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Messe de la Pentecôte
by Olivier Messiaen
II. Offertoire
“Les choses visibles et invisibles”

Moderé (page 4) and Moderé (Page 6 - 7)

The *Messe de la Pentecôte* was composed during 1950 and finished on January 21, 1951, under its original title, ‘Messe du Saint Esprit.’ The first performance of at least two movements, was given at Trinité on May 13, 1951, by Messiaen, The piece was meant to accompany the parts of the mass, but not the Ordinary (Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus, Credo, Agnus Dei, and Benedictus, which are performed at each mass) as was customary with composers throughout history. Here is what Messiaen said about the two movements performed on that day:

For the midday Mass, reserved for modern music, I have composed two pieces specially: an offertoire and a sortie. The offertoire comments on the words ‘Les choses visibles et invisibles’ (‘All things visible and invisible’) which we recite each Sunday in the Creed, and which are applied perfectly to the kingdom of the Holy Spirit, an inner kingdom of invisible grace. The sombre colours of the registration, the construction with ‘rhythmic character’, the alternation of the 16-foot bassoon which growls in the extreme bass, with the piccolo and tierce making the sounds of distant bells in an extremely high register, depict the workings of grace. The sortie, entitled ‘Le vent de l’Esprit’ (‘The wind of the Spirit’), uses a text from the Acts of the Apostles: ‘A powerful wind from heaven filled the entire house’ (taken from the Epistle of the day). A fortissimo, at first very violent, rises up in rapid swirls, like a chorus of larks as a symbol of joy. (Hill and Simeone, 2005).

The sections I have chosen to write about are from the Offertoire, the ones which Messiaen describes as alternating with the “growls” of the 16-foot bassoon. The Moderé on p. 4 and on p. 6 and 7 are those sections which provide the contrast he describes. In another of their writings, *Olivier Messiaen: Oiseaux Exotiques*, Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone say that the ‘free’ element in the music

is increasingly represented by birds in this, the *Messe de la Pentecôte* and in the *Livre d'Orgue*, which was the next. piece he wrote for organ.

In the *Messe de la Pentecôte*, (1950) an example of 'imaginary' birdsong comes in the second movement, 'Offertoire' (the Moderé section on p. 4), which derives from the lines for flute and clarinet in the 'Jardin du sommeil d'amour' in *Turangalila*, melodic 'garlands' (as Messiaen calls them) that resemble birdsong in slow motion. (Hill and Simeone, 2007)

Each of the Moderé sections is ten bars long, the bars corresponding not to the number of beats or to meter, but rather to the tiny phrases contained in them. This is the section that is referred to as "imaginary birdsong," or "birdsong in slow motion." The first two bars are identical and are repeated exactly in bars 8 and 9. It is this figure which can be heard as a kind of echo of the *Turangalila*, in the "Jardin du Sommeil." At first they sound identical, but on closer examination I find that the intervals are slightly different. In the "Jardin," 8 bars after **4**, p. 247, the first clarinet plays these intervals, beginning on G: 0 -2 -11 +2 +9 +2 -6. The flute then echoes this chain of intervals one bar later, the first bar of **5**, p. 248, also beginning on G natural. Nine bars before the end, on p. 263, the clarinet once again plays this figure on the same pitches. In "Jardin" the last sound heard from the flute corresponds to the first four notes of the monody, in the intervals given above, beginning on G: 0 -2 -11 +2. In the Moderé, the figure which is inspired by the earlier one, in bars 1,2, 8, and 9, the pitches are exactly the same each time. The order of intervals, beginning on D#, is 0 -1 -13 +2 +9 +1 -6. The differences between the pattern from the "Jardin" are the first interval (-2 in "Jardin") (-1 in the Moderé), the second interval (-11 in "Jardin") (-13 in the Moderé), and the next-to-last interval (+2 in "Jardin") (+1 in the Moderé). What remains the same

in both is the distinctive drop of a tritone as the last interval, the leap of 9 semitones, and the direction of the large leaps, even though they differ in the number of semitones. I think it is these connections which tease the ear into hearing the figures in “Jardin” and in *Pentecôte* as the same. The contour is the same and the similarity satisfies the ear. (Messiaen, *Messe de Pentecôte, Offertoire, Moderé*,) (Messiaen, *Turangalila*, “Jardin de Sommeil”)

This “birdsong in slow motion” is in Messiaen’s Mode 4-2 (second transposition), but with two extra pitches in bar 8: F natural, and A natural. Bars 3 and 10 are the same, except that bar 10 is missing the last note, an Eb. The first four notes of Bar 6, one of the longer measures, seem to answer the four notes of Bar 5. The first 4 notes of Bar 6 seem to be an inversion of Bar 5, but really are not. The opening 4-note pattern is heard four times in Bar 6,: first by itself, then as part of another tiny phrase, then by itself again, and once again as part of the tiny phrase repeated, so that the structure of the bar is ABAB. With the added value at the end, the structure could be called ABAB’. Bar 7 introduces different rhythms and short breaks, is the longest bar, ends with the drop of 13 semitones which resolves up 2 semitones, then is followed by 2 eighth rests. This bar is so different that it could be called a development. It is then followed by a reprise of the first three bars, but without the last note of the third bar, as described above. Of the 10 bars, six end with the drop of a tritone, and Bar 6 contains its own repeat and so has one more tritone drop, for a total of seven.

Messiaen says at the beginning of the movement that 3 Hindu rhythms would be used: tritiya, caturthaka, nihcankalila - transformed in rhythmique personnages: The first does not change, the second uses augmentation, the third diminution. This appears to be the case in the Vif and Presque Vif sections between the two Moderé sections. The Moderé rhythmic scheme seems free, like birdsong, and yet has enough repetition to seem classical in form. The Moderé sections seem

designed to represent a free contrast to the strict rhythmic construction of the two intervening sections. The registration for this section is a 16' quintaton and the Cor de Nuit (can be either an 8' or 4', but because it does not specify which, is probably an 8') and a tierce, the latter which colors the sound by reinforcing the very high overtones.

The second Moderé section is also 10 bars long, but this time there is another voice added for the left hand. While the original melody retains its identity in Mode 4, the new voice flows into a full chromatic scale. A new element appears: descending grace notes, all of which create intervals of 6 (C# - G, B - F), 8 (Bb - D, B natural - Eb), and 13 (A - Ab, C# - C natural) semitones respectively with the notes to which they are attached. The tritone C# - G natural reinforces the same interval used prominently in the right hand original melody. The grace note drop from A natural to Ab (13 semitones) echos the same interval drop from D to C# in the original melody in the right hand.

The new melody, without grace notes, contains much movement by smaller intervals, minor thirds, major thirds, major and minor seconds, and by perfect fourths and perfect fifths. These, together with the grace note intervals, seem to resemble bells with their overtones, a kind of tinkling which mixes with the quasi birdsong of the right hand. Without the grace notes, and removing the sharps and flats, the melody could be said to resemble plainsong. Thus hidden in the chirps of imaginary birds, or tinklings of liturgical bells, could *possibly* be the replica of a plainsong melody. Perhaps this is the *choses invisibles*? The grace notes are reminiscent of the piano part in the “Jardin de Sommeil,” which accompanied the clarinet and flute musings of the melody from the right hand part.

This added melody calls for a registration of an 8' flute, 4' flute, and a quinte, which

emphasizes the fifth. This fifth, the perfect fifth, was an interval allowed in the early church, and, if we accept the “hidden plainsong” idea, then this would be the appropriate accompaniment for it. The registration for these two melodies gives each voice a distinctive sound, one based on the 16' but with high harmonics, and one on the 8' with the strong fifth sounding.

The rhythm of this new voice is independent of the first. It is beautifully contrapuntal, justifying Messiaen’s description of this as interwoven “melodic garlands.” (Hill and Simeone, 2007) The addition of the chromatic scale to the voice in Mode 4 creates a rich palette of color. Together the voices form an amazing tapestry of sound, with birdsong in slow motion, ‘hidden plainsong,’ tinklings of tiny bells, and the chirpings of imaginary birds, all with the extraordinary overtones found in the registration. The ‘hidden plainsong’ melody begins and ends on the same note, G, and, above it is the C# which completes the opening tritone, C# to G natural. Thus we find a balanced ending to the ‘plainsong,’ and a symmetrical ending, as it began with that same tritone. How satisfying!

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