

Revealing the Colours of the Apocalypse through Visual Music

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It was in his *Quartet for the End of Time* that Olivier Messiaen began a life-long process of discovery, not only into his inner world of colour but, also, into a sound world which eliminated conventional notions of musical time. He regarded himself as a composer and rhythmician and the task he set himself, in his *Quartet*, was to produce a rhythmic system that could emulate the patterns of nature. The Apocalyptic inference of the *Quartet's* title was deliberate; it followed directly from the vision Messiaen experienced when he was a prisoner of war, in 1940.

My own visual interpretation of *Abîme des oiseaux*, the 3rd movement of the *Quartet*, has been influenced by two key facts. First, Messiaen's ability to see his own music, and that of other composers, in vivid colours. Secondly, the life-long inspiration that Messiaen gained from the shimmering stained glass windows of Chartres Cathedral. Details of just one Rose Window have enabled me to interpret, visually, the extreme conflicts of mood conveyed by Messiaen's music. For the composer, the Angel who announces the End of Time means the dissolution of musical time in a multitude of new rhythmic ways. My aim has been to create a pattern book of images where each of Messiaen's innovative rhythmic patterns has its visual counterpart. To achieve this end, I have explored new techniques and methods for producing Visual Music which seek to give some outward expression to the composer's Apocalyptic vision.

Visual mMusic. Olivier Messiaen, Quartet for the End of Time. Clarinet. Chartres Cathedral.

1. THE SCENE IS SET

In later life, Olivier Messiaen gave some insight into his very individual sound-colour world. It was during a conversation with Claude Samuel (1986) that he explained: "*When I hear music and also when I read it, I see inwardly, in my mind's eye, colours that move with the music and I vividly sense these colours and sometimes I've precisely indicated their correspondence in my scores.*" Of course, for most of us, this is an aspect of Messiaen's music where we can't follow him; unlike the composer's sound world, the colours in his mind's eye remain a closed and invisible book. But, is it just possible that a visual interpretation of his music can throw some light on the subject? That's the challenge I've set myself in creating a piece of Visual Music in which Messiaen's ordering of movement in sound is matched by complementary patterns that order the movement of images (Trickett 2015).

In making further retrospective comment on his sound-colour world, Messiaen commented: "*So I've tried to translate into my work the colours of the*

Apocalypse (all the colours of the rainbow)". Nowhere was this ambition more evident than in his *Quartet for the End of Time*. The Apocalyptic inference of the title was deliberate; it followed directly from the vision Messiaen experienced when he was a prisoner of war, in 1940, and what he described as his main source of inspiration –

"a little book containing the Psalms, the Gospels, the Epistles, Revelation and the Imitation. The book never left me, it followed me everywhere, I read and reread it constantly, and I paused upon this vision of St. John, the angel crowned with a rainbow. I found a glimmer of hope."(Samuel 1986)

Olivier Messiaen perceived sound and colour simultaneously. He had a form of synaesthesia which enabled him to transmute a wide range of individually perceived colours into audible sound combinations (Bernard 1986) - an ability he regarded as a gift although he said little about it prior to the 1970s. This explains why, in the score of the *Quartet*, he gave only a few clues about his esoteric world of colour. What he did declare was

his avowed intention to eliminate conventional notions of musical time; the task he set himself was to produce a rhythmic system that could emulate the patterns of nature – ideas that had been latent in his mind since his student days (Figure 1).



Figure 1: The Angel who announces the End of Time meant, for the composer, dividing musical time in a multitude of new ways. (Detail from *The Seven Angels with the Trumpets*, Albrecht Dürer, 1511)

2. GENESIS OF *ABÎME DES OISEAUX* AND THE QUARTET

It is not generally known that *Abîme des oiseaux* was the first of the Quartet's eight movements to be written (Rischin 2003). In 1940, Messiaen and two musician colleagues, Etienne Pasquier and Henri Akoka, were members of a French military orchestra installed in Verdun. It was in the forests, near Verdun, that the three of them listened, everyday, to the chorus of waking birds. Messiaen wrote down their songs. When Akoka asked Messiaen to write a piece for solo clarinet, the composer leapt at the idea; he had long regarded the clarinet as the ideal instrument for imitating birdsong. But before Akoka had a chance to play the piece, the three friends were captured and forced to march forty three long miles to Nancy – a test of endurance in which Akoka proved himself to be a tower of strength in helping the other two.

The first run through of *Abîme des oiseaux* took place in an open field near Nancy. The piece introduced many key features of the later Quartet including imitations of birdsong, a-metrical and unfamiliar rhythmic patterns and extreme contrasts in tempo - all aspects of Messiaen's very innovative musical language. At first, Akoka complained about the technical demands of the piece but, with Messiaen's help, he gradually overcame these difficulties. Shortly after, the three friends were sent to Stalag VIII A in Silesia where Messiaen, against all the odds, began the huge creative task of incorporating *Abîme des oiseaux* into his eight movement Quartet (Figure 2). Unexpected help from a music loving German Commandant provided the composer with special treatment – no extra rations, which were minimal, but permission

to retire to the latrines where conditions for concentrated composing were just about tolerable.



Figure 2: As a prisoner of war in Stalag VIII A, Messiaen 'had never felt so free' – a paradox that can be explained by the composer's belief that God had placed him in the camp for a reason.

3. MY VISUAL INTERPRETATION OF *ABÎME DES OISEAUX*

In creating visuals for *Abîme des oiseaux*, I have been influenced by two key facts. First, Messiaen's ability to see his own music, and that of other composers, in vivid colours. Secondly, the life-long inspiration he gained from the shimmering stained glass windows of Chartres Cathedral; he adored 'Chartres blue' as he called it. Details of just one Rose Window (Figure 3) have enabled me to interpret, visually, the extreme conflicts of mood conveyed by Messiaen's music.

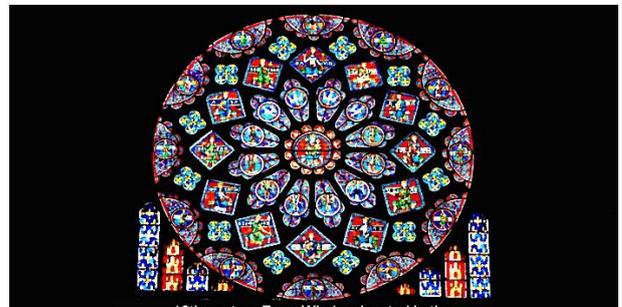


Figure 3: 13th century Rose Window located in the North Transept of Chartres Cathedral.

The tempo of *Abîme des oiseaux*, at its start, is extremely slow (see notation below marked *Lent, expressif et triste*). To match its desolate mood, I have conjured up a series of slowly changing textures all derived from details of the Rose Window (Figure 4). In the next section of the piece, which is much faster (*Presque vif, gai, capricieux*), the bird panels (Gifts of the Holy Spirit) of the Rose Window take flight to simulate Messiaen's cacophony of birdsong (Figure 5).

Olivier Messiaen, in his Preface to the first edition of his Quartet for the End of Time (Messiaen 1942), described the extreme conflicts of mood as follows:

"The Abyss of Time with its sadness, its weariness. The birds are the opposite of Time; they are our desire for light, stars, rainbows and jubilant song." These moods of ecstasy and desolation persist throughout *Abîme des oiseaux* and, it is for this reason that, in live presentations, I demonstrate excerpts from both 'Lent' and 'Presque vif'.

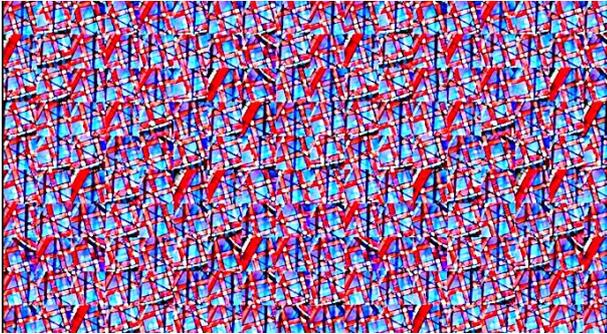


Figure 4: Lent, expressif et tristes



Figure 5: Presque vif, gai, capricieux

Of equal significance, in my visual interpretation of *Abîme des oiseaux*, are Messiaen's experiments with rhythm. His teachers in Paris had introduced him to Indian rhythmic patterns or *deçî-tâlas*. A 13th century treatise on the subject by Carnadeva listed 120 rhythmic patterns but it was pattern 93, *râgavardhana*, that caught Messiaen's imagination.

In 'The Techniques of my Musical Language' (Messiaen 1966), the composer explains two types of rhythm – non-retrogradable and retrogradable. (These were words he invented.) The basic non-retrogradable rhythm is derived directly from *râgavardhana*; it has a mirror structure (ie the same in both directions):



Similarly, a succession of further non-retrogradable rhythms all have a central common value:



In the last example, the central 5 x 1/16 notation is common to both the outer groups.

Throughout his life, Messiaen remained particularly fond of such palindromic rhythms. They can be effectively illustrated by an excerpt from 'Danse de la fureur pour les sept trompette' – the 6th movement of the Quartet. Here, all four instruments play in unison so my demonstration on solo clarinet can still convey the overall rhythmic idea. Every bar is a mirror image of itself.



Messiaen's works also contain numerous examples of Rhythms with Added Values. Added Values can be a short value added to any rhythm by a note, or by a rest, or by a dot. They are all examples of Retrogradable rhythm which again can be effectively illustrated with reference to 'Danse de la fureur pour les sept trompettes'. The dots represent Added Values.



Of the final eight movements of the Quartet, six embrace aspects of Messiaen's newly developed a-metrical rhythmic ideas. The opening passage of *Abîme des oiseaux* (Lent) contains notes with Added Values. These can be clearly recognised in spite of the movement's extremely slow tempo. In fact, it is this very slowness that gives the illusion of extending Time. The dots again represent Added Values.



Another passage from *Abîme des oiseaux* incorporates augmented rhythm – a form of retrogradable rhythm where the note values become progressively longer.



(Manuscript excerpts included here are taken from the score of *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* published by Durand SA. The author acknowledges this source with gratitude.)

The result is similar to a meticulously timed *rallentando*. Visually, this is one of the few passages where my interpretation follows the score, note-by-note: a device that I use very sparingly.

In the Preface to the score (Messiaen 1942), the composer includes, for the benefit of performers, a 'little theory of my rhythmic language'. It explains all the rhythmic patterns encountered in the Quartet and contains the following exhortation to the executants: 'Do not be preoccupied with all this (description analysis) when you perform; simply play the score, the notes and the exact values, the marked nuances.' So that's exactly what I do when I perform *Abîme des oiseaux* in its entirety!

Messiaen, in later life, felt that his greatest achievement had been to liberate, in Western music, a new type of rhythmic experience (Figure 6). It is this aspect of his music that exerts such a mesmerising and bewitching effect on audiences. For me, therefore, the composer's Dissolution of Time must exert a major impact on the 'rhythm' of my own visual interpretation of *Abîme des oiseaux*. My aim has been to create a pattern book of images where each of Messiaen's rhythmic patterns has its visual counterpart. Together, these express the extreme mood swings of the piece by manipulating and distorting various fragments of my chosen Rose Window at Chartres. I have already mentioned two such instances (Figures 4 & 5). Further examples are a note-by-note representation of Messiaen's meticulously timed *rallentando* (Figure 7) and a visual interpretation of single, sustained notes as they increase in volume from very soft to very loud (Figure 8). The aural impact of these interruptions, which occur three times during the piece, is terrifying and, to my mind, they denote the Angel announcing the End of Time – an idea that I reflect visually by large inexorably revolving segments of the Rose Window.



Figure 6: "My music takes its inspiration from the movements of nature, movements which are free and unequal in length – in other words, the very opposite of what is traditionally understood as rhythm."

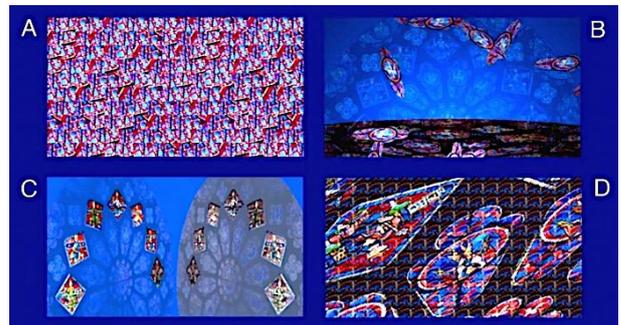


Figure 7: A pattern book of images where each of Messiaen's rhythmic patterns has its visual counterpart. Together, these express the extreme mood swings of *Abîme des oiseaux*.

4. BACK TO STALAG VIIIA

Messiaen's instrumentation for the eventual *Quatuor* was dictated by the availability of instruments and performers. Prisoners at the camp contributed towards a cello purchased in Görlitz for Pasquier, Messiaen played on a piano with sticking keys and, somehow, the violinist, Jean Le Boulaire, like Akoka, had managed to retain his instrument. So that was it; the Commandant allowed the group time to practise in the camp theatre (which contrary to all accounts could contain only a few hundred prisoners with their guards). Messiaen has stated, about the first performance, that he had never played previously to an audience so attentive, silent and 'captivated' by his newly discovered musical language. Because that's another important aspect of the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*; it was the piece where the composer formulated a sound world which stayed with him forever afterwards.



Figure 8: Prisoners at the camp contributed towards a cello for Pasquier. Messiaen played on a piano with sticking keys and, somehow, violinist Jean le Boulaire, like Akoka, had managed to retain his instrument.

The composition and performance of the Quartet revealed Messiaen's determination to overcome feelings of despair during his imprisonment at Stalag VIII A. Yes, he would have become a great composer without his prison experience but, perversely, the harsh conditions of camp life had succeeded in both concentrating his thoughts and hastening his development as a composer at a crucial time in his creative life.

5. CONCLUSION

In its time, Messiaen's Quartet was revolutionary; it was pivotal not only in Messiaen's own musical development but, also, in the overall development of classical music in the 20th century. Particularly in *Abîme des oiseaux*, the composer explored a path of extremes by inventing new rhythmic patterns, extending the top register of the clarinet to its limits, demanding both very fast and very slow tempi, and insisting on a range of amplitude which extended from *ppp* to *fff*. All these aspects of Messiaen's composition have provided a starting point for producing visuals which, similarly, follow a pattern

of extremes. It seems to me that if there is any music that justifies the idea of translating sound into colour, it must be Messiaen's. By taking on this challenge, albeit for only one movement, my overall aim has been to heighten audiences' appreciation of Messiaen's achievement by giving some outward expression of his Apocalyptic vision. Inevitably, my interpretation must be a personal one and I can never know whether or not the composer would have approved, but is it just possible that my hallucinatory glimpses of refracted light from the stained glass windows at Chartres would have touched a familiar chord in Messiaen's mind?

6. REFERENCES

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