

Narration	Other material
<p>Before each movement in the musical score of the <i>Catalog of Birds</i>, Messiaen included detailed, descriptive paragraphs about the land he was surrounded by and the birds he observed, almost like an ethnographer jotting down field notes. Episode one of this series began with a creative account of one of these introductory paragraphs to the musical work “The Curlew.”</p> <p>Here’s a bit of Messiaen’s actual words: Island of Ouessant. At Pern Point you might see a large bird, with striped rusty-yellow and grey-brown plumage, with long legs and having a very long, curved beak in the shape of a sickle: the Curlew! His solo goes like this: slow, sad, tremolos, a rising chromatic passage, savage trills, and a repeated glissando call, that captures all the desolation of seascapes. All the cries of the coastal birds: the cruel call of the the Black-headed Gull, the rhythms of the Herring Gull, brassy and horn-like in quality, fluted melody of the Oystercatcher, the Little Ringed Plover, the Common Gull, the Guillemot. The water extends to the vanishing point. Again a few bird calls, and the wail of the Curlew which is repeated as he flies off...Cold, total darkness, sound of the surf.¹</p> <p>One of the first things my previous guest, Craig Eley, spoke about was the detailed note taking that he observed throughout Messiaen’s seven volumes of the <i>Catalog</i>:</p> <p>(quote) “These really descriptive, poetic presentations of where we are in the land, in addition to the detailed marking of the score, says to me that this piece had a multi-sensory, multi-modal way of being in the world. Some of his [Messiaen’s] descriptions don’t involve music at all; they involve these environmental</p>	<p><i>Theme music fade in & out.</i></p> <p><i>Play footage from the start of Episode 1</i></p> <p><i>As each bird is read, a mixture of ocean wave sounds and beach birdcalls fades in. All slowly fade out at the end of the paragraph, with the final sound being the Curlew’s birdcall, then ocean waves fade out.</i></p>

elements of the setting. Something in that speaks to the richness of environmental music.”² (endquote)

Since Messiaen’s extra-musical information seemed important enough to include in the published score, I can only assume that it would be important for listeners to be aware of. In another movement of the *Catalog*, “Le Chocard des Alpes” (or “The Alpine Chough”) the structure of Messiaen’s written account strongly corresponds to the structure of his eco-musical composition; and because of this, I’d like to devote this episode to a narrative performance of “The Alpine Chough.” First, though, a bit about the Alpine region that Messiaen visited during his birdsong collecting tour.

Perhaps the film *The Sound of Music* best captures our popular imagination of the Alps – grassy, open, and lush grazing land. But there’s a lesser traveled Alpine space, and one with much greater a vantage point. On a mountain over 10,000 feet tall, both the terrain and the air becomes inhospitable for human inhabitation. This is where you’d find the two feathered subjects of “Le Chocard des Alpes” – the title bird (again, translated to the Alpine Chough), and the *Grand Corbeau*, translated to the Raven. The terrain is steep, extremely rocky, and often icy, as this is the elevation that supports glaciers and snow caps. The inhospitable nature of the place is reflected in its musical portrayal through sharp dissonances and perpetual series of chords; it’s an expansive, geometrical yet jagged musical representation.

I’ll let ornithologist Mark Berres, who was featured in episode 2, give us some context about the actual birds.

Fade in instrumental version of “The Sound of Music”

*Crossfade the slow, ‘Eagle’ music from “Le Chocard des Alpes”*³

Play piano version of Alpine Chough’s birdcall and the piano version of the Raven as they’re identified in the narration.

Play opening of “Le Chocard des Alpes” and fade out as Mark Berres interview begins

Mark Berres (MB) interview footage⁴
MB: The Alpine Chough – sometimes called the Yellow-Billed Chough (there’s also a Red-Billed Chough, as well)...generally a very jet-black bird; and as their name suggests, one has a yellow

bill, the other has a red bill. They both have really red feet, too, and legs.

KJ: Are both of them European birds?

MB: They are. So, the Alpine Chough tends to be a little bit smaller and more restricted to the French Alps. They’re high altitude birds. That’s one of the amazing things about these creatures is that they have a number of physiological adaptations to living at high altitudes. In fact, their hemoglobin allows a much greater ability to scavenge oxygen, and also to release it. Choughs are routinely seen by actual commercial airline flights, flying at elevations of 25,000-30,000 feet (whereas nearly all mammals at that altitude would immediately asphyxiate). These birds, as crows, tend to be very socially gregarious birds. They’re often found in groups. If you look at their wings, they actually have very rectangular wings and an expansive tail. What those are designed for is slow-moving flight. But they also are small enough that they can perform extraordinarily complicated aerial maneuvers. Particularly, that tail essentially provides them the ability to make incredibly tight turns and rotations and inversions that most other species of birds don’t do regularly. So, these guys are masters of their aerial environment, by far.

KJ: So that’s what he means by acrobatics, then, is the flipping and turning and stuff in the air.

MB: Yeah, and the characteristic shape of the wings and the tail are really what provide them with that ability. Definitely an accurate characterization.

<p>I’ll begin a performance of the movement that I recorded in early 2017. Throughout, I’ll narrate using content from both Messiaen’s introductory paragraph <i>and</i> his descriptions within the measures of music.</p> <p>“Le Chocard des Alpes”. The Alpine Chough.</p> <p>The Alps of Dauphine, l’Oisans. Climbing toward Mt. Meidje and its three glaciers. The lake at Puy-Vacher, marvelous view of mountains, gorges, and precipices...An Alpine Chough, separated from his group, crosses the precipice, crying...The gliding, silent and</p>	<p>KJ: I’m wondering if you can talk a little bit about the <i>Grand Corbeau</i>, which I said was a Raven or a large Crow.</p> <p>MB: Choughs and Ravens are very closely related, much more closely related than to other species of birds. In contrast to the Choughs, Ravens actually have essentially a uniform distribution over the Northern hemisphere—much more abundant than either species of Chough. They are adapted to a variety of environments. They’re not necessarily high elevational birds, but in fact they can occupy niches that are high altitudes, but nothing approaching the Chough. But in terms of their flight capabilities and their acrobatics, I would say that they’re pretty similar.</p> <p>KJ: Well it’s nice that Messiaen didn’t just include the birdsong, but also included the bird behavior in some type of way.</p> <p>MB: Indeed, and I’m biased, but this is a fact: few things, I think, are more amazing than bird behavior.</p> <p><i>A fast section of the ‘acrobatics’ within “Le Chocard des Alpes” plays, then fades out as the narration begins.</i></p> <p><i>“Le Chocard des Alpes” begins (the text should remain in sync with the music)</i></p>
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majestic, of the Golden Eagle, carried on currents of air... The raucous, fierce grunting of the Raven, king of the highest mountain regions... Different cries of the Alpine Choughs and their acrobatic flight (swoops, dives, and loops) above the gorges... In front of Saint-Christophe-en-Oisans mountains, Clapier Saint-Christophe: chaos of crumbling boulders, Dante-esque rock formations, piled in disarray by the giants of the mountain... An Alpine Chough makes a tour of the countryside surveying the cliffs... An Alpine Chough, separated from his group, crosses the precipice, crying... The gliding, silent and majestic, of the Golden Eagle, carried on currents of air... The raucous, fierce grunting of the Raven, king of the highest mountain regions... Different cries of the Alpine Choughs and their acrobatic flights (swoops, dives, and loops) above the gorges... Coda: the Ecrins mountains: Cirque de Bonne-Pierre, with its immense rocks, aligned like phantom giants, or like the towers of a supernatural fortress.

Birdsong recordings for this episode came from the Macaulay Library at Cornell University. If you'd like more information about this source (and others), please visit my website to access the transcript and citations for this episode. A special thanks to Mark Berres for his time spent sharing what seemed like an encyclopedic knowledge of both American and European birds. Also, thanks to Todd Welbourne for his translations of Messiaen's written accounts. The audio recording of my own playing was engineered and produced by Brian Grimm, while the theme music heard at the start of each episode was created by Micah Behr. Thanks for listening.

“Le Chocard des Alpes” ends, and a bit of music from the movement, beginning with one of the Chough birdcalls, begins and continues through the end of the episode. The last thing that is heard should be the slow ‘Golden Eagle’ gliding music.

END OF EPISODE

Berres, Mark. Personal interview on 4 March 2017.

Butley, Gregory. *Numenius arquata* -- Eurasian Curlew. Recording held by the Macaulay Library at Cornell University. Requested and downloaded 23 June 2017. mp3.

Eley, Craig. Personal interview on 4 March 2017.

Messiaen, Olivier. *Catalogue d'Oiseaux* vol. 1. LeDuc. 1964.

“Le Chocard des Alpes” from *Catalogue d'Oisesaux*. Kyle Johnson, piano. Recorded by Brian Grimm in February 2017.