

Narration	Interview/Music/Sound Clips
<p>Imagine, standing on the cliff of an island just a few miles from your homeland. You're close enough to see a mass of land—the edge of an entire country, an entire continent—but you're far enough away that when an enveloping fog rolls in each day, you're left isolated, or so you think.</p> <p>There's movement in your peripheral—a small, feathery yellowish-brown body overtop a set of thin, gray and brown legs; a tousled head of smooth, dark feathers; a beak that's long and curved like a sickle. You stare directly at this creature, and it stares back at you before it begins a long, intense song of ascending, repetitive glissando calls.</p> <p>As the cool ocean breeze changes to penetrating billows, the waves beneath you begin swirling and crashing more violently against the cliff's edge. And as the evening fog quickly advances with the hour, you realize the quality of that bird's call perfectly encapsulates the experience of being in that place at that time. Somehow, those wild trills and siren-esque glissandos tragically express the desolation of place.</p> <p>That's a summary of place and bird—albeit a creative summary—that French composer Olivier Messiaen included before his work for solo piano entitled “The Curlew”. A Curlew is the sea bird whose beak is long and curved, like a sickle. The location: Ushant Island, France.</p> <p>That's the voice of Todd Welbourne, who visited the island as part of a research trip to</p>	<p><i>Theme music – when birds enter, start cross fading to ocean wave sounds</i></p> <p><i>Fade in Curlew birdcall audio with ocean sounds.</i></p> <p><i>Both bird and ocean fade out slowly</i> <i>Play opening of “Le Courlis Cendré”</i></p> <p><u>Interview footage – Todd Welbourne (TW)</u> TW: That Island is desolate. I mean, I took a ferry out there.</p> <p><i>Audio footage continues, underneath narration</i></p>

document each of the natural inspirations found in Messiaen's large-scale musical work for solo piano entitled the *Catalog of Birds*.

"The Curlew", the musical work, falls at the end of the *Catalog's* thirteen movements, which, in full, amounts to almost three hours of music.

The Curlew is a common bird found along European coastlines, especially in France and the United Kingdom, although the *Irish Times* reported in 2014 that the number of Eurasian Curlews had declined nearly 80% since Messiaen's evocative translation of the bird's song to the piano in the 1950s.

From their report: (quote) "The haunting cry of the bird is one of the most evocative sounds of the uplands. Birdwatch Ireland says action is needed to ensure it does not become a mere memory." (end quote)

In fact, as of November 2016, the group that's mentioned in the article, Birdwatch Ireland, reported that only 130 pairs of bird remain.¹ In light of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's "near threatened to vulnerable"² status on the Curlew, the League for the Protection of Birds and the France Nature Environment organization called on their Minister of Ecology to reinstate a hunting ban that had been in place from 2008-2013.³ The ban *was* extended another five years, but breeding pairs continue to decline.

In a way, Messiaen's decision to put the Curlew movement at the end of the *Catalog of Bird's* thirteen movements foreshadows the tragedy of the species' decline. Many of Messiaen's other works from the same era tend to end with light, hope, color, and even

TW: There are very few trees. It's off the coast of Normandy, which is already a rocky, kind of desolate part of France. It very quickly becomes stormy; it's often cloudy, it's often foggy.

Music fades

exuberance. Here's the ending to his Turangalila Symphony, which premiered in 1949—less than ten years before his completion of the *Catalog of Birds*.

Even compared to the other movements within the *Catalog*, “The Curlew” ending is both a dark and brooding depiction of place, as enhanced by the quality of its title bird.

In the entire *Catalog*, Messiaen included music translations of birdcalls from over eighty species, as well as depictions of natural landmarks throughout France, all of which are labeled obsessively in the score.

The order of thirteen movements cycles clockwise from the Eastern French Alps, to the Southern Spanish border, to the northern coast, the land of the Curlew.

It's in this movement, also, that the only man-made element in the entire *Catalogue*, a famous lighthouse, is featured.

Considering the function of a lighthouse—to warn sailors of dangerous areas—and the fact

Fade in ending of Turangalila

Turangalila fades out

TW: He picked places that he loved. Some where he grew up. But he was an avid ornithologist and he went to many different parts of France to see different birds. He came to the United States to Zion National Park, and then he wrote *Oiseaux Exotique* (one of which is a cardinal, which here in this country, we wouldn't consider exotic in the slightest, but to him that was an exotic bird). So, he went around the world just to look for the birds and I think the feeling of the birds is quite...yeah, he loved them and knew them well and was very interested in translating the love for them, let's say. And I think in that case, of the final work, “The Curlew”.

An active middle section of “Le Courlis Cendre” plays

Play beginning of “Le Courlis Cendre”

Overlap foghorn sound, then match with foghorn effect in “Le Courlis Cendre”

that among Messiaen labels of the Curlew's call was "a siren," the rather grim associations, indeed, recall that foreshadowing of an environmental degradation that he may or may not have been witness to, up to his death in 1992. In hindsight and with a revisionist perspective, Messiaen's composition, along with the voices of scientists, politicians, and fellow citizens, is a siren that alerts us of the possibility that among the endangered species is humanity itself.

What else can the *Catalog of Birds* tell us about the places and birds that Messiaen chooses to represent through music? And what was the musical context that the work came out of?

I'd like to turn now to a fuller interview with pianist Todd Welbourne. He is professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and has done considerable work on the *Catalog of Birds*, including a series of multimedia concerts designed around the feathered subjects of each movement. We talk about Messiaen's work, as a whole, and about his past performances of it.

Welbourne and I will talk a bit more, momentarily, about how this is achieved at the keyboard, but I first want to jump in and

*Fade in ocean wave sound, then Curlew birdcalls
(Music continues, though fades quickly)*

Ocean waves and Curlew birdcalls fade out slowly

TW: Taken in its entirety—the seven volumes—it's the largest piano work by a major French, 20th century composer, Olivier Messiaen. Now it doesn't have the reference to the spiritual or religious elements that many of his other pieces had. But, I thought that it kind of elevated nature at that point to a kind of spiritual or reverential sort of level. All of his music, as a matter of fact, is in a line extending some of the experiments that were done by Debussy and Ravel—basically extending that element of timbre on the piano.

Le Merle Noir opening plays

give a broad definition of that word “timbre” because it’s not as easily defined as more objective musical words like “rhythm” or “volume.” Think of a flute, for example. There are elements of that sound beyond its range or its volume that make it fluty, or that make a listener know it’s a flute. There’s a quality to the sound, or a color. That’s *timbre*. In this context, where Messiaen uses the piano to try and recreate the timbre of something that’s not a piano – a bird’s song –, things get a little tricky...

So now, a little more about that word “timbre,” which—based on what Welbourne just said—is in close relation to the word “color”. What he’s talking about here is what musicians refer to as chord voicing. Within a given chord, there have to be at least three distinct notes. Here’s an example, a standard major chord.

Within that chord, a pianist can decide which of the three pitches to play louder. Here’s the

[TW:] His music in the *Catalog* kind of takes the idea of program music and brings it into the area of abstract art, I think, because even though it is specifically talking about specific birds and specific places, geographical locations in France, it’s still very abstract in a way.

Le Merle Noir slowly fades out

KJ: Could you talk a little bit about your process in learning the music – maybe specific things that you found very difficult, or maybe what attracted you to specific movements?

TW: The difficulties do come from trying to capture the moods and the birds, the models of the birdsongs themselves. Because it is a timbral experiment, balancing some of those thick chords, you can get a whole number of colors by balancing a chord differently.

Examples play, as indicated in narration

chord voiced to the bottom pitch; and the middle pitch.

Normally, the top note is what pianists are trained to bring out, since in a sequence of chords, the upper notes are usually the melody.

For younger pianists, it's often the most difficult to bring out, as well, since the upper voice usually falls on the pinkie finger, the weakest on any hand.

Messiaen's chords, which usually contain a lot more than three notes, give us license to break that "voice to the top" rule, usually because it's the other notes that make it more interesting, more colorful. [pause]

So, while a pianist plays, he or she is constantly maintaining as much regulation as possible of each finger's volume, often making voicing decisions in the moment. However paradoxical it may be, to be in *that* much control of each individual finger's depth and speed downward into the keys—that's liberating.

Play example of a short melody, then harmonized at the piano with the melody on top

Fade in the chord section in the middle of "Le Courlis Cendré"

KJ: In traditional classical music concert format, the interaction between performer and audience is kind of limited to just the performance of the music. The performer walks on stage, gets applause, bows, sits down, plays through the music, gets applause, then walks off stage. While there may be ways that audiences can learn a little bit about the music, like through program notes or brief comments by the performer, this kind of format places the performance of the music at its core. I wonder, in your project that you've done with the *Catalog of Birds*, can you describe some of the extra-musical elements that you incorporated for your performances and also just in your research of the work in general?

TW: Yes, well it really goes back to what you just mentioned, the program notes. So, the idea really was live, real-time program notes. To think, *what would help an audience to understand or follow the Catalog?* Well, it would be to see which bird you were depicting sonically. And then when you come back to that bird, that bird comes up again, you see the same thing, you hear the same kinds of sounds, and you begin to actually understand the character of the bird as an audience member. And then when it shifts to descriptions of geographical locations or elements—natural elements—like the sea or the night, then the audience immediately has a big step into the music. If you just play it, they can maybe come up with something. Maybe a really good listener would connect the bird sounds because they're similar when they appear, they disappear, and they come back multiple times often. And so, a really good listener could maybe pick that up. But then to see the bird on the screen each time, you think "yep" and even start to anticipate musical elements when that bird comes up. But, of course I had gone and taken all those pictures in France. I had three trips to France to take pictures and be in the spot—the very spot—that Messiaen describes that he was. So, I thought that was also an important element to take the listener to the actual geographical location that Messiaen sketched the bird in.

KJ: So, you mentioned this a second ago, but with the *Catalog of Birds*, there is an element of the music being very abstract, but there is also the very literal and specific element, because he does label everything. He labels places, he labels bird species, even specific behavior that he's witnessing the birds doing. So, it's almost, on the literal side, like a musical ethnography of particular places of France, or I guess ecologies of France. But on the abstract side, I get the sense it could be something that you went to a museum to

listen to—the Museum of Modern Art or something. A work of art that is to be taken on its own terms, in a way. So, I wonder if you could talk a little more towards the overall approachability or accessibility or also just the dual nature of these pieces a bit more.

TW: Yes, I think you said it quite clearly. They have an element of abstractness that is not going to leave it. It's always going to be there. And a person that is waiting for a particular triad or harmony, harmonic progression, is not going to hear it. There is an abstract element to it that I think comes from the extension of history, like we talked about before, from Debussy and Ravel and that French emphasis on color. Really, though, that's not unique to Messiaen. You know, there's how many elements to music? Pitch, harmony, timbre, and rhythm. Music is made up of those four elements. Historical periods emphasize, or let's say prioritize those four elements in different levels. And the preceding era emphasized harmony. Wagner destroys harmony—he's done every chromatic possibility. But at the same time, there's the timbral. He uses huge orchestras and invents new instruments to make the colors that he wants. So, as you see one element declining, the other element is already rising. And that element of timbre and rhythm came to the fore in the 20th century, and Messiaen came right out of that. So, to extend what Debussy and Ravel did was very natural to him. He couldn't go back. There was no other way for him to go but farther. He's very very sensitive to the timbre of the birdsong and as best he can, matching that with the piano.

How does that translate to a lay audience? I think he didn't care, he was having great fun translating these sounds. It satisfied his creative element. He said he went to nature, he went to the birds, his beloved birds. Whether people get it or don't, I think you're

right, it belongs in a museum-like mentality for the audience. They have to come to it with that, they can't come to it with the expectation of whistleability or something they're going to take back.

I think a person who wants to enter the mind of a twentieth century genius who is translating physical and beautiful places and beautiful birds into his element that he knows very well—I think that's kind of what we do when we go to a modern museum. We call them important people and we go to try to get into their brains a little bit and I think it works.

KJ: As a performer, how much human element do you see in this music?

TW: Now, the birds themselves... I think there you have to hear the models. I really think you have to know what a Curlew or a Lorient [Oriole] or Chocard [Chough] sounds like. And if you do, then you see the notation and you say, "Ah, now I see what he's trying to get by that notation." And if you did it exactly like it is on the page, you might miss it a little bit. It might not have the sigh quality or the rising element that you hear in the bird, and you think, *there it is! There's that rising element. Maybe I should go to that a little quicker than it says specifically in the rhythm.* So, whether that is a human element or a bird element, we do nothing that is not human, so it's always a human, even if we're trying to anthropomorphize birds, we're in there... and Messiaen is in there. So, we can't escape that. Usually those elements are close to the core of what that music is about, and you can't notate it exactly.

KJ: That leaves room to just do exactly what Messiaen said to do to know how to interpret his music, which is to go out in nature and listen to some birds.

<p>Once again, that's Todd Welbourne I was talking with, who spent years building a multimedia project around the <i>Catalog</i>. This entailed traveling to France to take photos of each labeled bird and place that Messiaen chose to represent on the piano. Welbourne compiled everything into a set of CD-ROMs that could aid a performer or researcher in understanding everything related to the seven volumes of the <i>Catalog of Birds</i>. Fortunately, those CD-ROMs still exist, but are unsupported by current-day software and hardware.</p> <p>My thanks go out to Todd Welbourne for speaking with me at length, as well as Emili Earhart for the use of WSUM studios. I'd like to close with a full performance of "Le Courlis Cendre," or "The Curlew," the final movement of the <i>Catalog</i>, snippets of which were heard throughout this episode. Thanks for listening.</p>	<p>TW: Exactly.</p> <p>KJ: So, thank you for talking with me today about this stuff. It's been very interesting.</p> <p>TW: Pleasure. "Le Courlis Cendre" <i>begins</i></p> <p>"Le Courlis Cendre" <i>continues; ends.</i></p> <p>END OF EPISODE</p>
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