

ON THE “EAST–WEST” PROBLEM IN THE WORK OF OLIVIER MESSIAEN
(BASED ON THE TURANGALILA-SYMPHONIE)

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The music of Olivier Messiaen reflects a synthesis of Western and Eastern artistic traditions. The Turangalila-Symphonie is examined in the context of Eastern musical thinking, with attention to modality, rhythm, and form. The study highlights the interaction of Indian philosophical ideas with Western symphonic principles, as well as parallels with raga and maqom systems. The symphony is interpreted as a unified artistic model in which East and West function as complementary elements.

The creative legacy of Olivier Messiaen represents one of the most distinctive phenomena of twentieth-century musical culture, in which diverse philosophical, spiritual, and artistic traditions are organically intertwined. His aesthetic is shaped at the intersection of the Western European compositional school and the multilayered world of Eastern thought, which determines the particular significance of the “East–West” problem in understanding his творчество.

The earliest attempts at the artistic assimilation of the East in French culture date back to the eighteenth century. Already at that time, the East was perceived as a realm of exoticism, mystery, and artistic inspiration. Among the most representative examples are Persian Letters by Charles-Louis de Montesquieu, the opera-ballet Les Indes galantes by Jean-Philippe Rameau, as well as stage works by Andre Gretry. In these works, Eastern themes function largely as decorative elements, reflecting European perceptions of the “distant” and “other” world.

In the nineteenth century, interest in the East intensified significantly and assumed a broader cultural scope, particularly within musical and theatrical genres. Eastern subjects and imagery became central to a number of works, including L’Africaine by Giacomo Meyerbeer, Les pecheurs de perles and Djamilah by Georges Bizet, Lakme by Leo Delibes,

Samson et Dalila by Camille Saint-Saens, and La Reine de Saba by Charles Gounod. During this period, a stable interest in Eastern imagery emerged as a source of new expressive means, timbral colors, and intonational resources.

Against this background, Messiaen's work represents a qualitatively new stage in the understanding of the East as an artistic category. Unlike his predecessors, he does not confine himself to external stylization or decorative borrowing but seeks a deeper engagement with alternative systems of artistic thinking. His musical language incorporates elements of Indian rhythmic theory, philosophical conceptions of time and the cosmos, and a particular attention to sound color as a bearer of semantic meaning.

The aim of the present study is to identify the stylistic features of the Turangalila-Symphonie within the context of Eastern musical thinking. Special attention is given to the ways in which elements of Indian philosophy, rhythmic organization, and sonic coloration interact with the traditions of Western symphonic writing, forming a coherent artistic system.

The relevance of this topic is determined by contemporary processes of globalization, in which cultural boundaries are becoming increasingly fluid, and interactions between traditions more complex and multidimensional than ever before. The analysis of works in which diverse cultural codes are organically integrated allows for a deeper understanding of the potential of intercultural dialogue and its significance for the development of contemporary art.

The Turangalila-Symphonie is the only work of this genre in Messiaen's output and is distinguished by the масштабность of its conception and the monumentality of its sound. The score calls for an expanded orchestral ensemble, including a triple woodwind section, solo piano, an extensive percussion group, and the rare electronic instrument, the ondes Martenot, with its unique timbral qualities. The active use of percussion greatly enriches the sonic palette, creating a dense and multi-layered texture.

The title of the symphony derives from Sanskrit, which in itself points to the orientation of the composer's artistic thinking. Given Messiaen's interest in Indian philosophy and rhythmic systems, a number of scholars interpret Turangalila as a kind of "song of love," associated with ideas of eternity, time, and cosmic existence.

The musical language of the work is characterized by a deliberate exoticism and a high degree of saturation. However, this exoticism is not merely a surface effect but functions as a means of expressing deeper meanings.

Within the musical fabric of the symphony, heterogeneous elements coexist: intonational patterns reminiscent of Indian ragas, complex metric and rhythmic structures, transcriptions of birdsong, and features linked to the Western harmonic tradition.

These components form a complex system of interaction in which the boundaries between East and West become increasingly fluid and conditional.

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A significant role is played by the composer's use of his own modal structures, which create a distinctive sonic environment extending beyond the limits of traditional tonality. This gives rise to the perception of an alternative musical logic, often associated with an Eastern mode of thinking, although in essence it is the result of an individual and highly original compositional synthesis.

Continuing the analysis of the *Turungalila-Symphonie*, it is necessary to turn to its internal structure, which takes the form of a ten-movement cycle. The sequence of movements is as follows: Introduction, "Chant d'amour I," "Turungalila I," "Chant d'amour II," "Joie du sang des etoiles," "Jardin du sommeil d'amour," "Turungalila II," "Developpement de l'amour," "Turungalila III," and Finale. This compositional design is not arbitrary but is governed by a profound conceptual logic.

Within the cycle, several semantic spheres may be distinguished, reflecting the philosophical foundation of the work. The first is associated with the category of love and corresponds to the concept of *lila*. This group includes the movements "Chant d'amour I," "Chant d'amour II," "Jardin du sommeil d'amour," and "Developpement de l'amour." These sections are unified not only thematically but also intonationally: they share a *мягкая*, cantabile melodic style, a refined sonic coloration, and a tendency toward the expression of both emotional and spiritual dimensions of being. Within this sphere, love emerges as a central image, symbolizing the idea of divine play, joy, and the union of souls.

The second semantic line is connected with the category of movement and time, corresponding to the concept of *turanga*. It includes the movements "Turungalila I," "Turungalila II," and "Turungalila III." These episodes form a contrast to the "love" sphere and are characterized by heightened dynamism, rhythmic complexity, and richly saturated orchestration. Here, the composer's interest in Eastern rhythmic systems becomes particularly evident: there is a strong sense of continuous motion, the flow of time, *стремительность*, and inner tension. Polyrhythmic layering, the prominent role of percussion, and a vivid timbral palette together create a distinctive sonic space in which time is conceived as an ongoing process.

The third semantic sphere comprises the central movement, "Joie du sang des etoiles," and the concluding Finale. These sections function as a kind of philosophical culmination and synthesis. They bring together the principal intonational, rhythmic, and imagistic elements introduced earlier, creating an effect of conceptual integration. At this point, the music acquires a cosmic scale, transcending individual images and addressing universal categories of existence.

A significant role in shaping the dramaturgy of the symphony is played by the so-called cyclic themes, each endowed with a stable semantic function. One of the key elements is the "statue theme," distinguished by its monumentality and sonic power. It is typically presented in the trombones and low brass at a fortissimo dynamic, conveying a sense of immobility, grandeur, and a kind of symbolic "immutability."

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In contrast to it stands the “flower theme,” heard in the clarinets at a pianissimo dynamic. Its two-voiced texture creates the impression of a delicate, almost intimate dialogue, which may be interpreted as a metaphor for a “meeting of gazes.” This theme embodies fragility, ephemerality, and an inner spiritual refinement.

At the center of the thematic system lies the theme of love, which performs a unifying function and symbolically brings together opposing principles—the static and the dynamic, the material and the spiritual. Through this theme, the principal philosophical idea of the work, associated with the notion of unity, is realized.

Also of particular importance is the “chord theme,” which represents a distinctive sonic material of an orientalist character. According to the composer’s conception, it is highly flexible and capable of transformation depending on context: it may be shifted across registers, dispersed within the texture, or, conversely, concentrated into dense sonorous complexes. This versatility gives it a universal quality and makes it a crucial element of formal construction.

The rhythmic organization of the symphony is grounded in the theoretical principles developed by Olivier Messiaen in his own writings. These include added-value rhythms, non-retrogradable rhythms, rhythmic pedals, and rhythmic canons. Such elements are employed both in their original forms and in transformed versions—through augmentation, diminution, inversion, and various combinations. This rhythmic system generates a sense of asymmetry and “atemporality,” bringing it closer to Eastern models of musical thought.

The Turangalila-Symphonie marks a new stage in the development of Messiaen’s compositional language. His turn toward the full symphonic orchestra, with its vast expressive possibilities, led to a significant expansion of timbral and textural thinking. The orchestral forces include a triple woodwind section with an expanded brass group, solo piano, an extensive percussion section, and the unique electronic instrument, the ondes Martenot. Such a large-scale ensemble later became characteristic of Messiaen’s orchestral writing.

Of particular interest is the comparison between the musical language of the symphony and Eastern modal systems, especially the raga and the maqom. In these traditions, there exists a unity of melodic-modal and rhythmic thinking, in which each sound carries not only an acoustic but also a symbolic and expressive meaning. In this respect, Messiaen’s system of modes of limited transposition reveals certain affinities with Eastern modal principles.

The structure of the symphony also shows parallels with the formal development of the raga: dynamic, rhythmically насыщенные sections (“Turanga”) alternate with lyrical and contemplative episodes (“Lila”), creating a balance between motion and stillness. This formal organization reinforces the sense of cyclicity and internal development.

At the same time, one can observe features that bring Turangalila closer to the maqom tradition, particularly the cycle of Shashmaqom. This is reflected in the combination of instrumental and “vocal” principles, in the alternation of song-like and dance-like

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expression, and in the interplay between cantilena and motoric movement. The meditative sections of the symphony resonate with the spiritual atmosphere characteristic of maqom, adding further depth and multilayered meaning to the work.

Thus, the Turangalila-Symphonie demonstrates not a superficial borrowing of Eastern elements, but their profound reinterpretation within the framework of an individual compositional language.

This reflects Messiaen's aspiration to create a universal artistic model in which East and West function as complementary principles within a unified cultural space.

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