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Birdsong as Compositional and Theological Determinants in Olivier Messiaen's Opera, *Saint François d'Assise*

ABSTRACT

Background

In a conversation with Claude Samuel in 1986 about his opera, *Saint François d'Assise* (1975–83), Olivier Messiaen declared that scene 6, *Le Prêche aux oiseaux*, signified his “greatest success in the bird-song style,” adding that the scene included his “best bird tuttis” (Samuel 1986/1994, 236, 239). Including this scene in the opera—inspired by Saint Francis’s sermon to the birds as described in the sixteenth chapter of the *Fioretti*—was an important reason as to why Messiaen chose Saint Francis as the subject for his magnum opus. As a composer and ornithologist, he admired the friar for his love of nature and birds, and thus considered him to be a colleague. Not surprisingly, birdsong plays a very significant role not only in the large-scale musical architecture and theological import of *Saint François* but also in Messiaen’s musical language operating on the compositional surface.

Aims and repertoire studied

This paper examines Messiaen’s use of birdsong in *Saint François d'Assise*, beginning with surface levels of musical structure. It analyzes selected passages of music from the following avian protagonists, which exemplify the exceptional variety of the opera’s musical language. The birds in question are: (1) the *Alouette des champs* (I and II), (2) *Merle noir*, (3) *Fauvette des jardins*, (4) *Gérygone à ventre jaune*, (5) *Fauvette à tête noire*, and (6) *Chouette hulotte*. The paper shows how these birdsongs are structured from both melodic and harmonic perspectives, as they typify the broad spectrum of Messiaen’s harmonic vocabulary, from the chromatic trichords of the *Alouette des champs* I, to the tonally oriented lines of the *Fauvette à tête noire*, to the modal and invented-sonority colorings of the *Gérygone à ventre jaune*. The paper also considers how birdsong shapes the formal design of *Saint François d'Assise* at deeper levels of structure. The songs of the *Alouette des champs* (I and II) lead the way in this regard, as large sections of their music are consistently associated with xylo and woodwind ensembles, respectively. As a result, the xylos and woodwinds function as referential timbres where sections of music are identified more readily by their instrumental colors than by focal pitch classes, chords, or scale collections (Benitez 2018b).

Finally, the paper investigates the significant theological role birdsong plays in *Saint François*. The opera’s drama centers on the development of grace in its eponymous protagonist, a

spiritual journey, in other words, in which the friar moves from the visible world of humanity to the invisible world of God. The visible world of humanity is depicted primarily by the imagery of Saint Francis’s *Cantique des créatures* and birdsong. Both are important components of the opera’s theological emphasis on nature. In Messiaen’s Catholic outlook, nature is a mirror of the divine, especially with respect to birds and their songs. For theologian Père Pascal Ide (1994, 103), in Messiaen’s

compositional aesthetics birds can be regarded as anticipating the four qualities (especially agility and lucidity) of the glorious bodies possessed by believers who are resurrected. Systematized by Saint Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae* (ca. 1265–1274), which the Angelic Doctor based on his reading of 1 Corinthians 15: 42–44 (Ide 1994, 103), these qualities were celebrated in Messiaen’s *Les Corps glorieux* (1939). Birdsong serves as a mediator, Père Ide continues, between earthly and celestial music, even anticipating the latter. Indeed, in the *Trois petites Liturgies de la Présence Divine* (1943–44), Messiaen addresses God by stating: ‘L’unique oiseau de l’Éternité, c’est vous!’

In addition to evoking the presence of nature in *Saint François*, birdsongs suggest the presence of various characters in the drama. But they also represent the unseen realm of God, suggesting at times that they double as celestial characters that observe—and even react to—the seen realm of Saint Francis and his brother friars.

Methods

As part of its inquiry, this paper uses techniques drawn from post-tonal theory, information about birdsong from Messiaen’s *Traité de rythme* (V), and insights gleaned directly from all of the composer’s 203 birdsong notebooks and the short score of *Saint François* at the Département de la Musique, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Implications

Besides expanding aesthetic and theological perspectives regarding birdsong and *Saint François*, this paper offers insights into how Messiaen structures his avian music, from the superimposition of semitonally related harmonic elements to the layering of multipart textures. It demonstrates how these techniques are part of the mosaic that constitutes his compositional practice, since they involve intensifying one element by another, drawing parallels with the phenomenon of simultaneous contrast in painting.

Keywords

(1) Music aesthetics

- (2) Harmony
- (3) Structure
- (4) Musical time
- (5) Advanced tonality and post-tonal music

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