

DEVELOPMENT AND STASIS IN MESSIAEN'S *L'ASCENSION*

Like many composers of the twentieth century, Olivier Messiaen developed a strict but encompassing set of rules to define his musical language through both progressive compositional experimentation and also *ex post facto* analysis of his completed pieces.¹ His later works, among them *Des canyons aux étoiles* and *Saint François d'Assise*, fit these rules quite well but his early works like *L'ascension* are somewhat more interesting in their only partial explicability through this later-imposed rule system. *L'ascension* is especially curious because of its lack of stylistic consistency; the entire piece sounds like Messiaen because of its orchestration and modality, but the dance-like feel and rapidly developing form of the third movement set it apart from the static, relatively undeveloped, and seemingly liturgical first, second, and fourth movements of the same piece.

It is no wonder, then, that in Messiaen's 1944 categorization of his works according to how characteristic of his style they were, he rated *L'ascension* zero stars, or not characteristic at all² (although in a posthumous revision of this categorization, *L'ascension* is rated two stars, or very characteristic.)³ He must have intended to distance himself from this work when he published these ratings, at least partly because of his rejection of the stylistic inconsistencies between the movements. (Dingle goes further, suggesting unfairly that the third movement "shows least signs of progress beyond anything Messiaen had composed up to [that]

¹ Olivier Messiaen, *The Technique of my Musical Language*, trans. John Satterfield (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1956).

² Peter Hill, *Messiaen*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 136.

³ Messiaen, 111.

point.”)⁴ More evidence to this effect comes again from Messiaen himself: in 1933, the year after he finished the orchestra version, he began transcribing *L’ascension* for organ and completed the first, second, and fourth movements but was so confounded by the original orchestral third movement that he ended up composing an entirely new third movement for the organ version. In addition to Messiaen’s own ambivalence towards this movement, however, a number of explicit musical features also set it apart from the other three movements. Comparing the third movement to the other movements elucidates some of the biggest aesthetic problems Messiaen was attempting to solve in his formative years. More importantly, though, this comparison brings to light how each of the movements treats form differently and therefore which musical parameters each of the movements emphasizes most. As we will see, the most important parameters of the piece as a whole are development and lack thereof, or stasis.

One of the most interesting inconsistencies between the third movement of *L’ascension* and the others is its dancelike character. With its lilting syncopation in triple and duple meter (mm. 4-6 in the first theme, mm. 255-256 in the last theme, etc.) and highly regular pulsing rhythm, the music recalls Baroque dance with startling fidelity. The opening trumpet call is almost surely a gigue as it is in three-eight time, accents beat three, and is cheerful in affection.⁵ Similarly, the two-four music that closes the movement is distinctly reminiscent of the tambourin dance

⁴ Christopher Dingle, “Forgotten Offerings: Messiaen’s First Orchestral Works.” *Tempo* 61 (2007): 15.

⁵ Meredith Ellis Little, “Gigue,” *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed March 17, 2016.

style, or something similar, with a repeating, harmonically static theme over the regular rhythm of the tambourine and cymbals.⁶ It is difficult to tell exactly which dance forms Messiaen intended these passages to take but the fact that they sound even close to the forms described above is remarkable given the lack of any such styles in the other three movements. It is not surprising that he would have used such forms, though, since Debussy and his compatriots composed with many of them around the same time Messiaen wrote *L'ascension*. Like Debussy, though, Messiaen subverts these forms so that neither of these “dances” goes exactly as expected. To say the least, the eleven bar phrases of the opening theme and the twelve bar phrases of the closing theme would make them unusually difficult to actually dance to. Additionally, these two sections both make use of nonstandard harmony, despite each having a clear pitch center. The first section (the opening of the movement) resides in G# Phrygian and the last section (from measure 255 on) fits into an octatonic scale built on G, a scale which happens to be the first transposition of the second of Messiaen’s modes of limited transposition.⁷ So this third movement may not be a dance *per se*, but its use of styles reminiscent of Baroque dance is striking and revelatory in the context of the other three movements. Incidentally, it should be noted that although Messiaen did not regularly return to rhythmically charged dance music like this in his later orchestral work, he did occasionally write such music again, such as in the final movement of *Turangalila*.

⁶ Meredith Ellis Little, “Tambourin,” *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed March 17, 2016.

⁷ Messiaen, 87.

The first, second, and fourth movements of *L'ascension* bring together styles reminiscent of plainchant and other liturgical forms and are much more simplistic than the third. The first and fourth movements are based entirely on repetitive, modal, homophonic chorales. It seems likely that Messiaen, as an organist, composed these two movements at the keyboard since they both translate so well to the reduced music in the organ version of the piece. The second movement is also formed primarily from a single chant-like theme (one which “owes its construction to the tracts and hymns of plainchant,”) ⁸ although the subsequent entrance of a second theme and the development of the accompaniment to the first theme give this movement a more neo-Romantic orchestral presence than either the first or the fourth. Still, the second movement’s lack of rhythmic drive and thematic variety set it far apart from the character of the third movement.

With all the stylistic differences between the movements of *L'ascension*, one of the only things holding them together is harmony. Although Messiaen only publicly codified his modes of limited transposition in 1944 ⁹, it is clear that he had developed his understanding of these modes sufficiently by 1933 to use them prevalently in this piece. For example, the beginning of the first movement makes use of different transpositions of the third and seventh modes, most of the second movement is based on the third mode, and the fourth movement clearly starts in the seventh mode. The third movement also makes use of such modes, though. We have already seen that the final section (measure 255 to the end) is written in the second

⁸ Olivier Messiaen, “*L'Ascension: Four Symphonic Meditations by Olivier Messiaen,*” *Olivier Messiaen: Journalism 1935-1939*, ed. and trans. Stephen Broad (Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 106

⁹ Messiaen, *Technique*, 87

mode, but additionally we have the third mode in the woodwinds at measure 140, and even another instance of the second mode, in the same transposition as at measure 255, in the winds at measure 93. The third movement is harder to analyze harmonically than the other movements since it is much more chromatic and has a higher frequency of “passing tones,” probably simply because it is much faster in tempo and harmonic rhythm than the other movements, but it is still primarily written using the modes of limited transposition. Interestingly, besides the modes, each movement has a fair bit of triadic harmony as well (much of which is also modal!).¹⁰ There are obvious triadic cadences in all four movements, although often these triads are inflected with added sevenths, like the dominant chords that end the fourth movement and serve as the “tonic” in measure 6 of the first movement. So although the third movement has a greater frequency of “passing tones” that are not part of the harmony, making it sound more developmental, all four movements of the piece are built on the same modal-triadic notions.

The best way to summarize all the various differences between the third movement and the other three movements of *L'ascension* is to look at how they each develop. As discussed in respect to style, the first and fourth movements are based on repeating motivic cells of a few measures each and both use this repetition to build gradually to *fff* triadic climaxes. Without any rhythmic drive or thematic development, however, these climaxes feel relatively directionless, as if both movements are intended to evoke pure stasis. The second movement too stays firmly in the realm of stasis, especially since the main theme is always heard in

¹⁰ Ibid, 96.

unison without any harmony. As noted previously, though, the presence of a second theme and the development of the accompaniment to the first theme in the second movement give it much more direction than either the first or the fourth. The variation in the rhythm of the repeated closing phrase of the opening theme (mm. 5-11 etc.) also encourages development and leads the movement to a powerful and prolonged climax. But although the second movement has some development, it is not until the third movement that we see Messiaen's full developmental capacity. Right from the start, the music progresses through a sort of developing variation, with the opening trumpet call in sentence form (mm. 1-22) leading to a motivically related interlude (mm. 23-39) and then a recap of the opening call (m. 40). Only in this movement do we find meaningful meter changes associated with new themes (m. 93 and m. 255,) meaningful key changes (m. 140,) and real polyphonic orchestration (although still not much counterpoint.) The biggest innovation in this movement, however, is the climax. An ascending sequence based on the opening trumpet call (mm. 205-246) leads to a tutti realization of the call (mm. 247-254) slowed down fivefold from its original tempo, harmonized in the third mode of limited transposition, and with each note annunciated by a symbol crash. This impassioned climax, the peak of the third movement's development, is followed by the two-four dance at measure 255, which acts as a brief coda that builds by repetition, like in the other movements, to the final cadence of the movement.

It is apparent that if the first, second, and fourth movements of *L'ascension* demonstrate the piece's preoccupation with singular, monolithic music, the third shows a multifaceted approach to rhythm, harmony, and style that together create a

monumental symphonic sound. The third movement shows a departure from the homophonic, “organistic” music of the others and instead the beginning of a new, bigger style characterized by continuous development, idiomatic orchestration, and formal complexity. But it is the juxtaposition of these ideas of liturgical and absolute music, of unmeasured and rhythmic music, and of development and stasis that make the four movements together so bewildering and appealing. *L’ascension* is thus not only an expression of Catholic piety, as its name might suggest, but is more so a broad testament to the power of cleverly balanced development and stasis.

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