

OSM

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Messiaen, *Saint François d'Assise*

Franciscan scenes

« Lord! Poetry and Music have led me to Thee; by image, by symbol, and in default of Truth.” These last words of *Saint François* sum up the meaning of the “Franciscan scenes” (*Scène franciscaines*) and express the longing of the whole of Messiaen’s life as poet-musician. The opera represents eight years of compositional work and a whole life in search of his own spiritual way.

Is it an opera indeed? A kind of music drama? An oratorio? There is no dramatic action, nor theatrical intrigue. Could it be a ritual? Or musical meditation? The debate is still ongoing. The work is a hymn to the Beauty of Creation, a praise celebrating music; it is conceived in such a way as to follow the progress of grace in the soul of the Saint.

The score suggests a sacred celebration on stage. By its conception, *Saint François* is closer to mystery plays, a popular theatrical genre in the late Middle Ages, than to the musical drama of modern times. The mystery plays were performed in day-long festivals, representing the lives and miracles of the saints, intended for the faithful, fond of wonders. They are an addition to the illustrations of the Holy Scripture, the narrative images in the stained glass windows of 13th century cathedrals. The succession of episodes creates a link between realism and the supernatural; it breaks free from the ordinary experience of time, giving the impression of an encounter between heaven and earth. Isn’t it a close description of Messiaen’s work?

Who was this enigmatic composer, living in the heart of the 20th century? In an age of material fetishism, he seems to be a pilgrim from another world. Not unlike Debussy, Messiaen was “a French musician”. A composer, organist, and teacher, his life spans all the decades of the last century. When young, he became famous for his organ improvisations at the Holy Trinity Church in Paris, where he held an appointment till the last year of his life. Teaching at the Paris Conservatory, he shared his love and knowledge of music with three generations of young musicians, among them Boulez, Stockhausen, Xenakis, Murail, Nagano. As a composer, he left an impressive opus, rich in innovations, and deeply marked by religious fervor. He created an original language, far removed from the tendencies of his fellow-composers. Yet his style is recognizable

by its exotic rhythms, its transcription of bird songs, its modal harmonies and timbres previously unheard, its magnificent instrumentation and the sense of colors. French art and sensibility *par excellence*.

In 1983 Messiaen completed the composition of *Saint François d'Assise*, a monumental musical fresco, based on sacred texts, which were his lifelong companions. Musician-poet, Messiaen shaped both libretto and score in order to allow himself musical and artistic freedom: "I wrote the text at the same time as the music. It was very important to me; I wanted to prevent mistakes in the use of the vowels, impossible for the singers to pronounce on certain notes." Historically, the action is set in 13th century Italy. The literary sources are mostly drawn from the Franciscan texts: the biography, compiled by Thomas of Celano, and one other, written by St Bonaventura, in addition to two anonymous books, *Fioretti* and *Considerations on the Stigmata*. The most moving prayers are Francis's own poems (including *Canticle of the Sun* - Fifth Scene). Finally, Messiaen cited passages from the Bible and the Gospels; there are also excerpts from the *Imitation of Christ*, building links between narrative episodes. But the most inspiring poetic image is in St Francis's last words, echoing the Angel Musician, and paraphrasing St Thomas Aquinas: "Poetry and Music have led me to Thee..."

The Facts

The score of Messiaen's *Saint François* weighs 12 kilos (25 lb), consists of eight volumes, and the music lasts for more than four hours. When structured into three acts and divided into eight scenes, the performance lasts five hours, including interludes. The work requires 119 instruments as well as 150 choristers, split up into ten groups of fifteen. The orchestra consists of a number of exotic percussion instrument: five keyboards (xylophone, xylorimba, marimba, glockenspiel and vibraphone) and three ondes martenot. There are seven characters, seven soloists, among them six voices of the Friars, and the last one, the soprano who sings the Angel, God's messenger. It's a dream team for the crafting of a huge mass of musical material.

Musical Elements

Messiaen's musical language is highly original. It draws on elements from various sources and styles brought together in a powerful synthesis. The medieval plainchant inspired melodies and psalmodic recitatives (Scenes Two and Eight), while the isorhythm borrowed its syncopated labyrinths from the *Ars nova* motet. In the use of

instrumental colors, rhythmic modes and theatre, there is a meeting point between East and West. This is particularly audible in the references to the Balinese gamelan (Scenes One and Six) and in the reminiscence of the Nô theatre (Japan), echoing the Khôn theatre (Thailand) (The Angel - Scenes Four, Five and Seven). As a contrasting element, back to reality, there is a nod in the direction of *opera buffa* (Scene Four - Brother Élie and the Angel). In order to create an atmosphere of anxiety and nightmare in the most dramatic scene, *The Stigmata*, the composer uses devices of integral serialism, resulting in an orchestral magma - harsh sounds without timbre. Floating above all is an ostinato, bird-songs in rainbow colors, accompanying each character on stage. "It contains virtually all the bird calls that I've noted down in the course of my life", said Messiaen. In Scene Six, *The Sermon to the Birds*, the bird-songs became melismatic fireworks, an "organized chaos of sounds" (Messiaen). Finally, triadic harmony and C-major chord structure appear during pivotal moments of the opera, when the composer - St Francis - in the presence of the Angel hopes to hear the music of the invisible.

Messiaen assigns a crucial part of musical expression to the orchestra: the characters' emotional states are introduced in the plot by the use of leitmotifs and birdsong, thus impressing them on the memory of the listener. The choir participates in two roles: as a witness, in the manner of the Greek chorus, following Francis' spiritual pilgrimage, and as a voice of divine presence, speaking in Christ's name. The choral writing, especially in the Stigmata Scene, leaves the impression of music coming from the Otherworld, unfolding strange tone colors and harsh harmonies through the use of the wordless tone cluster chants. In the Scene of The Angel Musician, the choir creates the resonant effect of the Angel's celestial music; while in the ultimate scene, the moment of epiphany, it unveils "music of the invisible..."

Visual references

The work is very difficult to stage. The subject is far removed from operatic conventions and the libretto contains neither dramatic action, nor theatrical plot. Its narrative, oratorio-like, character seems suitable for the concert version. In that case, there would be no point in considering the composer's suggestions concerning costumes, stage set, visual effects and lighting. However, Messiaen's musical imagination includes the sensory richness of colors, lights and symbols, which are important elements of his work. They may bring a valuable contribution to the listener's

experience, even with the eyes shut. The potential spectacle is encapsulated in the numerous references to the Italian primitive painters.

St Francis's portrait is drawn from the beginning: first, his figure painted by Cimabue (c. 1240-1302); then, his attitudes and gestures evoked on the Giotto frescoes, all of these in the Cathedral of Assisi. The description of the Leper alludes to the lepers painted by Grünewald in his *Temptation of St Anthony*, panel of the Issenheim altar. The figure of the Angel is intended to be the reproduction of the Angel in one of Fra Angelico's paintings depicting the Annunciation from the San Marco Museum in Florence. In order to avoid any ambivalence, Messiaen left a detailed description of his dress, his colors and his wings "similar to two harps or two sets of organ pipes." The listener could leave his imagination free...

The music, by its sensory richness and its brilliant tone colors of voices and instruments, seems in contradiction with the character of the *Poverello*, the saint who embraced Dame Poverty and his ideal, Simplicity. Why write such an exuberant score? Apparent paradox; the music is in harmony with the composer's sensibility and vision. The composer explains:

The Truths of the Faith, Truths I express, are awful; they are fairy tales, sometimes mysterious, heartbreaking, glorious, sometimes terrifying, always founded on a luminous and unchanging Reality. ... My music expresses marvels found in the Catholic faith. Music, the most immaterial of all arts, is the closest to these marvels. It doesn't express, but awakes emotions, touching the subconscious and dreams.

How to deal with the work?

The work is not easy to approach. The encounter with this mystery play forces the listener to explore a new sound world, to give up his usual experience of time and space, to follow Francis's journey towards enlightenment. Listeners who believe in God, and non-believers alike, discover that Messiaen's poetry and music transcend the dogma of the church. The listener may choose to ignore countless invocations to the Lord, and to marvel at the splendors of Creation, or simply share in the pleasure of celebrating music, accompanying St Francis in his search for spiritual freedom.

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October, 4th 2008 – The St Francis's Feast