on its rhythmic techniques, reveals that Messiaen’s rhythmic variations required more craft than simply finding and lining up similar objects. He adjusts his found rhythmic materials to heighten the illusion of development and hide the seams of his musical patchwork. Indeed, this passage might be considered both an example and a counterexample of Boulez’s remark that “The whole German-Austrian musical tradition is fundamentally alien to him in its need to express evolution and continuity in the handling of musical ideas—what the Germans themselves call durchkomponieren.”

100. Boulez, Orientations, 407.
In “Montagnes” and “Adieu,” two songs from the cycle *Harawi* (1945), Messiaen builds texture and form by reusing dotted rhythms linked with the character of Golaud together with contrasting harmonic and melodic materials. In both songs, the combination of these rhythms with new clangorous harmonies may signify a death knell, given Messiaen’s association of the Golaud theme with death and the full title of his work—*Harawi, chant d’amour et de mort*. These hints of Golaud’s shadowy presence lend a new intertextual dimension to a song cycle that has long been associated with the Tristan and Yseult story, Andean folksong, and Messiaen’s sense of loss in the face of the mental and physical decline of his first wife, Claire Delbos.101 At a formal level, Messiaen builds “Adieu” by intercalating borrowed rhythms between the phrases of a borrowed and altered traditional melody, “Delirio.”

“Montagnes” opens with and is later twice punctuated by a horn-call version of Golaud’s theme that accompanies his account of hunting a boar and becoming lost in the forest (see Examples 13a and 13b). Messiaen’s analysis of this moment notes that Golaud’s dotted rhythm is set to a downward harmonic sequence. As the harmonies gradually descend and Golaud’s attention returns to Mélisande, the rhythmic content also loses momentum. Messiaen further remarks on the way the hunting-call version of Golaud’s

Example 13a  Messiaen, *Harawi*, “Montagnes,” mm. 1–5, recurring in identical form in mm. 27–31 and 55–59 (Paris: Leduc, 1949)

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theme dovetails with the return of Mélisande’s theme in the sequence’s final term.102 The choice to structure “Montagnes” with rhythmic material evoking Golaud’s disorienting hunt seems related to the desperate atmosphere of

Messiaen’s song, for which he also wrote surreal lyrics suggestive of darkness, vertigo, and high mountain forests.

In addition to Golaud’s rhythm, Messiaen also retains the four-part texture of Debussy’s vocal score and its organization in a downward sequence. In place of Debussy’s harmonies he works with resonant chords heard in the first tableau of Stravinsky’s *Les noces* (see Example 13c). Messiaen decides, however, that only one hand will follow Debussy’s sequence. In the left hand Stravinsky’s sixths rock in place at pitch, while in the right hand a series of fifths gradually sequence downward to arrive at the original pitch level of the full Noces harmony at the end of the phrase, at the point where Golaud’s theme formerly met Mélišandre’s. Messiaen’s use of the melodic major seconds present in both the Debussy and the Stravinsky excerpts shows how melodic structures may have triggered and guided his combination of otherwise unrelated materials, even when he was borrowing rhythms and harmonies.

The song “Adieu,” which also reworks a version of Golaud’s rhythm, offers an example of the way Messiaen builds an entire form by adding contrasting borrowed material to the framework of a large-scale borrowed melodic structure. In “Adieu” Messiaen alternates the transformed and harmonized phrases of the traditional Andean song “Delirio” (filtered through

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**Example 13c** Stravinsky, *Les noces*, tableau 1 (“Koca” / “La tresse”), rehearsal 10 (London: Chester, 1922, authors’ reduction)

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103. Previous authors have remarked upon isolated examples of harmonic borrowing from *Les noces* in *Vingt regards* and the *Trois petites liturgies*, borrowing to which Messiaen himself obliquely refers in his analysis of “Noël”; see Schellhorn, “*Les noces*”; Donelson, “Musical Technique,” 44–48; and Messiaen, *Traité*, 2:474.

104. A less developed presentation of this example was first published in Balmer and Murray, “*Repenser la réception*,” 513–14.
his second mode of limited transposition centered on E♭) with more dissonant passages of rocking “carillon” harmonies (see Example 14a). These contrasting textures are linked by their common pitch material, notably their emphasis on the pitches of the E-flat major triad. The first two phrases of “Adieu” (“Adieu toi, colombe verte, / Ange attristé. / Adieu toi, perle limpide, / Soleil gardien”) are based on the opening phrase of “Delirio” (“Dime mi bien hasta cuando, / Ay! mi dueño!”) (see Example 14b). In turn, each interpolation of the carillon chords between the transformed phrases of “Delirio” is set to a different rhythmic formula, several of them borrowed. Measures 17–20 use a version of Golaud’s dotted rhythm that appears at the end of act 1, scene 3 (see Example 14c). In his analysis of Pelléas Messiaen remarks that this subtle evocation of Golaud’s menacing motif in a scene from which his character is physically absent serves to foreshadow the deaths of Pelléas and Mélisande. As in “Montagnes” Messiaen isolates the rhythmic formula from Debussy’s opera and places it in the texture of his song without modification. Its new setting conserves the rocking between neighboring harmonies and reuses the key pitches E♭ and G, regularly placing them in their original range. Here again, Messiaen’s rhythmic borrowing from Debussy is governed by other factors observed in Debussy’s score.

The next example, “courtship flight of the kingfisher” (“vol nuptial du Martin-pêcheur”) from “La bouscarle” (Catalogue d’oiseaux, 1956–58), is created from a chain of three harmonic formulas, all drawn from Debussy’s first book of Images (see Example 15). The first is a sequence incorporating a reinterpretation of the “Golaud chord” that Messiaen found in “Hommage à Rameau”; the second is based on the harmonic litany T246, which is also drawn from “Hommage à Rameau”; and the third is a sequence derived from “Reflets dans l’eau,” also related to Messiaen’s second “accord à résonance contractée.” The harmonic litany from “Hommage à Rameau” is transposed up a fifth whereas the other two borrowed passages include elements presented at the same pitch level as in Debussy’s scores. While Wai-Ling Cheong has already investigated the Debussian origins of the “vol nuptial,” her work does not situate its techniques within the broader field of Messiaen’s Debussian borrowings. This fascinating passage, the hermeneutics of which Cheong speculates upon at length, both illustrates the

107. Cheong, “‘Miroir fluide.’”
Example 14a  Messiaen, *Harawi*, “Adieu,” mm. 11–21 (Paris: Leduc, 1949)

Très lent

A - dieu toi, per - le lim - pi - de.

Très lent

Un peu vif

So - leil gar - dien.

Un peu vif

Très modéré
generative power of the borrowing technique and provides an opportunity
to explore the Debussian origins of three musical concepts dear to Mes-
siaen: the Golaud chord, the notion of harmonic litany, and the
accord à résonance contractée.\footnote{108}

To understand the origins of the first formula we must begin by unpack-
ing the history of the Golaud chord. While Messiaen associated this particu-
lar harmony (or pair of harmonies) with Golaud, his reuse of it does not
always draw from \textit{Pelléas}. Much as he would identify Golaud chords in the
music of other composers, Messiaen also heard them in other works by
Debussy from which he borrowed. In the section of \textit{Technique} entitled
“A Look at Other Styles” Messiaen selects two chords from the opening
measures of \textit{Pelléas} to create T223 (see Examples 16a and 16b) and then

\begin{example}
\textit{Delirio}, mm. 1–4 (as transcribed by Marguerite Béclard d’Harcourt)
\end{example}

\begin{example}
\textit{La bouscarle}, \textit{Pelléas et Mélisande}, act 1, scene 3, mm. 70–71 (vocal score, Paris: Durand, 1902–7, p. 51)
\end{example}

\footnote{108. Cheong links the program of “La bouscarle” to Messiaen’s citation, in Tome 6 of the \textit{Traité}, of a text by Cyrano de Bergerac that describes a bird singing over reflective waters. This connection might be reconsidered within the larger context of Messiaen’s interest in the writings of ornithologist Jacques Delamain, particularly \textit{Les oiseaux s’installent et s’en vont}, which provides more direct models for the programs of pieces in \textit{Catalogue d’oiseaux}, notably “La bouscarle.” Rather than being a hidden portrait of Boulez, as Cheong suggests, it may be that “La bouscarle” is a tribute to Delamain, who played an important role in Messiaen’s ornithological education. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that the program of “La bouscarle” is set near the Delamain family estate. On parallels between Delamain’s writings and the paratexts of \textit{Catalogue d’oiseaux}, see Murray, “Les métaphores végétales.”}

Sequence on Golaud chord, “Hommage à Rameau”

87  Très vif (\textit{v} \textit{144})

Harmonic litany T246, “Hommage à Rameau”

89  \textit{mf}

Chords from “Reflets dans l’eau”

92  Vif (\textit{v} \textit{160})

rall. molto

94  \textit{f}

rall. molto
follows their course in the music of Ravel and Milhaud. In doing so he presents a personal vision of “harmonic history,” one that legitimizes and elevates his own techniques by placing them within a larger, prestigious lineage:

Let us recall that these two chords of Pelléas... engendered the “Danse générale” of Daphnis (Ravel) and a polytonality particularly dear to Milhaud. It is curious to see how, ever since Orfeo and the extraordinary madrigals of Monteverdi, harmonic science has evolved from one composer to another.110

This nicely summarizes Messiaen’s theoretical position. He affirms the existence of a causal relationship between identical harmonies found in different works without considering their harmonic context or citing sources that would confirm that the relationship goes beyond coincidence. The vocabulary he uses is perfectly clear: the chords from Pelléas “engender” other compositions. This key example, referred to by Messiaen as the “accord Golaud,” is reaffirmed and completed at other points in his writings. In Tome 6 of the Traité he analyzes the same two chords in the following manner:

Two harmonic analyses: 1) B-flat major chord with added sixth and triple neighbor tones; 2) The second sonority is isolated and heard polytonally—

109. Messiaen, The Technique, 52. (Messiaen’s French title for the section is “Regards sur d’autres styles”; Messiaen, Technique, 72.)
110. Messiaen, The Technique, 52.
A major over B-flat minor. This is how it was heard at the time. . . . In the “Danse générale” (Bacchanale) of Daphnis et Chloé Ravel inverts the polytonality: B-flat minor over A major [see Example 16c]. . . . Darius Milhaud uses both effects (see the Choéphores and the song “Ténèbres”).

In Tome 2 of the Traité Messiaen makes reference to the same two chords from the opening of Pelléas, proposing another relationship, this time with the “Augures printaniers” of the Sacre du printemps:

This is the famous polytonal chord from Golaud’s theme in Pelléas et Mélisande by Claude Debussy. It is transposed and should sound E-flat major over E minor. Stravinsky further complicated it with two added notes, Ab and Db, resulting in a sixth and diminished fifth on G superposed on an F-flat major chord.

From Messiaen’s point of view, Ravel “inverts” a chord progression, Milhaud “uses” the same chords, and Stravinsky “transposes” the harmony, “complicat[ing] it with . . . added notes.” These are all transformative practices we have seen at work in Messiaen’s own music. Although he claimed that Ravel, Stravinsky, and Milhaud all borrowed this precise chord from Debussy (a possibility that should not be excluded), we can only confirm that Messiaen himself actually reused the chords he found in the opening measures of Pelléas.

Indeed, Messiaen rarely spoke of his own reuse of the Golaud chord, which he employed in two different forms: the single chord heard on the second beat of Example 16b and that same chord used in tandem with . . .

Example 16c  Messiaen, Traité, 6:58, transformation of the Golaud chord identified by Messiaen in Ravel’s Daphnis et Chloé


its neighbor harmony. In the *Traité* Messiaen indicates that the single Golaud chord can be heard in a climax of “Chant d’amour 1” (*Turangalîla-Symphonie*, 1948; see Example 16d), whereas the two-chord version, though not indicated by Messiaen, generates an entire passage of “Dieu parmi nous” (*La Nativité du Seigneur*, 1936), first at the original pitch level and then transposed up a half step (see Example 16e).113

But the importance of the Golaud chord in Messiaen’s musical imagination can also lead to misunderstandings, and this takes us back to the first harmonic formula in the “vol nuptial.” In his analysis of “La soirée dans Grenade” Messiaen remarks on a shorter version of the same sequence, describing it as “a bitonal chord: C-sharp major over A major—see ‘Hommage à Rameau’ and the Golaud theme in *Pelléas.*”114 Effectively, the same harmonies are found in both *Pelléas* and “Hommage à Rameau.” Yet as Cheong has already demonstrated, it is “Hommage à Rameau” that contains the complete version of the sequence as Messiaen uses it in the “vol nuptial” (mm. 87–88).115 “Hommage à Rameau” is therefore the veritable source of the first formula in the “vol nuptial” (see Example 17a), but it is also the model of that formula in T268 (see Example 17b) and in numerous other uses. Although Messiaen does not mention the chord in connection with

**Example 16d** Messiaen, *Turangalîla-Symphonie*, “Chant d’amour 1,” mm. 4–5 after rehearsal 31 (Paris: Durand, 1953, authors’ reduction)

113. Messiaen, *Traité*, 2:184. Messiaen speaks of the “polytonal chord of the Golaud theme from *Pelléas* in the brass” (“l’accord polytonal du thème de Golaud dans *Pelléas*, par les cuivres”). The same chord, with numerous added notes in the upper voices, also opens the concluding sequence of the first movement of *Es expecto resurrectionem* (m. 39). In the example from “Dieu parmi nous,” as in Example 7b, the pitches in the pedals are based on Debussy’s bass line. Latry and Mallié were the first to notice this borrowing in *L’œuvre d’orgue*, 176–77.


115. Cheong, “‘Miroir fluide,’” 645.

Example 17a  Debussy, *Images*, set 1, “Hommage à Rameau,” mm. 21–23 (Paris: Durand, 1905)
T268, his later remarks on works that use the harmonies in T268 (including the “vol nuptial”) make misleading references to Golaud. Following Messiaen’s indications in the *Traité*, we have found three other occurrences of the “Hommage à Rameau” formula spanning several decades: *Visions de l’Amen* (1943; see Example 17c), *Messe de la Pentecôte* (1951; see Example 17d), and *Saint François d’Assise* (1975–83; see Example 17e). In all of these examples Messiaen’s indication of the “sonorité Golaud” is a trace of his analyzing “Hommage à Rameau” through *Pelléas* that masks his borrowing of an entire sequence rather than a single Golaud chord.

As mentioned above, the second harmonic formula in the excerpt from “La bouscarle” in Example 15 is also based on a passage of “Hommage à Rameau.” This is an example of what Messiaen calls “harmonic litany.” At the heart of the “List of Connections of Chords” in *Technique*, Messiaen describes a group of six examples as “litanies harmoniques” and explains that “the harmonic litany is a melodic fragment of two or several notes repeated with different harmonizations.” Although the term “litany” seems to come from Marcel Dupré, the practice of repeatedly reharmonizing a short melodic fragment has other precedents. In 1889 Théodore Dubois concluded his *Notes et études d’harmonie* with an exercise that challenged the student to harmonize the same two-note melodic fragment in twenty-five different ways. In turn, Dupré’s *Traité d’improvisation* suggests that the student practice “harmonic variations” as follows: “Choose a short formula, a sort of litany . . . and on this group of notes improvise as many harmonic variations as possible.”

Messiaen’s interest in harmonic litanies is centered on his readings of Debussy’s music, as two examples in the *Traité* underline. In his analysis of “Hommage à Rameau” he remarks on “a marvelous progression: harmonic

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118. Dubois, *Notes et études d’harmonie*, 174. Messiaen owned at least two harmony manuals by Dubois, both of which are now conserved at the Médiathèque Hector Berlioz of the Paris Conservatoire: 87 leçons d’harmonie of 1891 (Rmb 72) and the *Traité de contrepoint et de fugue* of 1914 (Rmb 770).
119. Dupré, *Traité d’improvisation*, 101: “Choisir une courte formule, une sorte de litanie . . . et improviser sur ce groupe de notes le plus grand nombre possible d’harmonisations différentes” (our emphasis).
litany on G♯ and F♯,” admitting, “I liked this progression and created a sequence from it.”

Messiaen uses this litany in “Action de grâces” (Poèmes pour Mi, 1936), where it is heard at its original pitch level after initially appearing a minor third higher (see Example 18c). He also frequently employed it without sequence in some of his earliest works. Here he transformed very little, simply removing the first bass note.
so that the lower line can descend in conjunct motion. (He would later reproduce this voicing in T246; see Example 18d.) In his prelude “Le nombre léger” Messiaen uses the progression on the heels of the hybrid formula that mixes the “Cloches à travers les feuilles” quintuplet with the scène des cheveux chords, meaning that this very early work combines three different passages of Debussy’s music to create a new, perfectly coherent musical discourse (see Example 18e). In Technique Messiaen indicates his use of
Example 18c  Messiaen, *Poèmes pour Mi*, “Action de grâces,” m. 44 (Paris: Durand, 1937)

“Hommage à Rameau” litany transposed up a minor third

“Hommage à Rameau” litany at pitch

Example 18d  Messiaen, T246


T246 in “Un reflet dans le vent . . .,” where he develops the formula in a sequence (see Example 18f). In “Chant d’extase dans un paysage triste” he places the second half of the progression before the first (chords 3 and 4 are followed by chords 1 and 2; see Example 18g). He also reorganizes the voicing of each chord, setting the new progression to typically Debussian rhythms. (All of these examples directly contradict Messiaen’s later

121. Messiaen, *Technique*, 75.
claims that Debussy’s presence in the _Préludes_ was limited to the poet-ics of their titles.)\(^{122}\) The same harmonic litany also permeates the organ works _Diptyque_ (1929), “Les Mages” (_La Nativité du Seigneur_, 1936), and “L’Ange aux parfums” (_Les Corps glorieux_, 1939), and is heard, some fifty years after its first use, in an improvisation on _Puer natus est_.\(^{123}\) Such frequent recurrences of a single borrowed formula underline its importance as a perennial compositional tool in and unifying element of Messiaen’s musical language well beyond the confines of “La bouscarle.”

Cheong shows that the third harmonic formula in “La bouscarle” is drawn from Messiaen’s second accord à résonance contractée (see Example 19a), which is in turn based on a passage of “Reflets dans l’eau” (see Example 19b).\(^{124}\) Messiaen’s analysis of this measure from “Reflets dans l’eau,” followed by a

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123. This improvisation was recorded on October 21, 1985, broadcast on France 3 and France Musique on December 25, 1985, and made commercially available on a DVD by Georges Bessonnet, _Quartet for the End of Time_. The Debussy formula is heard three minutes and forty-seven seconds into the second of Messiaen’s three improvisations on _Puer natus est_ (“Et les Mages avaient vu l’étoile du Christ en Orient et ils se sont mis en route vers Nazareth”), or ten minutes and thirty seconds into the whole set of three improvisations.
124. Messiaen analyzes this passage of “Reflets dans l’eau” in the _Traité_, 6:17–18, and discusses the _accords à résonance contractée_ at 7:149–56. Although Wai-Ling Cheong was the first to suggest that there might be a relationship between “Reflets dans l’eau” and these chords (“Rediscovering Messiaen’s Invented Chords,” 97), the connection between the works was first confirmed in Latry and Mallié, _L’œuvre d’orgue_, 18.
diagram showing his adaptation of the harmonies (see Example 19c), leaves us in no doubt: “One should point out these double appoggiaturas. I often used them without their resolutions, obtaining the following sequence.”

Example 19a  Messiaen, “Deuxième accord à résonance contractée,” *Traité*, 7:151, Example 2, and 7:162, Example 3


Example 19c  Messiaen, *Traité*, 6:17

The second *accord à résonance contractée* is a borrowed harmonic formula, a fleeting moment of Debussy’s “Reflets dans l’eau” that became a calling card of his soundworld. The two *accords à résonance contractée* are in fact two different two-chord formulas that Messiaen used and indicated for the

first time in the second and seventh movements of the Quatuor pour la fin du Temps.126 It is nevertheless worth noting that his explanation of the chords in this section of the Traité does not mention their adapted use after the Quatuor, where the minor sevenths in the lower register (the “résonance[s] inférieure[s]”) are inverted and “contracted” into major seconds, bringing the sonority within the grasp of the pianist’s hands.127 In this form both chord pairs that make up the two accords à résonance contractée constitute a regular element of Messiaen’s harmonic vocabulary from the Visions de l’Amen (1943) onward and are regularly indicated in the analyses of his own works that are printed in the Traité. These harmonic formulas are also granted the status of “accords spéciaux” (special chords) that receive extra attention in the Traité.128 The pitches that Messiaen qualifies as “résonance[s] inférieure[s]” are notes he adds to Debussy’s original harmonies, a facet of his deforming prism. We should add that in a few rare instances Messiaen uses both formulas, including the “Reflets dans l’eau” formula, without the additional “resonant” pitches: in “Vocalise, pour l’Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps” (m. 19), “La bouscarle,” and “Les deux murailles d’eau.”

Two final case studies, from “Bail avec Mi” (Chants de terre et de ciel, 1938) and “La Transsubstantiation” (Livre du Saint Sacrement, 1984), show Messiaen using harmonic litany as a tool for unifying harmonic material across larger structures. He employed the “Hommage à Rameau” litany already seen in “La bouscarle” in association with other litanies, grouping them to create longer textures in a compositional strategy comparable to the assembled rhythmic variations of the fifth Rechant (Example 12). In both “Bail avec Mi” and “La Transsubstantiation” T246 is associated with T247, “Bail avec Mi” opening with a sequence on T247 (see Example 20a). In Technique T247 is clearly indicated as coming from “Bail avec Mi,” although Messiaen does not offer any further commentary or explain that T247 reproduces the piano part of the song’s second measure. He does, however, remark at several points in the Traité upon harmonies that are identical to those of T247 and that are found in act 1, scene 3, of Pelléas.129 This is the same passage (Geneviève’s “Il est temps de rentrer”) that yielded the dotted Golaud rhythm used in “Adieu” (Example 14c). The parametrical isolation of Messiaen’s borrowing technique allows him to borrow different parameters from the same key moment and deploy them in different contexts, just as it allows him to combine disparate borrowed elements in unified hybrid textures, as in “Montagnes” (Example 13).

126. Elsewhere in the second movement, “Vocalise, pour l’Ange qui annonce la fin du temps,” Messiaen borrows a different chord progression from “Reflets dans l’eau” (mm. 22–23), developing it through sequence in mm. 25–26 of his work; see Messiaen, Traité, 6:19, and T234.
127. Messiaen, Traité, 7:151, Example 2, and 7:162, Example 3.
129. Messiaen, Traité, 6:69, 90, 110.
Example 20a Messiaen, *Chants de terre et de ciel*, “Bail avec Mi,” mm. 1–5 (Paris: Durand, 1939)

Un peu lent

Un peu lent

Ton œil de terre.

Un peu lent

Ton œil de terre.

3 T247 transposed down a minor third

T246 transposed down a perfect fourth

Pour tâter l’atmosphère.

8va

8va

3

5

T247

T246

T248

(m.g.)

(m.g.)

(m.g.)
In both T246 and T247 Messiaen reverses the order of the harmonies as they appear in Debussy’s opera, so that a descending major second will be heard in the upper voice. This transformation smooths the transition from the borrowed harmonies of T247 to those of T246 and thematicizes the passage. Each line of Messiaen’s text corresponds to a term in the sequence of melodic seconds heard in the upper voices of each litany, including that of T248, whose model remains unidentified.

Examples T246 and T247 are also found together in “La Transsubstantiation” (see Example 20b). Here they are followed by a third harmonic litany based on a progression taken from “La flûte de Pan” in the *Trois chansons de Bilitis* (see Example 20c).130 While this seems to be the progression’s first


Harmonic litany T246, “Hommage à Rameau”

R: flûte 8, bourdon 8, gambe, trompette 8 > 1 
Pos: principal 8, fl. harm., cor de nuit, salicional 1 
G: montre 8, fl. harm., bourdon 8, gambe 1 tous accouplements 1

Bien modéré stacc. lourd

Harmonic litany T69A, “La flûte de Pan”

PR più f

Harmonic litany T247, Pelléas, “Il est temps de rentrer”

130. A passing reference is made to this progression in Messiaen, *Traité*, 6:151.
Example 20c  Debussy, *Trois chansons de Bilitis*, “La flûte de Pan,” mm. 13–16 (Paris: Fromont, 1896)

appearance in Messiaen’s oeuvre, it had lain dormant for decades in the form of T69A (see Example 20d). The harmonies marked U, V, W, X, Y, and Z in Examples 20b–d make it possible to follow their adjustment and rearrangement from “La flûte de Pan” to T69A to “La Transubstantiation.”

Like the repeated descending second of “Bail avec Mi,” Messiaen’s assembled litany develops the rising and falling fifth of “Quotiescumque”
from the plainchant fragment “Quotiescumque manducabis panem hunc” (As often as you eat this bread). This chant, for the Feast of Corpus Christi (see Example 20c), evokes the Eucharist upon which “La Transubstantiation” meditates. It is presented in a simple Mixolydian harmonization at the end of the movement (see Example 20f), in a formal strategy reminiscent of nineteenth-century cumulative forms and of what

Example 20c  *Paroissien romain*, Communion for the “Fête du très Saint Sacrement,” opening phrase (Paris and Tournai: Desclée, 1925)

Burkholder describes as Ives’s “cumulative settings,” in which “the borrowed or paraphrased theme is first heard in fragments, often varied; is gradually assembled and clarified; and appears in full for the first time near the end of the movement.”

The borrowed litanies from Debussy’s *Pelléas*, “Hommage à Rameau,” and “La flûte de Pan” work alongside other borrowed materials to prepare the plainchant citation that closes the ABABCD form of “La Transsubstantiation.” The A sections are composed of a serially inspired texture based on a twelve-note “melodic mode.” Each pitch is systematically associated with a particular register, one of four timbres, and a duration of between one and twelve thirty-second notes, the highest pitch being attached to the shortest duration and so forth. The B sections involve a dialogue between two birds that Messiaen heard and transcribed in Israel: the *bulbul des jardins* (common bulbul) and the *tourterelle maillée* (laughing dove). These are underpinned by the rising and falling fifth of “Quotiescumque” in the pedals, first heard at pitch and progressively fragmented, expanded, contracted, and transposed. The beaming of this element, like that of the plainchant excerpt that closes the work, reflects the chant’s original neumatic notation. Elements of the transcribed birdsong also echo the plainchant, notably the laughing dove’s rising and falling fifth. Section C is built from constantly changing four- to eight-note harmonizations of plainchant fragments corresponding to one or several neumes: “Quotiescumque” (mm. 73–77), “manducabitis panem hunc” (m. 78), “panem hunc” (mm. 79–81), and so on. Messiaen reworks the three Debussian litanies to create expanding and contracting chord pairs that are revoiced to develop the rising and falling fifth of the “Quotiescumque” motive, much as he emphasized Mélisande’s rising and falling fourth in T276 (Example 4): the rocking between pairs of chords, vestiges of Debussy’s trademark harmonic *balancement*, effectively permeate Messiaen’s personal style. Although “La Transubstantiation” is composed of four different textures presented as closed entities, each block is linked by common material. Over the course of the work the plainchant fragment gradually emerges from the twelve-note mist of the opening section, first through snatches of birdsong, and then in a kaleidoscope of harmonic litanies that includes several Debussian borrowings. Finally it is revealed in its original form, in a stark modal setting. This case makes it particularly tempting to align Messiaen’s compositions, which he described as “acts of faith” and in which he transforms secular and even sensual material into religious meditations, with the composer’s frequent reflections on the

132. Messiaen began using such melodic modes, made famous by “Mode de valeurs et d’intensités,” in “La parole toute-puissante” of *Vingt regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus*, where a new melodic mode is used to redistribute the pitches of a traditional Korean melody found in the *Encyclopédie de la musique et dictionnaire du Conservatoire*; see Messiaen, *Traité*, 2:472.
Eucharist, in which ordinary bread and wine become the saving body and blood of Christ. (These began with a series of early works including *Le banquet eucharistique*, *Les offrandes oubliées*, *Offrande au Saint Sacrement*, and *Hymne au Saint Sacrement*.) Beyond their practicality or personal significance, Messiaen’s borrowings might, at times, serve as a form of theological commentary.

**Situating Messiaen’s Borrowing**

This article has demonstrated that different forms of borrowing play a central role in Messiaen’s music. In each of the cases described above we have compared sources to their transformations in Messiaen’s scores and, importantly, have cross-referenced these comparisons with information found in the composer’s statements about his own music and the music of others. This triangulation cleared the way for a step-by-step reconstruction of Messiaen’s compositional process and his habits of selection and transformation. More generally, we have provided new evidence that Messiaen’s creativity depended on his particular intertextual vision of music. Defining the terms of Messiaen’s borrowing technique, notably the multiple mechanisms of his “deforming prism,” has allowed us to show how Messiaen transformed material by means of specific methods, integrating existing harmonies, rhythms, melodies, and gestures into original works.

This new vision of Messiaen’s creative process must change our approach to analyzing his music. In light of our demonstrations of the way Messiaen mimics traditional rhythmic and harmonic development by assembling elements of disparate origin, we should no longer assume that similarities between musical elements are a sign of linearly conceived developmental relationships. For example, set theory and its derivatives do not seem sufficiently flexible—at least, not without significant adaptation—to describe Messiaen’s harmonic procedures as they have been detailed here; indeed, they would seem to be in direct conflict with his harmonic thinking. Although set theory may have certain applications in relation to the modes of limited transposition and their octaviating patterns, its indifference to specific octave ranges renders it powerless to characterize the “special chords” and borrowed harmonies whose particular distribution in pitch space are key to their identity. The central question of segmentation, traditionally left to the theorist’s discretion, would need to negotiate with the composer’s thinking in terms of harmonic formulas. Overdependence on set theory would erase the internal hierarchies and varied origins of Messiaen’s harmonic formulas, with their vestiges of tonal practice and, when combined, their frequent grouping of similar structures from different sources. And while it may be simple for an analyst without knowledge of Messiaen’s compositional process to segment accurately passages such as the harmonic litanies in
“La Transsubstantiation,” it would be a far more delicate operation to do the same for the staggered chord changes in “Un reflet dans le vent . . .” (Example 5e) without knowledge of the prelude’s genesis.

Furthermore, although reading unidentified harmonies in relation to the special chords described in the Traité or imagining them as transpositions and inversions with missing notes or added notes may seem, on the surface, to correspond to knowledge of Messiaen’s harmonic theories, it overlooks the fact that Messiaen’s special chords are not just pitch collections but particular “registrations” of those pitches. This approach also downplays the fact that the named special chords, although present in Messiaen’s later works, make up a small part of his much larger non-modal harmonic vocabulary. Given Messiaen’s proclivity for creating unity by grouping objects with similar characteristics, chords that are similar but not identical to special chords may in fact have other origins. The harmonic formulas created through Messiaen’s harmonic borrowing make up a large part of what was previously an unidentified repertory of chords. We now know that many of those unaccountable harmonies have particular origins in the works of Debussy and others and can be traced across the whole of Messiaen’s output.

In addition to retracing unexpected creative lineages, the identification of borrowed materials in Messiaen’s scores allows us to understand how he composed at the level of the phrase, the section, and the form. Messiaen composes primarily with blocks of precomposed material, what we have called formulas, many of them derived from borrowed material. In order to create form he brings these blocks together and adjusts, interweaves, stitches together, or superposes their boundaries. This is, in a sense, the part of his technique that has been apparent to his listeners from almost the beginning, the long-assumed reality behind Boulez’s well-known observation that “Messiaen’s method never manages to fit in with his discourse, because he does not compose—he juxtaposes—and he constantly relies on an exclusively harmonic style of writing.”

This study has been the first to reveal the different levels at which Boulez’s observation of juxtaposition in Messiaen’s music is operational: at a formal level, certainly, but also at a very local level, in the composition of texture, harmonic progressions, and phrases. His technique of musical montage maintains a delicate balance between the enduring identity of his borrowed materials and the attenuation of their different origins. He frequently evoked stained glass (vitrail) to characterize his forms. This metaphor takes on new meaning in the context of the present study, in which we have shown how heterogeneous, colorful fragments melt into a single and dazzling whole. The deforming prism is also a unifying prism, creating an impression of continuity and development between fragments of dramatically different musical origin. By tracing borrowed fragments back to their sources we have been able to

133. Boulez, Stocktakeings, 49.
reconstitute a cascade of previously unknown compositional choices. Knowledge of these choices has brought about a profound change in our understanding of the composer’s analyses, his rhetorical sidesteps and pregnant silences.

We have already suggested that personal hermeneutic motivations may lie behind particular cases and that borrowing, like theological commentary, creates a web of new meaning between texts with similar characteristics of different origin. But we have also seen that Messiaen’s borrowing is far too fundamental to his techniques of musical construction for it to systematically bear extramusical significance. At the close of his book on Ives’s uses of existing music, Burkholder includes a section titled “Why so much borrowing?” This is likely a question that has also crossed the minds of our readers. Many of the reasons Burkholder proposes for Ives’s borrowing are also applicable to Messiaen’s music. Borrowing is an efficient and practical generator of musical material for a composer in need of a starting point. Borrowing from the past allowed both Ives and Messiaen to align their music with a tradition while simultaneously differentiating themselves as individual artists. Ives’s forms of borrowing increased over the course of his life and became a means of surpassing himself, of working within the terms of his own creativity. While we are only beginning to grasp the depth and breadth of Messiaen’s borrowing techniques and are not yet able to describe their historical development in full detail, the cases presented here have shown that his practices were also in constant evolution.

Beyond questions specific to Messiaen alone, the importance of his selection, transformation, and juxtaposition of borrowed material has the potential to alter significantly our vision of musical creativity in twentieth-century music in general. Our findings emphasize the importance of memory in a composer’s invention, rather than in a listener’s or commentator’s later reading of a work. Much of our research has been guided by a central question: “What aspects of a beloved work might a composer retain?” Although he is not the only composer to have worked with an ear to the past, Messiaen had a unique and personal response to this question, one he did not feel free to describe in spite of his frequent analyses of his own music.135

Resituating Messiaen’s music in light of what we have revealed might begin with reflection on his post-Technique silence on borrowing. A selective survey of this volume’s reception history—three texts from 1945, 1961, and 1968 respectively—yields three types of objection inspired by Messiaen’s

134. Burkholder, All Made of Tunes, 417.
135. In this sense our work on Messiaen’s creative reuses of Debussy’s music has certain similarities with Carolyn Abbate’s study of Debussy’s sketches for Pelléas et Mélisande as reinterpretations of Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde (“Tristan in the Composition of Pelléas”). Although our methods differ, we have, like Abbate, sought to define in clearer, more concrete terms the generally recognized musical relationship between a composer and a key creative forebear.
descriptions of musical borrowing. Each objection arises from its author’s understanding of what it means to compose—of acceptable and unacceptable forms of musical creativity.

Following its publication in February 1944 the early reception of *Technique* became entangled with the controversial 1945 premiere of Messiaen’s *Trois petites liturgies de la Présence Divine*. Debate in the press snowballed into a polemic that is now commonly referred to as “le cas Messiaen” after the subtitle of an essay by Bernard Gavoty.136 When censuring Messiaen’s music and texts Gavoty took particular notice of the passages on musical borrowing in *Technique*:

It scientifically defines the process of discovery. First of all, Messiaen finds his pleasure everywhere—in Hindu ragas, in plainchant, in Russian music, in Debussy, and in birdsong. From one he borrows rhythmic declamation, from another scraps of melody and harmonies. He spies consciously on the song of the blackbird and faithfully reproduces the songbirds’ early morning hymn. Nothing is useless to him; nothing leaves him indifferent. His credo is “Let’s take a closer look at a piece of music, a melodic contour, and let’s try to find our honey in it!” But not without difficulty. It is like deciphering an alchemist’s recipe book: I take the first three notes of *Boris Godunov*, I retrograde them, I make a harmonic sequence, I deform its rhythms with added values [*demi-unités de valeur*], I am inspired by the reversed harmonies of the third measure of “Reflets dans l’eau,” over the top I release a terrifying cascade of chords with appoggiaturas, and I obtain the second theme of my *Corps glorieux* or one of the cyclical themes of my *Regards*. . . . This is hardly an exaggeration.137

Gavoty’s criticism focuses on the surface of Messiaen’s language and reflects a general distaste for the neologisms and colorful language of Messiaen’s program notes that he expresses elsewhere in the essay. The pastiche-paraphrase of *Technique* shows that although Gavoty suspected what Messiaen was getting at (and did not approve), he lost patience with


the “alchemist’s recipe” before it led him to an understanding of its processes. More to the point, Gavoty goes on to explain that the harmonic procedures described in Technique were too successful in creating music immediately recognizable as Messiaen’s. The composer’s processes were too automated: “As fertile as it may be, a system remains a system, a limited field.”138 In this sense, Gavoty seems to have understood the unifying properties of Messiaen’s transformational techniques even as he overlooked the more literal implications of “finding one’s honey.”

André Hodeir’s comments on Technique in his Since Debussy of 1961 are similarly characterized by suspicion. His generally dismissive remarks on Messiaen, whom he includes for having educated Boulez and Barraqué, are little more than a rest stop on the road to Barraqué’s apotheosis in the book’s penultimate chapter. Hodeir’s critique of Technique comes in a passage titled “Messiaen’s Downfall: Form”:

If we are to believe the advice given future disciples in his treatise, Messiaen’s conception of the composer’s art is rather strange indeed. Just what is the meaning of these “favorite intervals,” this “distorting prism of our musical language,” this utilization of the melodic curves of the plain-song, permissible provided we “neglect their modes and rhythms in favor of our own”? What is the meaning of these “imitation folk songs” which are to be fabricated “without forgetting the little onomatopoeic refrain” and what, above all, does he mean by “taking a peek at other styles,” allowing himself to “transform” a measure of Debussy—into a harmonic progression!—and using “the five notes which begin Mussorgsky’s Boris Godounov” to concoct his “formula No. 1 for a melodic cadence” which he immediately provides with an “added time-value” and “harmonies from the second mode of limited transpositions”? Were these the methods of Mozart, Wagner, and Debussy, the composers whom Messiaen reveres above all and whose works he has so lovingly analyzed? One would like to think that this is merely a faulty pedagogical expression of a procedure which would otherwise be glaringly corrupt. Messiaen seems to be inviting his pupils to practice a technique of camouflage which might easily have been preached by a good many other so-called masters whom I can neither admire nor respect.139

Hodeir’s skepticism arises from the presence of exogenic material on the composer’s workbench, a transgression linking Messiaen’s language to the “doomed generation” of the interwar years.140 The identity of this generation becomes clearer in the following chapter’s estimation of Boulez’s

138. Ibid., 27: “Car, si fécond soit-il, un système reste un système, c’est-à-dire, un champ limité.”
139. Hodeir, Since Debussy, 118–19. Noel Burch’s translation of Hodeir translates directly from Technique, yielding variations on Satterfield’s 1956 translation such as “distorting prism” rather than “deforming prism.”
140. Ibid., 119.
early works: “they implied a condemnation of every shade of neoclassicist: symphonists, folklore specialists, back-handed tonalists, and fabricators of still-born modes.” Messiaen might well belong to all these categories, but he is definitely the target of the last. Hodeir dismissed the processes of Technique as backward-looking neoclassicist “camouflage,” in spite of the fact that he also remarked upon Messiaen’s serial works of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Today it is widely assumed that Messiaen’s experimentation with serial procedures was inspired by his contact with students such as Boulez and Barraqué, by the aesthetic pressures of their rising postwar generation. These pressures, seen to be alive and well in Hodeir’s text of 1961, with its idealization of “‘athematic’ and discontinuous music,” may have kept Messiaen from elaborating on the borrowing processes described in Technique, even as he continued to use them. In contrast to these previous two writers, composer Roger Smalley is among the most sympathetic and perceptive historical readers of Technique. Yet even in praising Messiaen’s originality he sensed that deeper knowledge of his processes might put Messiaen at risk. Having presented an overview of the volume’s propositions for melodic and harmonic borrowing in T85–89 and T189–191, Smalley reflects,

What an extraordinary way to compose! In The technique of my musical language he also quotes other examples of Debussy, of Mussorgsky, and of Ravel, which he has used in this same way. The extent to which he does it must, of course, remain unknown, for reasons which will soon become obvious. It would seem to be unique in the recent history of music for a composer to base his music so closely on that of another composer—indeed it might almost seem to amount to plagiarism, were it not for one important thing: Messiaen’s results are very different from the models, and bear the unmistakable stamp of his own musical personality. This is because the fragments of Debussy have been, as he puts it, “filtered” through his own technical processes. The most important of these transforming devices is his series of seven “modes of limited transposition.” Smalley not only recognizes the modes of limited transposition as potential “transforming devices,” but he underlines the importance of Debussy as a source of raw material. With the remark “The extent to which he does it must, of course, remain unknown” Smalley reveals his fear that Messiaen’s borrowings might cause his carefully crafted art to be dismissed as vulgar plagiarism. Even as he admired the ingenuity of his borrowing technique he felt that its workings were best admired from a distance.

141. Ibid., 156 (our emphasis).
142. Ibid., 100–101, 118–19.
143. See Boulez, Orientations, 412; Deliège, Cinquante ans, 101–2; and Hodeir, Since Debussy, 101–2.
Messiaen’s music and teaching began to receive international notice after the Second World War, during a period in which Hodeir’s “doomed generation” of the interwar years was increasingly challenged by younger musicians whose compositions seemed to defy material attachment to the past and who idealized the notion of the autonomous, self-contained work. Messiaen taught many of these young composers and, as a tutelary figure, he partially threw in his lot with them, adjusting the way he talked about his music as he did so. Although some early readers of *Technique* focused on its discussion of borrowing and transformation, with time this dimension of Messiaen’s text faded from its reception to the point that the importance of his borrowing technique has remained unnoticed. We would nevertheless invoke the words of Messiaen’s former student Pierre Boulez to suggest that the divergence between Messiaen’s discourse and the reality of his techniques is not an isolated case:

Toward the end of the [*Symphony of Psalms*], I simply adore a passage that evokes Japanese mouth organs. I tell myself that I haven’t yet used that sort of sound, but that it will probably come. I store it for later. That’s what interests me when I’m conducting, storing something and then using it later, but in a totally unrecognizable way. In *Rituel*, for example, I use a rhythmic cell from Stravinsky’s *Symphonie pour instruments à vent* [sic], but nobody can guess that it’s borrowed from Stravinsky. I really like this sort of filtered influence: the chemical combination with what you take results in something that is completely different from the source. But the sources are always there. It’s the same thing with younger composers. When I conduct the works that you mentioned, by Dalbavie or Manoury in particular, I say to myself: he thought of that, very well then, I’ll make a note of it and keep it to myself. It’s a warehouse, or rather a refrigerator, because the things don’t deteriorate, they’re kept for later.  

This unexpected admission by Boulez in a late and little-known interview would seem to prove that, among twentieth-century composer-theorists advocating a certain rupture with past notions of musical creativity, Messiaen was not alone in finding his raw material in the music he loved. If this capacity to compose by loving, retaining, filtering, and integrating through “chemical

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146. Boulez, “Prenons garde,” 33–34: “Vers la fin de cette œuvre, j’aime énormément un passage qui évoque les orgues à bouche japonais. Je me dis que je n’ai pas encore utilisé ce type de sonorités, mais que cela viendra probablement. J’emmagasine; voilà ce qui m’intéresse quand je dirige: emmagasiner quelque chose, et m’en resservir plus tard, mais de façon méconnaissable. Dans *Rituel*, par exemple, je me serais d’une cellule rythmique employée par Stravinski dans sa *Symphonie pour instruments à vent* [sic], mais personne ne peut deviner que c’est emprunté à Stravinski. J’aime beaucoup les influences par filtrage: la combinaison chimique avec ce que vous prenez fait que le résultat est complètement différent de la source. Mais les sources sont toujours là. Avec les compositeurs plus jeunes, c’est la même chose. Quand je dirige les œuvres que vous avez mentionnées, de Dalbavie ou de Manoury en particulier, je me dis: il a pensé à ça, très bien, je le note et cela reste en moi. C’est un magasin, ou plutôt un réfrigérateur, car les choses ne se détièrent pas, elles restent en attente.”
combination” surprises us, it is because such actions contrast with the premises of Boulez’s major theoretical writings. In his lectures to the Collège de France, for example, his theory of the composer’s most elementary gestures is founded first on “the genesis of the idea” and then on “deduction from the initial idea.” Boulez did not leave room to consider that “the genesis of the idea” might be found, beyond the abstraction of a musical code, in existing musical elements. Yet his later remarks on Stravinsky, Dalbavie, and Manoury reveal that he did not exclude this possibility. His reference to musical borrowing illustrates that for him, too, interpretation, and through interpretation analysis, created an important bond between memory and creation. For Boulez, as for Messiaen, analysis was not a tool for proving coherence through preconceived systems or for imposing a personal reading on a work, but rather one for discerning the aspects that might be kept and later reused as a source or model. Through revelations of material borrowed from existing works in the music of Olivier Messiaen, this study has suggested that we look beyond theoretical discourses and aesthetic polemics to focus greater attention on the place of the model and its recomposition in the construction of twentieth-century musical modernity.

Appendix Messiaen’s borrowings from works by Debussy

This table is arranged in chronological order. Neither definitive nor exhaustive, it provides a synthetic overview of our current knowledge of Messiaen’s borrowings from Debussy. Only the first occurrence of each borrowing in each work is indicated. Moreover, we do not account for all of the numerous appearances of the second accord à résonance contractée from its appearance in Visions de l’Amen onward.

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147. Boulez, Leçons de musique, 143–45.
| Excerpt built on borrowed music | Passage borrowed from Debussy | Type of material borrowed | Corresponding example in  
Technique de mon langage musical |
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(continued)
Appendix  continued

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**Works Cited**


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Messiaen the Borrower


Abstract

This article shows, through a new reading of Messiaen’s *Technique de mon langage musical* and examples of his composing with elements found in the music of Debussy, that borrowing plays a more central role in his compositional practices than has previously been recognized. Messiaen’s conscious reuse of Debussy’s music spans his entire career, and primarily involves passages from *Pelléas et Mélisande* and a handful of piano works. Using his descriptions of Debussy’s influence, his analyses of Debussy, and his own theoretical writings, we examine examples of Messiaen’s musical borrowing in terms of compositional strategy. Four groups of case studies show how he transforms borrowed harmonic material, creates meaning, borrows gesture, and composes texture and form by combining different types of borrowed material.

**Keywords:** Olivier Messiaen, Claude Debussy, musical borrowing, compositional techniques, *Pelléas et Mélisande*