Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) made unique contributions to the musical language of the twentieth century. Symmetrical “modes of limited transposition,” Greek and Hindu rhythmic cells, bird-song transcriptions, harmonies related to visual colors, and an expanded palette of timbres remain consistent features of his personal style. For vocal works, Messiaen wrote his own texts to express themes of transformation and resurrection from his Catholic mysticism.

In the eight tableaux of his only opera, *Saint François d’Assise* (1983), Messiaen created a synthesis of Catholic themes, colorful timbres, and musical techniques from earlier works. The introduction of this thesis presents a chronology of the compositional process and a description of the two staged productions. The study then traces the sources of Messiaen’s themes and musical language and his manner of integrating these materials with new themes and musical techniques in *Saint François*. The first chapters investigate sources of the text, and succeeding chapters examine recurring themes, significant timbres, and four aspects of Messiaen’s personal technique: unmetered rhythm, modes of limited transposition, harmonic complexes that produce visual color, and bird-song transcriptions.

Previous studies have produced detailed lists of the materials Messiaen included in his works, and the composer took pleasure in explaining his themes, timbres, and techniques. Nonetheless, little attention has been devoted to the guiding formal principles that enabled him to create large, coherent works without the tension and resolution of traditional tonal harmony. In *Saint François*, as in his earlier works, Messiaen created a large form from a mosaic of small musical modules that recur and accumulate in a balanced pattern in order to reach a point of fulfillment. The final chapters analyze this mosaic form in the work as a whole and in the sixth tableau, “Le prêche aux oiseaux.”