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Messiaen or the French clarity
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Abstract: What seems so clear and simple in many works by Messiaen might be their vertical, choral, harmonic, homorhythmic aspect. The latter is very common in Messiaen’s style. This is a relative curiosity, considering the domination of counterpoint (polyphony), even if non tonal, during the XXth century. This rare vertical style also carries a French aesthetics. It might remember Balzac’s, Voltaire’s or even Descartes’s clarity.

This text is presented here just as it was read as a conference presentation in April 2008 at the Messiaen symposium in the University of Toowoomba, Australia. It might be considered like an informal introduction to *Vingt regards sur Messiaen* (Aix-en-Provence, 2015, chapter 4), which may be useful for an English-speaking reader – strictly nothing more.

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Some pages of Messiaen’s works could have seemed (and still seem today) like a particularly clear lesson: not just in the creation of music, but also in the “teaching” of a composer. This kind of “lesson of modernity”, taught in a clear way, could have a link with the excellent reception of Messiaen’s complex style, with the composer’s success, a success which remains remarkable for a modernist musician. As a matter of fact, the public and the musicians who have premiered the works (and made them fast “classical” for some of them like the *Turangalîla symphonie*, the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* or *Vingt regards sur l’enfant Jésus*), may have been “grateful” to Messiaen’s clear teaching. But what kind of “clarity” are we evoking here?

Before mentioning the concept of clarity, let us admit that Messiaen’s works, without being tonal, are sometimes admittedly seductive because they use the sensational, futurist – perhaps optimistic (Phil glass would have said “spacey”) timbre of the Martenot waves; immediately seductive also because they sometimes present ecstatic motionless string
chords, for instance in the part named “Demeurer dans l’amour” from *Eclairs sur l’au-delà* (1988-1991), in the fourth movement of *L’ascension* (1932), in the part subtitled “Jardin du sommeil d’amour” from the *Turangalîla symphonie* (1946-1949); also because of the birds, imitated or stylised: in any case the simple joyful presence of the birds may also have seduced, perhaps reassured the listeners; because of the poetic, ecstatic Christian titles and commentaries, which may have shown, proved maybe the musician’s sensibility, even if the listeners could not really understand his work. However, the extraordinary rhythmical clarity of Messiaen’s style can not be insisted upon enough. In a way, this clarity is forgotten. It is often just considered a “starting point” from where the real listening begins. The listeners are then freed from “vertical parameters”. They can focus better on others, such as melody. Or else this clarity could be confusedly felt like a vague “sign of quality”, definitely perceived even if only vaguely understood. As a matter of fact, the ingenuous but educated listeners we have in mind, even if they wouldn’t appreciate non tonal music in general, could have heard enough about the so-called “historical necessity” of non tonal avant-garde to have finally admitted it and then, been grateful to hear some music which could present this “necessary atonality” in a relative simple, clear, perhaps “French” way. Messiaen’s mythical character could be considered not only like that of musician. It could also touch on the domain of a good teacher of new aesthetics. This role, then, could have appeared crucial in a world where “culture”, then aesthetics, may have become more important than music, at least considering the field of contemporary music.

However, it is well known that a teacher can fascinate his public not because his difficult words are finally understood, but because his speech – which remains obscure – seems organised, organised enough to make the listeners feel like the composer worked hard for them, condescended to them. In the same way, even if Messiaen’s music, in the worse case, could remain obscure, it may seem obviously presented in a relatively simple way (the effort of simplicity can be perceived even if the result remains complex), perhaps because the parameter of time, of rhythm, in many works, is limpid, though the harmonic and melodic structures stay dissonant. The rhythm itself can be complex, composed with *deci tāa* and with many “valeurs ajoutées”. But it can also stay simply “customised”: in a homorhythmic way. If not homorhythmic, the rhythmical
structures, in the works of Messiaen, often stay clear, surgical, spare, and tend to develop only one or two rhythmical layers.

Let us focus on the homorhythmic style. Some famous pages show such vertical, choral, purely harmonic structures. One hears something like a modern voice using dissonant intervals. But at least it sounds all in one voice, because it is in one rhythm. 

Eclairs sur l’au-delà (1987-1991) which appears to be the composer’s testimony, begins and ends with such choral structures. The end of Couleurs de la cité céleste (1963) presents just such a verticality. We hear a single rhythm, thus a single musical intention, all the more in this last example since this rhythmical unity is powerfully created by the brass. For Messiaen, this was probably the voice of God the Father, who lives in the “cité céleste” (heavenly kingdom), which was described. But for the listeners, this divine voice might sound at least like the “voice of modernity”, presented in a particularly pedagogical way. Stravinsky thought that the only goal of music was to “organise time”. If one applies his judgement to the case of Messiaen, the great deceleration is all the better organised, in the end of the “Chant d’amour 1”, second movement of the Turangalîla symphonie (1946-1949) since it is homorhythmic.

Messiaen called himself a “rhythmician” (“un rythmicien”). Indeed, he used a few concepts like rhythmic modes (medieval or Indian: the “deci-tala”) or “rhythmic canons”. He’s also invented the famous “rythmes non rétrogradables”, and the “valeurs ajoutées” (added values). But those procedures might be interesting, above all, because they are clearly perceived (perhaps with the exception of the “rythme non rétrogradable”). And if they are, this is probably because they can be currently presented with one single rhythmical stratum (or two in the case of rhythmical canons). Messiaen often spoke about his famous horizontal inventions, but rarely about their vertical exemplary presentation. Pierre Schaeffer wrote that “the musician is unaware of his real code, which remains subconscious”. Indeed, all his life Messiaen might have been unaware of his own clarity of mind, even if this clarity could have built the “real code”, i.e. the musical parameters which are really remarkable.

In the third part of Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum (1964), Messiaen went further than just writing homorhythmic structures: he wasn’t afraid of great gaps between chords,

\footnote{And the layers can notably simplify their relation in what Messiaen calls “rhythmical canons”.

\footnote{which he was obviously proud of, notably because each time, he had to dive into a complex “foreign” culture (India or medieval France) before he discovered them.

\footnote{« Le vrai code est inconscient. » Traité des objets musicaux, Paris, Seuil, 1966, 282.}
imagining quite long silences between them. The voice of God the father could not only be heard, but might also be expected during the silence. This way, the musical time was even better clarified and simplified.

In some other pages, Messiaen was one of the rare modernist musicians of his time to have dared to write unisons (so not only homorhythmic but homophonic structures) of such long durations. We may notice that those long paths of unisons, as a matter of fact, often come in the very beginning of a work. Each time, Messiaen probably wanted to start with a strong and clear gesture: in the beginning of “Les deux guerriers” (part of Poèmes pour Mi, 1936), of the second and the fifth movements of Visions de l’Amen (1943), of the fourth of the 5 rechants (1948), or of the “Regard de l’Esprit de joie” (tenth part of the piano work Vingt regards sur l’enfant Jésus, 1944) or, unique example, during the whole sixth movement of his Quatuor pour la fin du temps (1940-1941). No doubt this latter work became famous not only because of the dramatic circumstances of its composition (in a prisoners camp during the second world war) or because of the ecstatic last movement, but also because of this rare occasional clarity, the clarity imagined by a composer who trusted the “modernity” of his own “modes à transpositions limitées” enough to present them in a extraordinary – monodic – way.

The “Amen final” of the Livre du Saint Sacrement (1984), the last page Messiaen wrote for the organ, presents almost only homorhythmic, sometimes homophonic parts. It ends with a repeated cluster which sounds again like a sacred voice, but this time perhaps trying to “transmit pure energy” to the listeners. This cluster resounds like a violent electric interference noise. But it probably describes the absolute power of the Verb, the “creating sound” which might correspond to the buddhist “om” and to the “amen” for Christians like Messiaen. That is really, concretely, the “Amen final”. Here, finally, the homorhythmic project becomes Scelsi’s: finding God in a single and unique sound.

\[4\] The deep Christian knowledge of Messiaen makes him distinguish the voice of Jesus from that of the Father or the voice of the Holy Spirit. Then, the Father’s strong and sometimes terrible voice is notably figured by a particularly powerful vertical language, for example great chords of brass, like in the wellknown end of Couleurs de la cité céleste.

\[5\] Part II, bars 1-48 (piano II alone), Part V, bars 1-11.

\[6\] See the whole sixth movement.

\[7\] From time to time (rarely), a two-voice polyphony comes.

One question could remain: how did this rhythmical limpidity build itself, from one work of Messiaen to another, during the long career of a composer whose influence lasted almost from the 30’s to the 90’s. Before the end of the Second World War, the works were certainly less often “simply vertical” because they were still marked by an impressionist timbre. Then, the “time” of the works appeared less clear, even if some great tutti magnified the parallelisms of Debussy and therefore, were not only vertical but vertical in the same direction. And those parallelisms were slow, which underlined the “one voice impression” well, for example in the centre of the first Petite liturgie de la présence divine (1944), when the children’s chorus, in some kind of final recapitulation, slowly chants “Il est parti le Bien Aimé, c’est pour nous”, each syllable having its own impressionist chord (adopted by the whole orchestra). And the chords, totally pledged to the vocal melody, move by parallelisms.

After the war, the impressionist “blurred time” is abandoned. Then, a certain emptiness, consisting of long silences, can appear to clearly separate the chords (like in the third part of Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum). The time of extreme clarity comes with the 50’s, after the Turangalîla Symphonie (achieved in 1949). Then, even the orchestration seems to participate in the general project of rhythmical precision: the drum instruments (like vibraphone or xylorimba) come not to reinforce the sound (like in the works of Bartók or of the first Stravinsky), but more to “dry” it. And the strings are sometimes purely and simply banished from the orchestra (like in Couleurs de la cité céleste, 1963). Thus, those dry timbres may have developed themselves to further clarify the “homorhythmic”, “chord” style. However, during the same period, in what he called his “bird style” (his “style oiseau”), Messiaen looked for the absolute opposite of the choral structures underlined in this text (the often slow verticality). The “style oiseau”, first developed during the 50’s, looked for a fast horizontality, often treated in a polyphonic, vivid and complex way.

However, it seems like at the end of his life, Messiaen had last clearly defined two styles, the “bird” and the “chord”. From then on he could articulate them in a very clear and contrasted way. In his opera Saint Francois d’Assise (1975-1983), a late work by excellence, the words are all the more clearly understood by the public since the accompaniment, most of the time, strictly follows the rhythm of the syllables. This might seem surprising, not considering Messiaen, but opera in general. Thus, the very opposite of Richard Strauss Capriccio is extolled: in the present case, that is prima la parole, doppo la
Then, when the bird style comes (with the birds themselves), the contrast is total. One feels that Messiaen, at the end of his life, distinguished the clear voice of God (in the "chord style") from the vivid polyphonic ones of His creatures (the birds) and organised everything from this simple vocabulary.

However, beyond the expression of God the father’s voice, the reader might wonder why this verticality dominates the work so much. And there are probably many answers. It has already been suggested that the duty of writing a single rhythm music had to do with a Christian obligation to present the sacred Verb and to present It in a simple way to evangelize the listeners. The fact that Messiaen was a teacher of harmony at the Conservatoire de Paris must have also played a significant role. He probably had to present his chords in a simple pedagogical way. Messiaen might have been proud to have been able to create his own harmony, at least to have conserved the “effort of harmony” while Schoenberg and all his numerous followers seemed to have chosen the opposite, a contrapuntal style. The harmonic style was also like a typically French manifesto. Messiaen showed that he was the son of Debussy, who had invented great chords with added notes, the grand son of Rameau, author of the famous Traité de l’harmonie (1722) and the father of the French “spectral musicians”, notably Gérard Grisey and Tristan Murail, whose style would soon appear essentially harmonic. Also, the rhythmical clarity, permitted by the harmonic style, might have been particularly natural to a composer of France, seeking like Descartes, like the philosophers from the Age of Enlightenment, also like Hugo, Balzac or Zola, to present a limpid message, a demonstration.

Last but not least, Messiaen probably transmitted his modernity all the more clearly since he conceived it well. Or perhaps he thought so and thus he followed the seventeenth century French moralist Boileau who wrote: “what is well conceived is clearly enounced”. « Ce qui se conçoit bien s’énonce clairement ».

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9 And not the opposite: “prima la musica, doppo la parole”, like it is song in Capriccio.