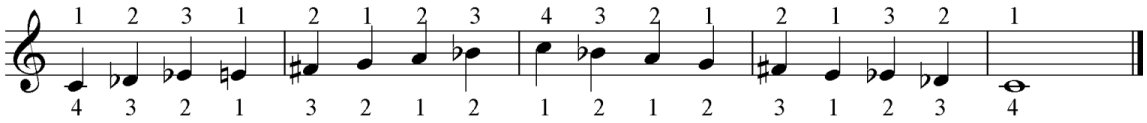
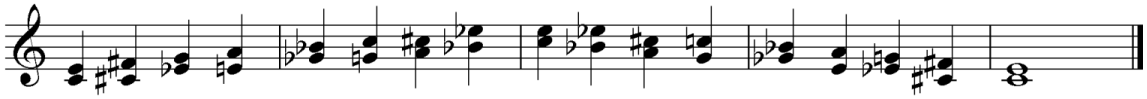
Learn to Improvise in 15 Minutes a Day: How to Sound like Messiaen

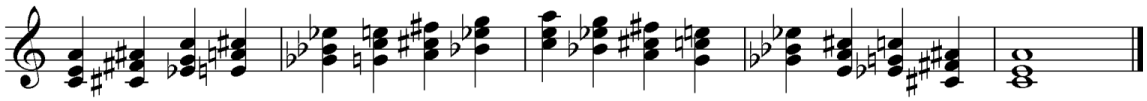
Last month's column introduced this octatonic scale, which Messiaen called *Mode 2*:



We derived various patterns and clusters from this scale, and used ostinato figures to accompany octatonicized hymn tunes. We also practiced the scale in parallel octaves, thirds, sixths, and tritones. And we noted the interesting effect of starting on a major third: the scale alternates thirds and fourths.

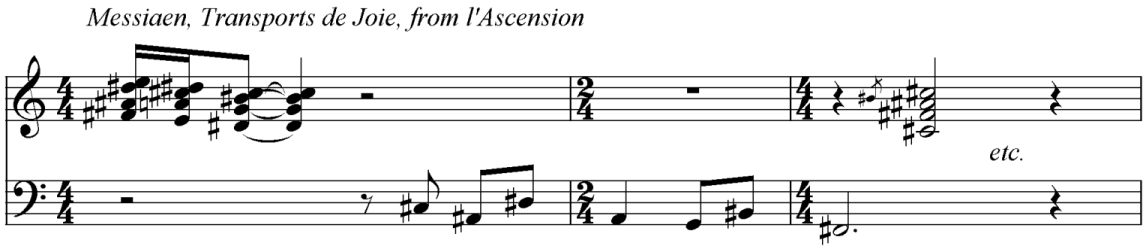


Let's add another level to this pattern, namely, another third/fourth above the given interval, so we have triads. Practice this pattern, first in one hand, then the other, until it becomes automatic:

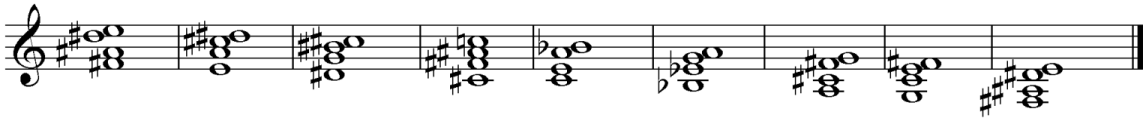


Notice how this pattern alternates sixth chords with 6/4 chords. All the sixth chords are minor, and all the 6/4's are major. In practicing, you can say to yourself "6, 6/4, 6, 6/4…" or "minor, major, minor, major,…" to help imprint the pattern in your mind.

Now we'll take a brief look at one way Olivier Messiaen applied this scale. Consider the opening to *Outburst of Joy*, third movement of his *Ascension Suite*:

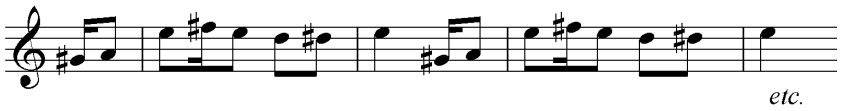


Yes, it's true. Every single pitch in this opening line is derived from the scale at the beginning of this article. (Ignore variations in enharmonic spelling.) If we start with his opening three chords, and continue the pattern all the way down the scale, we'll get this:

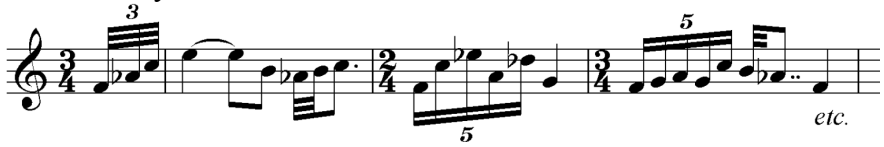


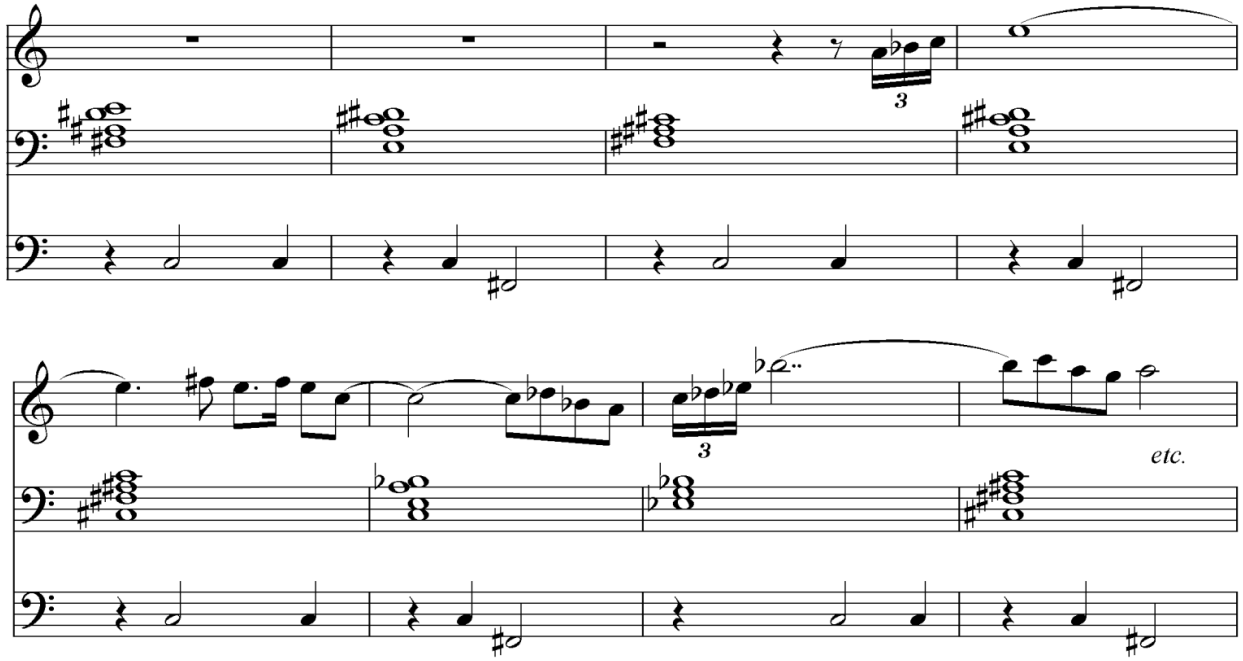
If we omitted the top note from this scale, we'd have the alternating sixth and six-four chords we've already practiced. You can sound like Messiaen already by making an accompaniment of this in the left hand, and putting your octatonicized hymn tune in the right. Make life easy by playing a pedal point in the feet, or a simple ostinato figure.
But what about that F# major chord at the beginning of Messiaen's third measure? How striking, that juxtaposition of dissonance and consonance. What traditional chords are available to us in the scale above? C, E-flat, F#, and A, all in major and minor modes. We see them spelled out in various inversions just by omitting the top note of Messiaen's pattern.

When you think of Messiaen, what melodies come to mind? I would bet that the essence of whatever melody just popped into your head is characterized by its rhythm at least as much as its pitches. I think of the spunky *Les Bergers*, from *La Nativité*:



or the dreamy *Alléluias sereins* from *l'Ascension*:



You're not limited to these, of course. Practice creating octatonic melodies incorporating whatever rhythms occur to you when you think of Messiaen. Theft is good.

We've now identified a few Messiaenic characteristics to play with: a specific octatonic chord progression, some major triads for harmonic relief, and a plethora of rhythms from which to choose. Your piece might start something like this: