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*October 16, 2008*

**Messiaen: *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps***  
**Chapter 3: Abime des oiseaux**

For all of the freedom implied in the clarinet solo of the Third Movement of *Quatuor pour fin du Temps*, as Anthony Pople describes it, it is remarkably well- organized internally. At first look and listen, it appears cadenza-like, improvised, especially in the sense that there is no accompaniment with a metric beat against which to measure any of it. The temptation for the player would be to treat the performance that way, and for the listeners to receive it aurally as improvisatory. In fact, it is almost classical in its form and use of cohesive devices.

Pople gives the outline of sections, A through H, by the change of tempo. The longest section is A, *Lent*, with 13 bars, and the second longest, with 12 bars, is F, also *Lent*, which is a reprise of section A an octave below. Each of the *Presque vif* sections, B and C, is introduced by a long crescendo on E, each followed by a figure which is similar, not exact, but with the same contour. This is followed by birdsong, the blackbird and nightingale combined.. B ends with the ‘chord on the dominant,’ arpeggiated, while C ends with an arpeggiated chord of similar contour. In B there is a descending arpeggiated ‘chord on the dominant’ which is answered by the chord on the dominant mentioned above , but in an ascending arpeggio. These two are separated by snippets of birdsong. Again, while this seems improvisatory, it uses classical devices of question and answer, inverted motion, and repetition. In E:1-2, *Modere*,’ there is a figure and its echo which is answered in G:1-2 but with reverse direction. This G section, *Modere*,’ is introduced with the same E crescendo which introduced B and C. Again, here is a unifying device. The last section, H, *Presque vif*, is two measures long. The first measure, H: 1, is an arpeggiated chord on the dominant, but in retrograde as compared with B:6. The final four notes are taken from the opening. They are the second, third, fourth, and fifth notes, but at the end are slow, accented, and fortissimo. This same figure can be found at the end of A:11 with its fourth note at the beginning of A:12. It seems to be a kind of motive.

There are surprising elements of compositional technique which bind within the sections. Within section A, as Pople describes it, there is a “fascinating relationship” between the fifth and sixth phrases. In A:11, a very long “bar,” Pople describes the second phrase as seeming to be the model for the first phrase in that there is an augmentation in the first phrase, of a figure in the second phrase. (Why not call the second a diminution of the first?) The notes in the first phrase can be found after the first two beamed groups, one of three, followed by a group of four, these last being the same notes being interpolated in the three groups which follow. These three groups have lower eighth notes which form the augmentation. Two tied 8<sup>th</sup> s (for the repeated Ab), 8<sup>th</sup> G, and 8<sup>th</sup> F. Pople gives a tied 8<sup>th</sup> as well for the F, which I cannot reconcile, because the 8<sup>th</sup> note F moves then to Bb. What really is interesting is that, in addition to the augmentation described above, each of the lower eighth notes is followed by a sixteenth, each of which forms a minor third with the three notes in the second phrase, which you can either call the model for the first phrase, or the diminution of the first figure. The second figure is transposed up a minor third. In the reprise of section F there is a similarity but not an exact duplication of what Pople describes in A. (Example 3.2, p. 43)

In discussing the use of birdsong in this movement, Pople identifies here a combination of the blackbird and the nightingale, used in *Liturgie de Cristal*. As he says, Messiaen would hardly have been able to take field trips from Stalag VIIIA and so one might wonder how accurate these transcriptions could have been. As we have seen, the birdsong gives way very quickly to flourishes on the ‘chord of the dominant.’ In the music, the birdsong gives relief from the long phrases, and it contributes rhythmic variety and puck-like playfulness. In its reappearances it also helps with unifying the whole.

There is an added theological issue for Messiaen: the bird represents a Christ-figure, granting the hope of salvation from this abyss, Time, with its sorrow and its weariness. (Pp 40-41) This may refer to the Apocalypse, or it may refer to his time as a prisoner. Messiaen himself said the title of the work, *Quatuor pour la fin de Temps*, might also refer to the end to “the equal and measured time of classical music.” (P. 44)

Another very Messiaen-like organizing device can be found in the first *Modere* section, E,

which takes a form of the melody from A:1 and varies it. Though this movement is in Mode 2, there is a strong pull to E and E minor. Here the music has moved to the dominant of E, or B, and is transposed down a perfect fourth. The notes are then taken in different registers (Pople suggests the flight of birds), and then followed by an echo. At G:1-2 we find a similar figure, not exact, but with the same contours, and this time with inverted direction. It also has an echo.

Although Pople does not mention it (maybe I should not either!) It seems to me that Messiaen also makes use of sequence in D:4, a very long “bar.” There are six groups of arpeggiated figures. Although the sequence is not exact, the effect in the second through sixth figures, is that of a sequence because the contours are so similar.

What I have tried to demonstrate are the ways in which Messiaen uses classical techniques to accomplish his own goals, enhancing his own material. I have not touched upon his use of time which is quite striking. His use of added values creates a feeling of freedom from metric counting. His marked contrasts of tempo help the impression of improvisation. The long-note introductions help give structure, coming as they do at the beginning of related sections. The long-note introduction at one bar before G is a teaser. We think we will hear the *Presque vif* material again, but instead we hear the figure from E:1, this time in the opposite direction. The long-notes are a kind of signal of what is to come. The transitions, such as that in E:3-4-5 help slow the motion and direct the ear to the next section, which is the reprise.

And the birdsong reminds us of our humanity.