

Messiaen's *Turangalila Symphonie* and its Place within the Symphonic Genre of the First Half of the Twentieth Century.

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In Eric Salzman's broad-brush overview of twentieth century music, he described the decade following the end of World War 2 as a period marking the second major advance of modernism¹. During this decade, serialism began to occupy the compositional mainstream, experiments in integral serialism by Messiaen, Boulez, Stockhausen and Babbitt were underway, the first coherent attempts to make electro-acoustic music occurred and Cage was working on his earliest pieces using indeterminacy. It is less well known that the same decade represented the last phase of the "second age" of the symphony, a period lasting from Brahms and Bruckner then passing through Mahler and Sibelius through to the mid 1950s. This took in both neo-classical and neo-romantic trends and was marked by the use of extended tonality or the retention of tonal centres. Messiaen's *Turangalila Symphonie*, dating from 1946-48 and his largest first period work, seems to be part of this latter trend. It bears the title of symphony and thus brings up all the connotations of the symphonic tradition by doing so. On the other hand, several movements of the symphony link into the aforesaid modernist "spike". Is *Turangalila* a representative symphony of its own time, is it revolutionary, reactionary, or is it prophetic for the present age? Does *Turangalila* link into the canon of symphonic music, is it unique, or is Messiaen saying something completely new within it about the symphonic form?

My aim in this paper is to consider *Turangalila Symphonie* within the larger symphonic context of its period and to propose some answers to the questions above. This corresponds with my principal research focus: the twentieth century symphony, and its local expression in Australia between 1945 and 1960.

I vividly recall my first hearing and reading of the *Turangalila Symphonie* while a composition student at the University of Melbourne in about 1977. I remember being impressed by the unashamed tonality of many of the work's sections, the jaunty rhythms and the suave languor of the slow sections which highlighted the "sci-fi" sounds of the ondes martenot. It all seemed very dated and unfashionable in 1977 and to admit to liking this music in a composition class of the period was as dangerous to one's reputation amongst peers as admitting that you liked the music of Vaughan Williams, Britten, Shostakovich or Malcolm Williamson. Thirty years on, the wide range of musical expression and style within *Turangalila* seems a natural part of today's musical environment. It is one of a few mid 20th century works that can attract a full house in the concert hall and it demonstrates how musical conventions and tastes have altered in the wake of post-modernism. It is not incongruent in overall style with many recent or new compositions and, since the 1980s there has been a strong resurgence in writing symphonies again. Given this shift in recent musical trends, is it fair to suggest that Messiaen's wide range of expression, including blatant tonality, was forward-looking in 1948?

Firstly, let us try to get an overview of the symphonic tradition immediately prior to *Turangalila Symphonie*. Despite signs of the demise of the symphony during the mid 19th century, the high status of the genre was recaptured from the mid 1870s onwards by Brahms, Bruckner, Dvorak and Tchaikovsky. Dahlhaus described this phenomena as the "second age" of the symphony². Despite a brief eclipse between about 1914 and 1929 during the first spike of twentieth century modernism (but yet marked by Sibelius and Nielsen's finest symphonies), the "second age" of the symphony lasted into the the 1930s and 1940s. The long, strongly-expressive symphonies of the first decade of the 20th century—works by Mahler, Rachmaninov, Suk and Elgar—gave way to the more concise and cooler emotional temperature of Sibelius and Nielsen. Average lengths of symphonies following the First World War tended to be shorter, with durations between 25 and 40 minutes. The principal centres of symphonic writing shifted from Germany and Austria to Britain (Vaughan Williams, Bax, Walton, Brian, Rubbra and many others), Scandinavia, the Soviet Union (Prokofiev, Shostakovich and Myaskovsky) and the United States (Hanson, Harris, Copland,

¹ Eric Salzman, *Twentieth-century Music: an Introduction*, 4th edn. (Upper Saddle River, Prentice-Hall, 2002), 198.

² Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-century Music* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989), 236

William Schuman, Diamond, Creston, Piston, Sessions, Barber and many others). During the period immediately surrounding *Turangalila* from 1945-1949, significant symphonies were composed by Shostakovich (No.9), Prokofiev (No.6), Copland (No.3) and Vaughan Williams (No.6).

The only roughly contemporary symphonies of the 1940s of comparable length to Messiaen's *Turangalila* are the 7th (70 minutes) and 8th Symphonies (65 minutes) of Shostakovich. Other large symphonies like the Prokofiev 5th and 6th symphonies and the Copland 3rd tend to be around 40-45 minutes. None of these works surpass the scale of *Turangalila*.

Despite Berlioz's stature as a symphonist prior to 1850, a strong tradition of French symphonies did not emerge until the late 1880s and 1890s with important symphonies by Saint-Saens, Franck, Chausson, D'Indy and Dukas. Although Faure, Debussy, Ravel and Satie are popularly viewed as the principal figures of early 20th century French music, Franck's brand of late romanticism and symphonic writing as perpetuated by his disciples was also a strong feature of French musical life of the period. Paul Dukas, one of Messiaen's teachers at the Paris Conservatoire, demonstrated in his three movement Symphony in C (1896) a mastery of managing musical material and the full orchestra that matches Richard Strauss and Elgar. Guy Ropartz completed six symphonies, Alberic Magnard four (between 1890 and 1914) and Charles Tournemire (another important teacher of Messiaen) eight orchestral symphonies in addition to a large oeuvre of organ works. Tournemire is a particularly intriguing figure in that much of his organ music and orchestral symphonies were based on strong programs based on Catholic theological themes. He used synthetic modes, similar to ones used by Messiaen in his early works of the 1930s, and Tournemire's latter works demonstrated an extended use of tonality and modality³. Of his eight symphonies, No.7 of 1918-22 is 75 minutes in duration, comprising five dances of 15 minutes each, each demonstrating a different historical phase of the influence of Christianity⁴. It is the only French symphonic work of its time predating Messiaen's *Turangalila* that approaches it in length. Hart writes intriguingly about Tournemire as follows:

*Tournemire's highly imaginative symphonies reward closer investigation. In terms of mystic imagination and comprehensive breadth, they form a direct link from Franck to Olivier Messiaen, who admired Tournemire and often heard him play at Ste Clothilde*⁵.

In the 1930s, the principal French symphonists were Roussel and Honegger. Their works are compact and tight in design, and one finds a strong sense of linear movement and of continuity – a sense that the music is progressing towards a goal. Roussel's Third and Fourth symphonies of 1930 and 1934 respectively demonstrate pounding neo-classical textures in outer movements and powerful romantic gestures in the slow movements at an almost Mahler-like intensity while retaining a Bach-like flow of counterpoint. Despite big musical gestures, the time scale of both works is short and concise – four movements play out within 22-24 minutes. There is time for about three and a half Roussel symphonies within the time span of the Messiaen *Turangalila* Symphony. Based in France during the 1920s and 1930s, Stravinsky, too, completed symphonies. *Symphony of Psalms* (1930), *Symphony in C* (1939-40) and *Symphony in Three Movements* (1945) are amongst his most important works within his neo-classical period.

Although Honegger completed his First Symphony in 1930 – a work of powerful energy and dissonant counterpoint and motor rhythms – his second to fifth symphonies occupy the period between 1941 and 1950. France's dark period of defeat and occupation of the war-time is powerfully portrayed in Honegger's Second Symphony (for strings) and the Third Symphony ("Liturgique") of 1946. A Fourth Symphony followed almost immediately. These works of three movements each are also of moderate dimensions – little more than 25 minutes each. Darius Milhaud wrote his first two symphonies in the United States during the war years, and his Third with choral finale commemorated the Allied victory in 1945⁶.

3 Nicholas Kaye. "Tournemire, Charles." In Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/28225> (accessed October 30, 2008).

4 Brian Hart, "The French Symphony after Berlioz: from the Second Empire to the First World War" *The Symphonic Repertoire* ed. A. Peter Brown, Vol.III, Part B (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2008), 685.

5 *Ibid*, 690

6 David Cox, "The Symphony in France": *Guide to the Symphony* ed. R. Layton (London, Oxford University Press, 1995) 215.

Bohuslav Martinu, who had been based in France during the 1930s, spent the war years in America – his six symphonies date from 1941 onwards.

Lastly, many of the great symphonic works of the period share a link to *Turangalila* in their origins as commissioned works by the Boston Symphony Orchestra conductor Serge Koussevitsky and his foundation; they include Roussel's Symphony No.3 in G minor, Honegger's First Symphony, Stravinsky's Symphony of Psalms, Bax's Symphony No.2 and Britten's *Spring Symphony* (also premiered in 1949 – the same year as the first performance of *Turangalila*).

Having set the scene, we now focus on *Turangalila* within this symphonic context. On the surface, the symphonic traditions within French music seem to be absent in Messiaen's early orchestral works. *L'ascension* (1932) consists of four movements (similar dimensions to Roussel's third and fourth symphonies) which together comprise a descriptive and meditative suite – the characteristic symphonic sense of continuity and progress is not palpably evident; rather there is a sense of circular rotation and, in the slow finale, stasis. Although *Turangalila* at times demonstrates elements of goal-driven progress in particular passages, within movements 2, 4, 5, 8 and 10, more usually the music moves in self-contained blocks—in ostinato-driven rotations. In terms of musical precedents, *Le Sacre du Printemps* is the most obvious one. Roussel's or Honegger's more dynamic, neo-classical motor rhythms are rarely in evidence, although the very opening paragraph of *Turangalila* is not dissimilar to the beginning of Honegger's First Symphony.

The ten movements of *Turangalila* seem to be unprecedented. However, Messiaen's first intention of the work in 1946 was a much shorter piece in four movements, in order the Introduction (the present first movement), the scherzo with two trios (fourth movement), the slow movement (sixth movement) and the finale (tenth movement)⁷. This scheme is both more traditional and emphasises an overall cyclic structure with weighting towards the "Love" theme. As the work grew into its present shape one suspects that Messiaen had in mind the large-scale, multi-movement shape of his major organ cycles, of the *Quatuor* and massive piano cycles like *Vingt Regards*. It is the large number of movements that give the piece its overall length, not the length of individual movements: only two movements approach or exceed a duration of 12 minutes. Most of the movements are of moderate duration.

The multi-movement symphony was pioneered by Berlioz in his seven movement *Romeo et Juliette*. This is an interesting precedent to *Turangalila* in the technical and emotional range employed by Berlioz and, arguably, in *Romeo et Juliette* stretched the meaning of the word symphony more widely than any symphonic work before Mahler. Although Mahler exceeded the length of *Turangalila* with both the Third and Ninth symphonies, he never exceeded a total number of six movements, and only used six twice (No.3 and *Das Lied von der Erde*). Havergal Brian's *Gothic Symphony* (1919) is also cast on a larger scale than the Messiaen, but the movements only number four (albeit the last a gargantuan choral setting of the *Te Deum*). Britten's *Spring Symphony* is an interesting parallel to *Turangalila*. Just as *Turangalila* is unusual in its ten movement shape, the Britten is also a very unorthodox symphony consisting of 12 solo and choral settings of poems about Spring that are grouped together to form four parts, corresponding loosely to the four standard movements of the symphony. The distinctiveness of each of the 12 parts is stronger to the ear than any sense of movement grouping. Compared to the tonal movements in *Turangalila*, Britten's musical language is more subtle, understated and the tonality cleverly concealed. His song-cycle approach was later echoed in Shostakovich's 11 movement Symphony No.14. Like the Messiaen, the *Spring Symphony* seems to define the term symphony in a new way, and is distinct from the shape of most other symphonies of its time. But the overall length of approximately 42 minutes is short alongside the gargantuan dimensions of the Messiaen.

Turangalila features prominent roles for the piano, percussion and ondes martenot, with no less than four prominent cadenzas for piano. This concertante element within a symphony or symphonic poem is not unprecedented, especially in French symphonic music. The *sinfonia concertante*, featuring solo instruments within the overall orchestral focus, can be traced throughout the second half of the 18th century.

⁷ Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, Messiaen (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2005) 168-9, 171

During the 19th century prominent concerto-like solo parts are found in Berlioz's *Harold in Italy*, Lalo's *Symphonie Espagnol*, Saint-Saens Third Symphony, and D'Indy's *Symphony on a French Mountain Theme*. Precedents within the tone poem can be found in the prominence of the solo cello in Richard Strauss's *Don Quixote* and solo violin in *Ein Heldenleben*, while in symphonic ballet music there is the obligato piano in Stravinsky's *Petrushka*. Lastly, much closer in time to *Turangalila* is the concertante use of piano and harp in Stravinsky's *Symphony in Three Movements*.

The theme of the symphony – love – is not uncharacteristic of French symphonic music. From Franck onwards, composers like D'Indy, Ropartz and Tournemire conveyed religious and social messages through the vehicle of the symphony. Hart⁸ compares and contrasts two approaches to the French symphony of the 20th century—the “message” symphony as opposed to the absolute symphony which can be traced back to the Franck/Saint-Saens rivalry of the late 1880s. Messiaen was not neutral in his use of music to convey his theological world view throughout his career. It is not stretching to truth to suggest that *Turangalila* probably belongs to the tradition of the French “message” symphony. There is no record of him wanting to convey any specific nationalistic message in this music. This is in marked contrast to the Soviet and American (and Australian) search for the great national symphony. Nevertheless, the exuberance and joy of the 5th and 10th movements of *Turangalila* surely reflect the euphoria of peacetime and liberation from foreign occupation (which Messiaen experienced at first hand). The “over-the-top” conclusion of the work is paralleled by Stravinsky's “MGM” ending (complete with added sixth chord) of the *Symphony in Three Movements*, which expressed Stravinsky's euphoria at the end of the war.

Four principal thematic ideas permeate *Turangalila* as unifying cyclic devices across the movements. Such processes are characteristic of French symphonies ever since the pioneering *Symphonie Fantastique* of Berlioz of 1830. They occur frequently in the cross-movement references and thematic transformations found in the symphonies of Saint-Saens, Franck, Chausson and D'Indy of the late 1880s and early 1890s, and later in symphonic works by Magnard, D'Indy, Ropartz and Debussy (*La Mer*) during the early 1900s. The first of these cyclic themes, the so-called “statue-theme” is the most prominent, usually appearing in a clearly recognisable form. However, Johnson points out two significant transformations that a casual listener might miss; it “is transformed to become the new theme at figure 5 in *Chant d'amour II the fourth movement, as well as forming material for the fifth movement, “Joie du sang des etoiles”*”⁹.

Messiaen's treatise of 1944 demonstrates clearly that his harmonic language was one of great sophistication; it spanned the gamut of possible consonant and dissonant chordal constructions. He did not abandon triads or tonality. Although there are sections of *Turangalila* which match or exceed Stravinsky's level of dissonance in *Le Sacre du Printemps*, there are others which are as blazingly tonal as a Richard Strauss apotheosis in *Der Rosenkavalier*. (By the way, Strauss's *Vier Letzte Lieder* are almost exactly contemporary with *Turangalila*). The tonal centre of F sharp major (a rare key—only paralleled in Mahler's unfinished Tenth Symphony) underpins this symphony. The first appearance of the “statue” theme—the first principal cyclic motive of the work—appears in G flat, the enharmonic equivalent of F sharp. F sharp is the tonal centre of movements 2, 6, the huge orgasmic climaxes in 8 and, at last the finale. A major underpins movement 4. D flat major, the enharmonic “dominant” of F sharp major, the centre of movement 5. Only the three enigmatic “Turangalila” movements are marked by the absence of a clear tonality. Otherwise the tonal relationships linking one movement to the other are not particularly unorthodox.

The fourth movement was described by Messiaen as a scherzo with two trios. For the listener steeped in tradition, this description reminds one of Mozart's minuets with two trios that occur in his divertimentos; perhaps the best known is the example is the third movement of the Clarinet Quintet in A. Schumann used the scherzo with two trios in his Second and Third symphonies. Mahler also uses this form in the third movement of his Fifth symphony (March and two trios appear also in the First movement). Towards the

⁸ Brian Hart, “The French Symphony after Berlioz: from the Second Empire to the First World War” *The Symphonic Repertoire* ed. A. Peter Brown, Vol.III, Part B, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2008), 656-7.

⁹ Robert Sherlaw Johnson, Olivier Messiaen, (London, J.M.Dent & Sons, 1989) 83.

end of the third movement in the Mahler Fifth all the principal themes from scherzo, trio 1 and trio 2 are presented simultaneously – a feature that occurs as well in this movement in *Turangalila*. However, there is little sense in this movement of any rondo-like reiterations. Rather the sequence of musical events runs scherzo, trio 1, trio 2 (the slower section) then a combination of all. Then, on these three planes of sound, Messiaen superimposes the principal “statue” theme on trombones. A piano cadenza, then a serene musing on the second trio material closes the movement on an A major 6/4 triad.

Messiaen only fleetingly describes sonata processes in his treatise as follows:

*Having written some absolutely regular sonata-allegros, we shall state that one thing in that form has become obsolete: the recapitulation. Then we shall try once more to keep what is most essential: the development.*¹⁰

He devotes the eighth movement in *Turangalila* to development of his main ideas to date. This notion seems to be an original procedure in a symphonic work, but it is not without precedent. In his *Faust Symphony*, Liszt replays and transforms many of the themes of his previous two extended movements. With only some minor exceptions, there is little new thematic material throughout the movement, and even the final apotheosis is derived from the “Gretchen” theme from the slow movement.

The closest movement to orthodox sonata procedure in *Turangalila* is the Finale. Of all the movements, it is almost the only one to exhibit aspects of organic continuity and even includes sections of sequential development. The grand apotheosis of the love theme is not foreign to the tradition of Liszt and Franck, and its blazing brilliance in F sharp proclaims an affinity with the often heroic brass blaze-ups in the epic symphonies of Walton, Shostakovich and Copland.

The departures from symphonic norms are most clearly seen in the most advanced movements of the piece, namely the three *Turangalila* movements with their atonal style and their concentration on complex planes of rhythms. Messiaen highlights his awareness of their own stylistic affinities in the preface in the score where he permits performances of these three movements as a discrete group.¹¹

The use of rotations of sections and ostinatos that occur in the 1st, 2nd, 5th and 6th movements are quite unusual in typical 20th century symphonies. These sections are the ones which most strongly recall Stravinsky’s procedures in *Le Sacre*. The rapt stillness of the slow movement is unique within the mainstream symphonic repertoire. Time seems to stop, so far is symphonic drive and continuity absent from the music. It is this that transforms what could sound “over-ripe” and clichéd within the melody and harmony into a memorable experience.

In this paper I have highlighted the connections between the overall symphonic tradition of the late 19th and first half of the 20th century and the *Turangalila Symphonie* rather more than its original features. To conclude let us look forward to the more recent past.

I suspect that *Turangalila* is much better appreciated today than at the time of its first performances in 1949 and 1950, when it attracted scathing reviews¹². This may be due to the “rehabilitation” of the symphony during the final decades of the twentieth century. In a discussion about composing symphonies with fellow symphonist Brenton Broadstock, the Australian composer Peter Tahourdin, himself a composer of five symphonies, said:

¹⁰ Olivier Messiaen, *The Technique of my Musical Language* [trans. J. Satterfield] (Paris, Alphonse Leduc, 1956) 40.

¹¹ This permission is absent in the 1992 revision of the Durand score—see Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Messiaen* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2005) 395, note 57.

¹² A good example of this can be found in a review of the symphony by ‘M.C.’ [Martin Cooper?] “The Festival at Aix-en-Provence, *The Musical Times*, (London, 1950) 355-56:

In all my experience I cannot remember having heard a work (if that is the word) as nonsensical and bombastic...The crudity and sentimental banality, the blatant plagiarisms, the diabolical din of the orchestration...made listening to the symphony a veritable torture...

I've always found the orchestra a very rich medium to write for and the symphony seems to me...to be the most direct way of writing for the orchestra. I mean, what it really is is a large-scale orchestral piece which may have something to do with program music but essentially is not program music in the way a symphonic poem is program music; it's more concerned with abstract notions, with philosophical notions and with purely musical ideas.

Broadstock said:

...As a composer/artist I particularly want to express certain personal ideas and to me the symphony has always been associated with a musical work that is profound, which wants to make some sort of statement. And it's also a form, particularly in the twentieth century I think, which is very adaptable, very flexible and unlike the traditional symphonic form.¹³

Many recent symphonies demonstrate that a new symphonic tradition, one separate from the older, conventional sonata structures, has emerged that presents a valid way forward for the genre. As a symphony, *Turangalila* is an important stepping stone from the symphonic traditions of the 1940s to present practice. Tahourdin and Broadstock's perception of the symphony in 1990 could be a description of what Messiaen has achieved in *Turangalila*. Even though *Turangalila*'s time scale is rarely approached in recent symphonies, the work's freshness and appeal 60 years after its completion suggests that the symphonic paradigm still has life in it.

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¹³ Peter Tahourdin and Brenton Broadstock, "Australian Symphonies Today" *Speaking of Music*, (Sydney, ABC Books, 1990) 211,213

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