DOUGLAS, A. 2021. A man standing in a forest listening intently, noting down what he hears. In M. Collier, B. Hogg and J. Strachan (eds.) *Song of place and time: birdsong and the dawn chorus in natural history and the arts.* Manchester: Gaia Project Press [online], pages 192-203. Available from: https://tinyurl.com/yawnpn5r

A man standing in a forest listening intently, noting down what he hears.

DOUGLAS, A.

2021

A man standing in a forest
listening intently, noting down what he hears

Anne Douglas

He is there in the forest to revitalise, to connect with a world that exists beyond his construction, beyond his imagining.

> In my hours of gloom, when I am suddenly aware of my own futility, when every musical idiom-classical, oriental, ancient, modern and ultramodern-appears to me as no more than admirable, painstaking experimentation, without any ultimate justification, what is left for me but to seek out the true, lost face of music somewhere off in the forest, in the fields, in the mountains or on the seashore, among the birds" (Messaien in Johnson 2008, p 117)[i]

'[T]he lost face of music' is the song of birds. It is difficult for the human ear to hear birdsong. Its registers are high and tempi faster than human music and therefore beyond the capacity and skill of most human performers, particularly in the West. Our composer in the forest transposes the patterns that he perceives into new patterns that are lower and slower than birdsong. He respects the intervals that uniquely characterise each song, building on melodic lines through harmonies that aim to capture the specificity of each species of bird and their unique calls. These vary with times of day so that one bird might sing differently at night, dawn, morning or evening and different species of bird sing alongside each other at different times of day.

> " The songs of birds express the affirmation of their own territory, their amorous or courting impulse, and most beautiful of all, their salutes to the dawning or dying light" (Messaien in Bell 1984, p 119)[ii]

To define a territory a song needs to be distinct, recognisable and precise. To attract a mate requires the additional quality of an aesthetic, the desire to reach out, to communicate. Saluting the dawn or dusk springs from a sense of joy, the joy of being alive, of having survived the night and of having survived the day. These complex forms of energy are all present in Messaien's *Le Réveil des Oiseaux* (*The Awakening of the Birds*) (1953)[iii].

Le Réveil begins at midnight and follows an arc through four am, dawn, morning to midday. It is made up of birdsong and only birdsong "Il n'y a dans cette partition que des chants d'oiseaux" ["There is nothing but the song of birds in this score"] (author's translation)[iv]). The piece is minutely observed through the composer's presence in the forest and field. The resulting form is unsentimental. It strives to be authentic. Authenticity is different from accuracy. It is a process of becoming immersed in, and perhaps transgressing a threshold that separates the human from the non-human, melding with the world, then re-emerging to communicate onwards through the composition.

If I were to stand in the forest at dawn with my lack of experience of birdsong, I would hear a cacophony of sounds that would be barely distinguishable in terms of different species. Messaien's *Le Réveil* has the possibility of opening the dawn chorus up to me through its careful sequencing of discrete patterns of sound over a period of transition from night to day, from dark to light. It becomes a point of entry, something to work with that takes me beyond my own sense of futility, both of not knowing this other world better and of not knowing how to draw better.

How can I explore this work more deeply? Perhaps through the visual, a medium closer to me than music? Perhaps through words? How might such an exploration take me closer to the world of the birds? Is it indeed even possible to enter imaginatively into that world?

A drawing by the artist and musician, Paul Klee (1879 -1940) strikes me as coming close to imagining the world from the perspective of birds. Entitled *Zusammenhang und Früchte* 1927 (translated as *Connection and Fruits*)[v] the drawing depicts what appear to be birds eyeing three fruits from a distance. Perhaps these fruits are their source of life, of energy and continuity. Is this the connection alluded to in the title? There are other possible connections: the tension between the different pairs of eyes evokes a profound awareness of the presence of the other and competition perhaps for the same source of food. A thin line divides life from death, which is suggested by a skull form, more human than bird, the sockets of which are clearly blind, unable to see in the way that the birds see, no longer alert in the way the birds are alert. The direction of the multiple stares takes form as a series of deliberate and carefully placed dots or circles, across the picture plane, including dots at the centre of the fruits. They create a mystery that is strange, uncanny even.

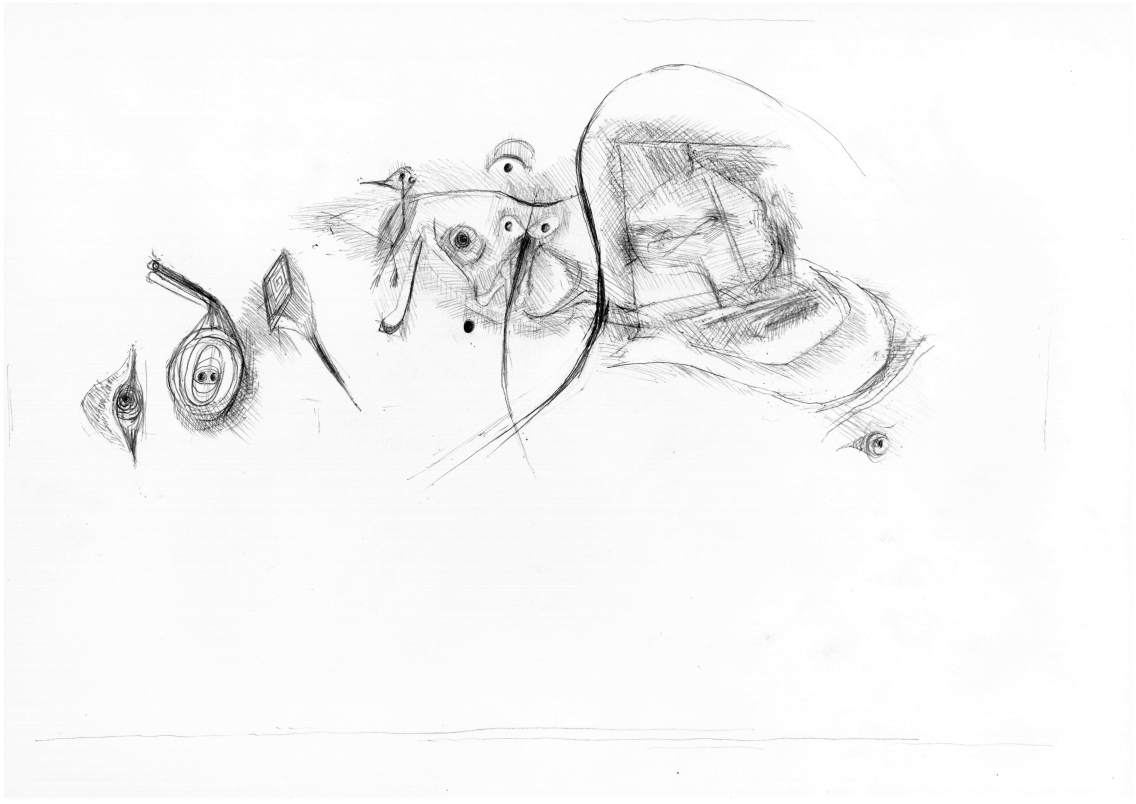

Fig 1: Author's copy of Paul Klee's original *Zusammenhang und Früchte* 1927 undertaken as part of a research project at Zentrum Paul Klee, March 2018.

Drawing shares with music a formal language: the notion of tone as a transition, from light to dark and dark to light, or alternatively from loud to soft and soft to loud. We speak of line in both domains and of colour. We refer to points in space that resemble the smallest component in music, a note that has a value, a full tone, half tone, quarter tone or smaller. These small components, a dot or a note, create the capacity we have for infinite variability, the capacity to change direction, to break a block of space/sound into smaller parts, to diverge. We experience weight in colour and weight in a sound. The tone of a painting may be heavy or light, the mood of a piece of music or

performance likewise. Both music and drawing are time based, rhythmic but in different senses. The form of a piece of music unfolds through time where a drawing may be grasped in a single moment, its temporal passage revealed to the eye all at once. The play of both media in perception and experience is even more complex in the sense that we navigate the surface of a drawing through time creating pathways or following ones that are given to us from the artist. This is similar to following a line in music. At the same time we can grasp the experience or mood of music in a second. Some people associate numbers with colours (synaesthesia). We can also hear sound through words (onomatopoeia). The word *Huam* indicates the moan of an owl in the warm days of summer in the Scots language (Thomson 2018 backcover)[vi]. Indeed Messaien uses onomatopoeia throughout his score to give some idea of the quality of sound and rhythm he is seeking.

How might these notions aid my exploration of Messaien's *Le Reveil* and by extension the dawn chorus? The visual, verbal and musical are quite different forms of communication despite the commonality we attribute to them. They offer distinctive possibilities for experience. They engage quite specific kinds of constraints in relation to the body and the instruments and tools we use. I am beginning to feel that it is possibly a pointless, pretentious idea, too challenging to embark on. But if I put these reservations to one side, where might I begin? And why?

Klee once said that an artist undertakes an analysis of the work of another artist in order to 'set ourselves in motion', to follow the energy of creativity, to avoid seeing an existing work of art as something rigid, fixed and unchanging (Klee in Spiller, p 99)[vii]. Klee explored the difference between an artist's and a chemist's approach to analysis. The chemist, in contrast to the artist's exploratory, open-ended approach, is motivated to break down a particular compound in order to be able to copy it for its excellent effects or to disclose its harmful effects. The artist in contrast works with existing material to embark on a new journey, an improvisation of sorts.

Constraints are necessary and important within any improvisation. An existing work of art that is copied is a constraint of sorts, as is the knowledge that the artist who copies brings to their analysis, their skill and focus of interest. While forming some firm ground, it is perhaps important not to be trapped by prior knowledge, to be open to indeterminacy, to the possibility of a new world or at least a new direction, imaging the constraint as a pathway to improvisation.

What might it mean to analyse Messaien's *Le Reveil* in this way, to explore this work as alive? Might this take me nearer to an experience of dawn, the dawn chorus even? The point of doing so would not be to make art out of art, but rather to create an encounter between Messaien 's extraordinary celebration of the awakening of the day and myself as audience, an encounter that might become an experience of deep listening in Pauline Oliveros' sense of walking " so silently that the bottoms of our feet become ears" (Oliveros, 2017)[viii]. Oliveros carefully distinguished between listening and hearing. Where the latter, hearing, can be measured, listening engages us with a lifetime of accumulated experience. Listening varies from human to human and presumably from creature to creature. It is dependent upon the languages we share and on the subjectivity we bring to the experience. What seems to matter is quality of attention and quality of imagination

> Deep Listening is listening in every possible way to everything possible to hear no matter what you are doing. Such intense listening includes the sounds of daily life, of nature, or one's own thoughts. Deep Listening represents a heightened state of awareness and connects to all there is. (Oliveros 2017, p 5)[ix].

And so I begin, analysing the score.

It is midnight[x].

A nightingale **pierces an otherwise soundless dark**, the first to herald the night through a repeated ‘tikotikotiko’, beginning quite loudly then softly. The light of dawn is gradual in the northern hemisphere. The sound of the nightingale is of a different tempo, altogether more urgent. He/she is joined by another nightingale, then a third - ‘tio, tio, tiolaborix’, to which the first nightingale responds with his opening call.

Then sudden silence.

An owl breaks this quiet with a screech and is quickly joined by a snuffling wryneck (‘tuin, tuin’). The owl returns and is joined by a warbler, a lark, then a blackbird and night jar, a chiffchaff (‘zip zap, zip zap’), a robin, the lark and the owl, then a song thrush (é-didi, é -didi, tioto, tioto, touhitte). The blackbird reappears followed by a pair of chaffinches and a whitethroat. Each song is clearly distinct and identifiable, at times discrete and at other times synchronous. They appear **to conjure the dawn out of the darkness.** Some songs are lines of single notes. Others are extraordinarily complex chords of one or more instruments. I read that Messaien took the time to hone and perfect the colour or timbre of each call.

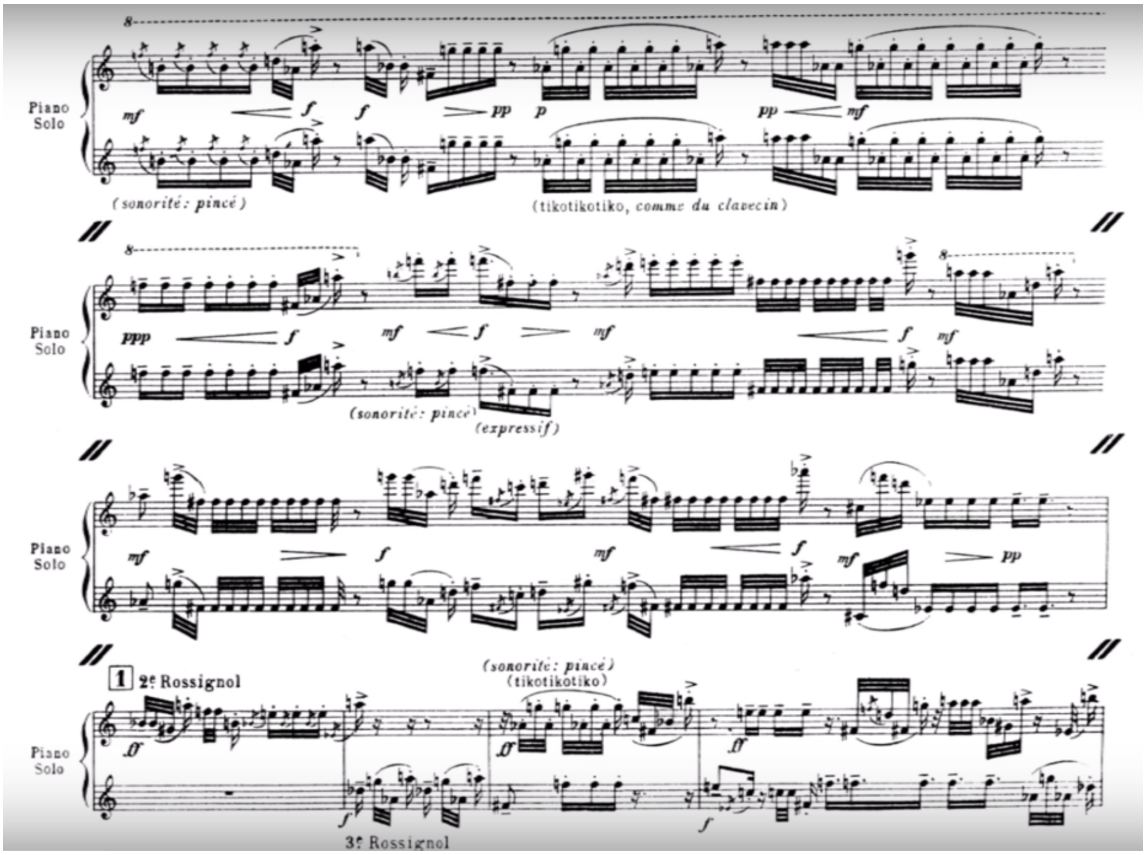

Fig. 2 Interchange between nightingales at midnight from the *handwritten* score of Messaien’s *Le Réveil des Oiseaux* (1953)

Already I am overwhelmed with the complexity. Where to start with drawing? And yet there are clues. Drawing also involves a kind of immersion in the context, whether that is a forest or a studio. It involves transposing what we perceive in experience, giving

form to this experience in ways that are slower, more painstaking than the immediacy of perception through the senses. Drawing plays between action and reflection. As in music, the act of drawing demands that we respect the intervals that uniquely characterise what we happen to be looking at, building on visual clues that aim to capture the character of what we encounter in its time of day as distinct, recognisable and precise. A need for clarity is driven by the desire to reach out, to communicate. It springs from a sense of joy and also of struggle.

I move into the next phase of the awakening, the dawn itself.

It's 4 am ….

The dawn chorus begins with the trumpeting call of a melodius warbler (*hypolais polyglotte*). It is emphatic, talkative (*bavardé*), unpleasant even (*désagréable*). It is soon joined by the cry of a huppe, then briefly a green woodpecker quickly followed by a robin, a song thrush. At first the calls are distinct, recognisable and then gradually build up into a counterpoint of nearly two dozen simultaneous songs, different calls over-layered in a thickly textured soundscape, high-pitched, rhythmic like a brass band, percussive, occasionally melodic.

All stop abruptly **at sunrise**.

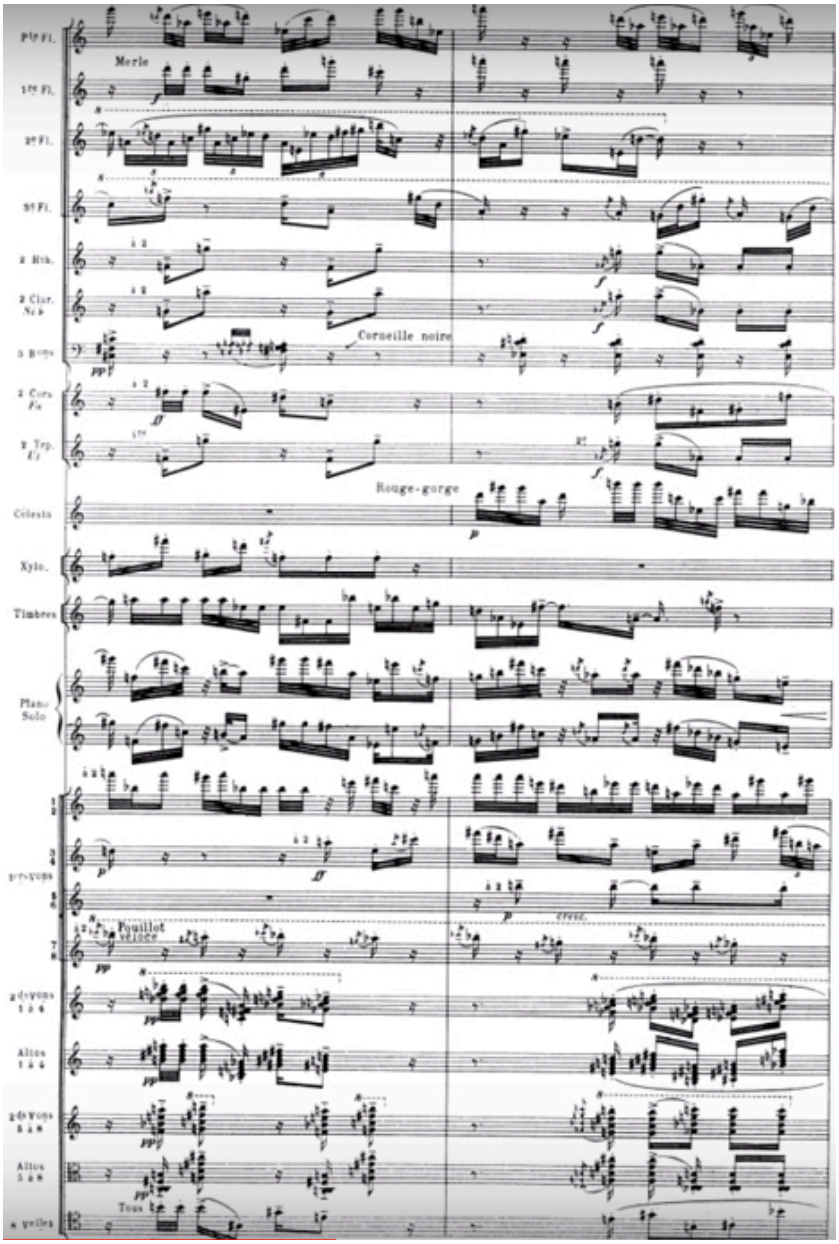

Fig. 3: Build up of the dawn chorus from the *handwritten* score of Messaien's *Le Réveil des Oiseaux* (1953)

The call of the morning is lead by the blackcap, authoritatively, on piano. He/She is joined by numerous other species – a turtle dove (flute), white throat (celeste) finches (clarinet), a songthrush, an oriole, two blackbirds and two robins. Each call is distinct, some thirteen different calls.

Another long silence

Finally **at midday** this complex sound world gives way to a very short thirty second ending – two chaffinches on violin, followed by a woodpecker (wooden blocks) and a very distant cuckoo (chinese block).

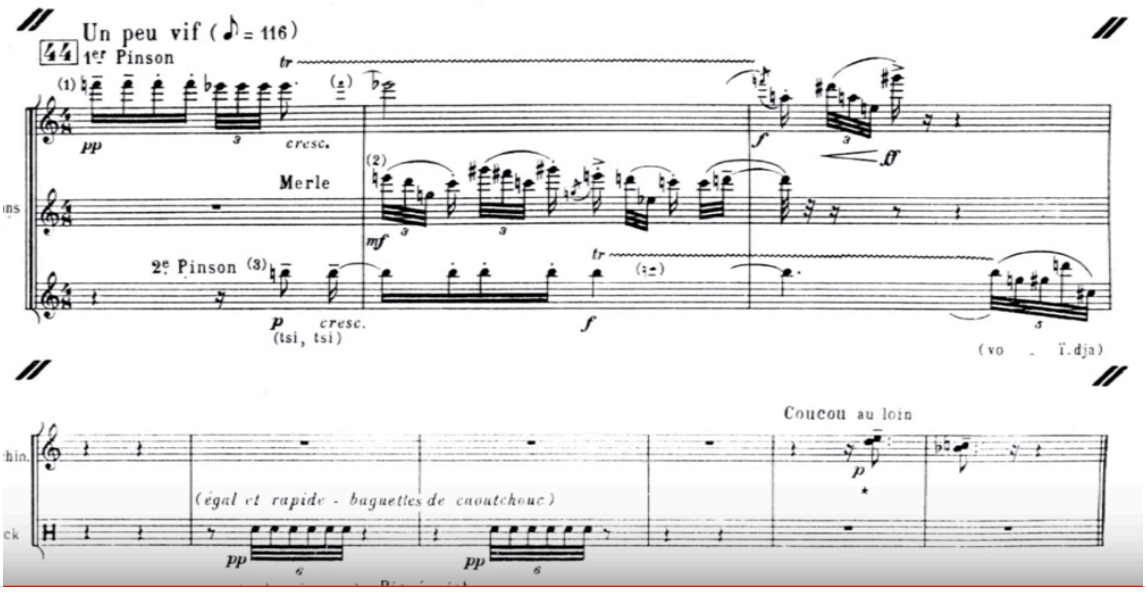

Fig. 4: Final bars of Messaien's *Le Réveil des Oiseaux* (1953) with woodpeck and cuckoo from the *handwritten* score

This makes me wonder- how do we as human beings celebrate the dawn? The monotone of vehicles over tarmacked roads, the crush of human bodies into carriages, the 'rush hour' is a constrained palette, repetitive and consistent rather than rhythmic, occasionally broken by the sound of a siren declaring an emergency- a warning rather than the call for a mate or affirmation of a territory. It is a unidirectional flow of sound to and from work, accompanied by a sense of urgency to reach a destination. We consume the space between and the dawning or dying of light goes unnoticed. The sound of wheels on tarmac or train track is relentless in its continuity. We fill the space in between, blocking out the silences that would allow us to breathe and take note.

In the score of *Le Réveil des oiseaux* (1953)[xi] Messiaen makes three dedications, firstly to Jacques Delamain, the ornithologist and mentor to Messiaen's bird studies; secondly to Yvonne Loriod, the pianist and Messiaen's muse and later his wife who played and edited the piano part and thirdly, to "the blackbirds, thrushes, nightingales, orioles, robins, warblers and all birds of the forests". The birds are arguably the finest musicians to inhabit the planet. To bridge the space between the human and the birds, the composer needs to open up to a new kind of music eschewing tradition, engaging his skill and imagination.

The piece hovers, like dawn on the edge of vision, at the edge of composition and on the edge of how we know the world.

I start with the question: What is the form that would allow me transpose one experience (the Messaien) into another (a drawing)? Then I realise that this is a false objective. What I look for in the activity of drawing seems to be quite different from Messaien's turning to birdsong to escape the tedium of experimentation in modernism. I know that I generally only draw what I can experience. Often the object of drawing is simple, banal even. It is a medium in its own right. I draw to be present, to be quiet and pay attention. Each drawing is a reaching out, reaching beyond what I know how to do. The challenge to draw anything at all becomes overwhelming to the point of having to remind myself to keep going, to become still in order to become acquainted, acknowledging the threat of failure, of meaninglessness.

Faced with the Messaien, I feel the limitations of such an approach, of being tied to a subject in front of me for long periods.

How to break this impasse?

In the 1970s Brian Eno, a composer and visual artists in collaboration with Peter Schmidt, another composer, created a set of notes as instructions. Entitled *Oblique Strategies* the project consisted of a set of 115 white cards with simple black text in a deck subtitled *Over One Hundred Worthwhile Dilemmas*[xii] The cards were essentially a practical tool for generating ideas, a means to break through a creative block and to break free of stale thought patterns. The strategies are presented as a conceptual artwork. I feel they might help me to create a particular kind of alertness, focusing on the formal properties of the Messaien but nonetheless opening up an opportunity for experience.

Four particular cards resonate.

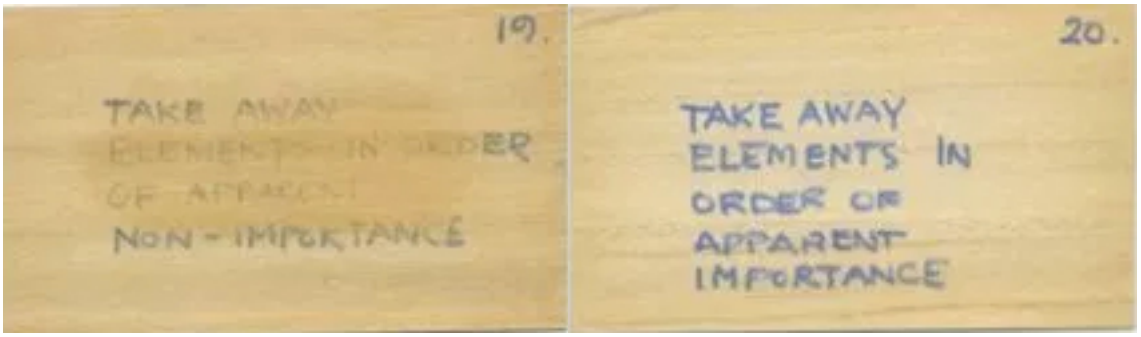

Fig 5: ***Take away elements in order of apparent non-importance / Take away elements in order of apparent importance. (***Eno & Schmidt 1974)

Perhaps this means removing any reference to birds i.e. the obvious and important in order to focus on the arc of change from midnight to dawn.

What does a bird see within this arc of midnight, 4.am and dawn, daybreak, mid morning and midday? Does he or she see what I see?

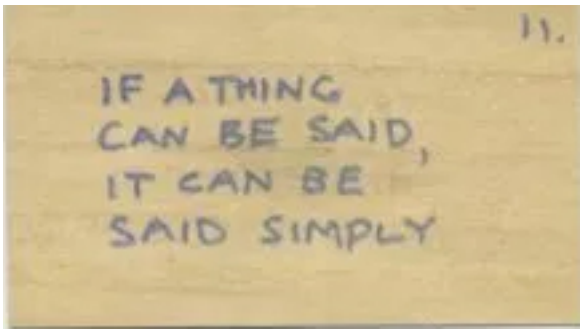

Fig 6: ***If a thing can be said it can be said simply***

Simplicity for me is line and of course more than this, simplicity of content expressed directly.

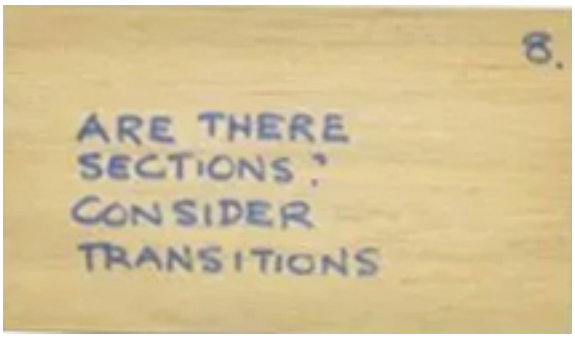

Fig 7: ***Are there sections? Consider transitions*** **(**Eno & Schmidt 1974)

At this point I check the score again. The paragraph structure that Messaien gives us in his introduction to the score suggests five sections but these are not of equal length as I had first believed, nor do the silences correspond to section breaks. Between midnight and dawn, the first silence occurs 2 minutes, 40 seconds i.e. closer to midnight than to dawn, separating the nightingales, which are the first to sing, from other night birds like the owl, the warbler and the lark among others. This whole section is approximately 6½ minutes long and moves straight into the next section, the dawn chorus without a further break, building in intensity over 5 minutes duration. It is as if the first part opens up the possibility of the second and then breaks suddenly into silence with dawn (approximately 2 seconds).

The large breaks or great silences in the score are authentic to the pattern of silences in nature and Messaien calls upon the musicians, particularly the pianist, to respect them for this reason, to take themselves into the forest and experience the form that birdsong takes within the arc from midnight through dawn to midday. Like respecting the proportions of the intervals within each song, this element of accuracy suggests something more than the compulsion to copy nature, mimetically. It is about making a connection, spilling over in a sensory way into a life that is beyond human construction. Messaien's birdsong is quite different from his contemporaries in this respect, from Beethoven, Couperin, Stravinsky. It goes beyond a form that is firmly recognisable in the human world of harmony and melody. It is a transcription from nature that risks strangeness.

In these first drawings I have focused on the light, the dramatic transitions of midnight to dawn at 4.am, daybeak, morning and midday. It is perhaps at this point that any connection between drawing and the Messaien becomes tenuous.

I walk and find myself creating an imaginary conversation, wondering what the world of a bird can possibly be like. Human beings alternate their feet from left to right. Some birds, chickens and pigeons, also do so, birds that are close to the ground, to gravity. Other birds that are capable of flying to great heights, hop on two feet. Their relationship with gravity near the ground is very constrained but once in the air, it is freer. Such a bird can swoop, dive, glide, encircle, free in the way a drawing might be.

Walking creates pathways that are made by walking, by the action of feet folding vegetation and through repetition creating a degree of unintended permanence. Others can follow the same path, however temporary, as long as it is already marked out. In so doing we trace a movement in experience. We become the movement and bring along with us its past present and future. Pathways exist elsewhere in nature. The dawn creates paths of light as the sun breaks the horizon, a full moon likewise, neither becoming engrained into the earth's surface. A bird, like moon or sunlight, has no

proscribed routes other than the momentary forces of currents of air created by a particular convergence of elements in a moment in time.

I see a tree or series in the distance. It is a thing of beauty, of energy, revealed through light, neither a threat nor something that is of use to me, or perhaps 'of use' only as an object of contemplation, to draw. It is this quality of encounter, of chance, that brings me pleasure. Are such moments of pleasure possible in the world of a bird in its struggle for survival? Its landscape is different from that of a human but is its seeing merely instrumental, dictated purely by the need for food or a mate? This is how we tend to explain their activities but is it possible that the birds celebrate the dawn, as Messaien suggests, by sensing a larger movement of which they are a part? The thought of such a possibility gifts the composition of the *Le Reveil*, with a sense of joy, of connectedness to this larger domain through the senses and through the imagination.

I come across another, quite different sense of the dawn. *Aubade* (1977), a poem to the dawn by Phiilip Larkin (1922-85) evokes the dark at 4.00 am as 'soundless', dense, in some sense relentless. In time 'the curtain edges will grow light'. For Larkin the dawning of a new day is one day nearer to death. And death is the loss of the capacity to feel, to sense, not to be here or anywhere.

> *No rational being*
> *Can fear a thing it will not feel,* not seeing
> That this is what we fear—no sight, no sound,
> No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
> Nothing to love or link with,
> The anaesthetic from which none come round[xiii]

What is the experience of death for a bird? Do they mourn? It would appear that some species do so, the jar, the crow and raven. How do birds experience life? The dramatic transformation in light across the two works, the Messaien and Larkin, opens up to scale and a raft of emotions as the light strengthens and the world takes shape, becoming intelligible. Is it this enormity in the face of nature that the birds also sense and celebrate?

In exploring the dawn chorus through drawing and writing, through existing works of art and through direct experiences of walking, I start to wonder at the complexity of our human relationship with nature. As living organisms we are inextricably part of nature, bound to its rhythms and cycles, much like the birds. We also hover over nature and are capable of distancing ourselves in our imagination. We reflect, question and analyse, breaking up what we sense and see into fragments in order to understand and to share understanding. We apply method to our analyses and communicate what we discover through language.

'Hovering over' can imply separation, a sense of alienation from nature, predisposing us to think of nature as something we need to overpower before it overpowers us, such as in death. This quality of relationship is combative. It also undermines the considerable influence (and responsibility) that human beings have in the way life itself unfolds and develops.

Is there another possible imaginary?

On the one hand the dawn offers reassurance, the security of a pattern, a rhythm that occurs again and again. Each repetition is also a variation, experienced uniquely. The patterns of sound within the dawn chorus, the birdcalls, are known, recognisable, within

and across species, They are sounded each day (though mainly associated with spring and early summer). This repetition is not mechanical but performative, coming into being as if for the first time.

Drawing and writing (like music) are then an affirmation of a territory, not in a combative, competitive sense but as a way to encircle the chaos that surrounds us. They create a moment, a focus, to open up a quality of time 'experienced', rather than time 'spent'. As forms of communication they are simultaneously open-ended *and* subject to constraints. They require a particular kind of attentiveness and energy in relation to the senses, learning to observe carefully, to question what appears to be given, to enable us to feel what may not be immediately disclosed. This need for skill, knowledge and practice appears at first to contradict spontaneity but all four are necessary conditions for creativity.

Perhaps what Messaien and Klee have taught me is the importance of being awake, of breaking free of the codes we have set ourselves. By trusting intuition and training the body to be the finest instrument of perception, the man standing in the field opens birdsong up to us, crossing into a world that is very real and yet mysterious. He touches that part of nature that is within me. In this way the dawn chorus becomes a specific experience that connects me to a place and a moment in time. I am touched, moved by what I experience and the chaos that is life becomes momentarily ordered.

> We do not understand speech, because speech does not understand itself, nor wish to; the true Sanskrit would speak in order to speak, because speech is its delight and essence. (Novalis, 2005 p.5)[xiv]

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[i] Johnson, Robert Sherlaw. (1975/2008). *Messaien*. London: Omnibus Press
[ii] Bell, Carla Huston. (1984)..*Olivier Messaien*. Boston, Massachusetts: Twayne Publishers
[iii] Messaien, Olivier. (1995). *Le Réveil des Oiseaux.* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QOlQtirmrT0. [online] Accessed 16.1.2020.
[iv] ibid, p3
[v] Klee, Paul. *Zusammenhang und Früchte* 1927, 276. This is a copy of the original made during a research visit to Zentrum Paul Klee (ZPK), in which I undertook to copy a number of original works of Klee as an experimental research method (March 2018). The original work is part of the collection of ZPK. My research was funded by the EU Advanced Grant *Knowing from Inside* (2013-18), PI Professor Tim Ingold, Aberdeen University, Scotland
[vi] Thomson, Amanda. (2018). *A Scots Dictionary of Nature*. Glasgow and Salford: Saraband
[vii] Spiller, Jürg. (1961/1969). *Paul Klee Notebooks Vol 1: The Thinking Eye*. Translated Ralph Mannheim from the German edition *Das bildnerische Denken*. London and Bradford: Lund Humphries
[viii] Oliveros, Pauline. (2017). *Sonic Meditations* By 10 Deep Listeners . Chicago: Half Letter Press,pp 16-17
[ix] Oliveros, Pauline. (2017) in Breakdown Break Down Workbook #3, Volume 1 November 2017. Chicago: Half Letter Press & Breakdown Press
[x] I have occasionally emboldened the text when aspects of the score or my own walking activity suggest content for a drawing.
[xi] Messaien 1953, p.2
[xii] Eno, Brian and Schmidt, Peter. 1974. *Oblique Strategies: Over one hundred worthwhile dilemmas*. [online]. Available from https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/01/22/brian-eno-visual-music-oblique-strategies/).

Accessed 16.1.2020. I am grateful to Chris Fremantle, artist researcher, for pointing me in this direction.

[xiii] Larkin, Phillip. (1977). *Aubade.* [online]. Accessible from https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48422/aubade-56d229a6e2f07. Accessed 16.1.2020

[xiv] Novalis, (2005). *The Novices of Sais*. With illustrations by Paul Klee. Translated from the German by Ralph Mannheim. Brooklyn, New York: Archipelago Books