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## OLIVIER MESSIAEN'S *QUARTET FOR THE END OF TIME*, SECRET OF FORM – MOVEMENT VI

**Abstract:** Knowing that Messiaen's early period, especially *The Quartet for the End of Time*, got so many written comments and discussions and from renowned critics, musicologists and composers it is hard to believe that anything different could possibly come out about the structure, form or concept in his work. Still, another look at these works would be valuable, since the concept of form is far from explored. The focal point of this text is the sixth movement from the *Quartet* and its concept of form. It unveils the relation between Messiaen's music ideas and the ancient Greek tragedy and the depth of the influence that Greek art had on his concept of form. The influence goes as far as the "suggestion of ring composition".

**Key-Words:** Concept of form, transitions, circles, "ring composition".

"The man is gone with his secret but here is the work to speak for him"  
(Boulez P, 1994, Preface for *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur, et d'Ornithologie*, by Messiaen)

"This ancient (Greek) art that inspired my work so deeply..." (Messiaen, 1994, *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur, et d'Ornithologie*)

For many years much of Messiaen's music retained some "mystery" especially in the relation between its rhythmic configuration, composing technique and resulting **form**. The relation is more fundamental than it seems or, briefly, rhythmic configuration and some composing techniques come from the same source. In spite of Messiaen's own comments on what to listen for in his music, the origins of the 'freedoms and restraints' of his composing are yet to be discovered. Much of his early music, which is performed and recorded frequently, has been explained using the composer's comments and these are typically on: a distinct rhythm (freeing of rhythm), on modes, on "bird singing" etc. What is not discussed (not often) by the composer is the complete form. Since a number of renowned specialists have studied his work, there have been a number of works available (in several languages) on Messiaen's music. While reading discussions on composing techniques, of the period ending with *Turangalila Symphony*, one can unmistakably notice an effort among writers to link Messiaen with either twelve-tone technique, or traditional forms in the 'environment of

post tonality'.<sup>1</sup> These two links, pointing to what is called “the origins of composer’s thought”, provide some insight, although they do not reveal Messiaen’s “points of departure”, and especially do not bring about understanding of the **concept of form** and the meaning of symmetry. (This is to say that the notion of symmetry in form is deeply related to Greek Prosody and the form of Tragedy).

The analysis of this paper covers one movement of the *Quartet for the End of Time* with which Messiaen created an original form while maintaining a ‘recognizable rondo shape’. “The brilliance and originality of the sixth movement – ‘Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes’, written entirely in unison – remain undimmed both by retrospective familiarity and by endless imitation of the idea by other composers”.<sup>2</sup> After this quote, it is even more surprising that the structure (form) of the sixth movement did not get an ‘in depth reading’ (understanding) in a number of articles, papers and discussions.

The sixth movement is based on an idea of form borrowed from the Classic (Greek) Tragedy. The appearances of thematic materials follow the logic of tragedy’s characters, the Protagonist (Theme I), the Antagonist (the developed Theme II, of a disproportional length, #5) and the ‘neutral’ theme (#26, the Tritagonist, symmetric theme III). These themes, the “three rhythmic characters” enter as if they were ‘on the stage and acting’ and create a unique movement in which a ‘dramatic form’ comes into being through music. (This is one of the “charms of the impossible” in Messiaen’s philosophy.)

The structure of the movement shows a strong emphasis on rushed (unprepared) “**entries**” and “**exits**”, abrupt beginning and ending of thematic materials, typical of the structure of Tragedy, the dramatic use of exits and entrances in Greek Tragedy.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, having the emphasis on ‘sequences of development’ of the second theme (*Technique*, p.41–42), with gradually increased transformation, shows the parallel with ‘**transitions**’ (transitional development) in the structure of Tragedy.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the point of reaching the ‘**crisis**’ (the central section, from bar #55, in the central development, from bar #48) is well prepared. As a climax of the crisis there are cyclic repetitions (from 51, 55–67), and in the form of symmetric, “Cretic” rhythm,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. R. S. Johnson, 1975, *Messiaen*; A. Pople, 1997, *Messiaen: Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*; P. Griffiths, 1985, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*; edited by Peter Hill, 1995, *The Messiaen Companion*; edited by Siglind Bruhn 1998, *Mystical Symbols of Faith: Olivier Messiaen’s Charm of Impossibilities*, author Jean Marie Wu; *The Theology of Illusion*, author Darbyshire Ian.

<sup>2</sup> *The Messiaen Companion*, Ed. Peter Hill, 1995, p. 185.

<sup>3</sup> Taplin Oliver, 1977, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus*.

<sup>4</sup> J. de Hoz, 1979, *On Aeschylus composition*, p. 17, 22, 27.

of three notes (augmented or diminished). The three notes are the center and the two extremes, from the 'range' (span) of the first theme. Their origin is in the first theme but their form is puzzled, as it is in "**exhortations**" in the Tragedy, gnomic commentary and cyclic repetitions.<sup>5</sup>

Identical bars from exhortations appear on the same line:

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51-----56-----64-----
-----67-----52-----58-----
-----55-----
--62-----66-----57-----
-----65-----

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The reference given by Messiaen, about his quartet being inspired by (based on) the *Revelation of John* and the "Last Judgment" explains why he borrowed the 'dramatic' concept of form for the sixth movement: dealing with calamities was the role of Tragedy. The fact that the suffering comes to balance certain acts from the past (of an individual or a group), at the end of every Tragedy, perfectly serves this context. With choosing to depend on the "theatric structure" Messiaen respected the 'freedoms and restraints' that come from it and set the piece as a 'unison' played by four instruments (even the Chorus of Tragedy performed as one). The texture of the sixth movement was always intriguing, since the reason for choosing it was not known. Moreover, the vastly developed second theme (the Humanity), the agitated character, and the merely repeated first theme (the voice of the Angel), both represent the restraints and the freedoms of this form. The two themes act as opposite sides, one that proclaims "no more Time" (the Angel), and another, of the multitude, caught in the midst of events (actions and consequences).

The opposition of the first and second theme could be understood as the opposition between the Mythos, on one side, and the Logos on the other. The Logos (humanity) does many tricks to avoid the 'terror', the 'punishment', that comes out of the "Last Judgment" announced by the Angel. Whether this is what Messiaen intended isn't clear, but the first theme is the 'traditional pair of strophes' (the "period"). The second theme is an unusual phrase-sentence and the interval between 'tonal centers' of themes is a triton (F# -C, a rotational interval at the center of the octave).

At last, the third theme of total symmetry is the 'neutral theme' of this movement (the 'observer'). This theme goes through seven repetitions of the 'sixteen notes row', symbolizing the world of harmony. Moreover, the theme is beyond Duality and does not get involved in actions and conflicts. It is related to the non-individualized 'Messenger' character of the Tragedy and is placed as a central section in the first half of the movement. With seven symmetric, rhythmic formulas (bars), it gets repeated and completes

<sup>5</sup> J. De Hoz, p. 51, p. 67.

the total of fourteen bars (till #39). The ‘melodic row’ does not coincide with seven formulas of its rhythmic configuration. The symmetry (in every bar-formula) surfacing in this ‘central’ theme brings the spatial property to the music.

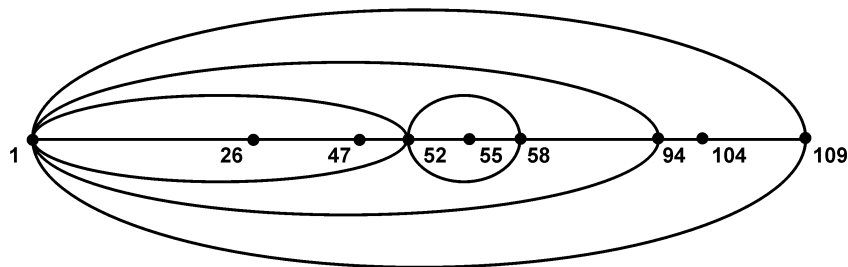
The impression of ending the piece in bar #47 (‘**quasi end**’) is not usual for the rondo form but very typical for the composition of Tragedy (Taplin Oliver). This dramatic accent announces that the audience, and the Chorus, both know about ‘the event from the past’ and the inevitability of the tragic end for the Antagonist. The Antagonist (humanity), on the contrary, doesn’t know (see the quarter rest in #47). The development reaches its central moment soon and leads to exhortations.

Among the remained, typical, sections from the form of Tragedy are the dramatic **Conclusion** -reconciliation- (Coda, in #94) and the **Epilogue** (in #103).

Again, the spatial property of the thematic material comes ‘on stage’ from bar #94. The Conclusion opens with the augmented first theme conquering the space of five octaves (till #103). This ‘space and value augmentation’ expands through the Earth and Heaven (and Hell). Therefore, all the instruments, playing ‘unison’ through the five octaves, touch ‘the bottom and the top’.

The augmentation has a special role in Messiaen’s composing. It does give the importance to what a thematic material or motives mean. What is often forgotten is that this “rule” of giving an ‘importance emphasis’ with augmentation comes from practices of ancient Greek poetry (Tragedy). Often forgotten and argued about is the fact that there is the evidence of ‘suggested ring composition’ in the form of Tragedy. The same concept or the “suggestion” of “ring composition” exists in the sixth movement, “Dance of Furry”. In short, there is the center of the movement in #55; the center of the first part is in # 26; the half way of reconciliation (#94), is “quasi end” in # 47; the last of four is the inner circle, around #55 (from #55 backwards to #52, and from #55 forward to # 58, where bars 52 and 58 are identical). The anticipated center in #51– 52 relates to the Epilogue in # 103.

#### *Dance of Furry – Ring Composition*



For being able to write such a great number of works Messiaen has often visited the past looking for 'old ways' of creating the form and structure. He proved himself in being a **structural pluralist** (at times he was looking in Greek poetry, other times in Indian Ragas or rhythm, also *Gamelan* and folk traditions, or the *Gregorian Chant*). He also succeeded in creating the identity of his music while maintaining the impossible goal of using concepts from divers traditions together, which alone required certain freedoms and certain restraints. His remarkable work is built on the philosophy of the "Charm of the Impossible" for which it took a life long journey of constant studying and writing music and not being demoralized by a heavy criticism of many contemporaries and even former students (Boulez).

Since this secret of form, in one of the well known pieces, shows how little we know about Messiaen as a composer, and as a scholar, a philosopher and a religious man, we can expect a new wave o research of his work in our time. The fact that he took so many ideas from an ancient (Greek) tradition, including not only concepts and not only specific elements, is yet another, far from explored, territory. Starting from 'one count' (indivisible value that Greeks used) to free the rhythm, and the 'added value' which is the same as "irrational value" of that old tradition, speaks enough about our lack of knowledge<sup>6</sup> of Messiaen's music. Furthermore, applying rules and principals from the art of Tragedy is much broader and deserves new research and considerations, especially in the concept of the "ring composition".

For any composer the idea of rondo form would never come close to what the form of the sixth movement presents, and to the far reaching transformation of form with the introduction of transitional developments (of the second theme), and "exhortations" and centers of symmetry in rotation and circles. How much can a small piece of music reveal depends on the master and, with Messiaen, we know we found one.

*This paper was presented in the lecture at the Faculty of Music, University of Toronto, on November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2004.*

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Theodore Reinach, 1926, *Greek Music*, Payot, Paris.

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МЕСИЈАНОВ КВАРТЕТ ЗА СВРШЕТАК ВРЕМЕНА,  
ТАЈНА ФОРМЕ – VI СТАВ

(Резиме)

Верује се да је све познато о Месијановим делима раног периода, како са аспекта структуре и форме, тако и са аспекта „страних“ елемената и стила. У делу *Квартет за свршетак времена*, често извођеном и детаљно проученом, нема шта ново да се открије јер је на многим језицима толико тога већ речено о њему. Постоји мала вероватноћа да је можда остао пропуштен неки детаљ или превид, пошто се ради о структуралном и стилском плурализму који карактерише овог композитора. Тако се још једно „читање“ његовог *Квартета* чинило скоро залудним, премда дефиниције форме нису биле потпуне и нису пружале више од „приближавања формалним оквирима“ традиционалне музике (најчешће форми ронда). Наравно, изузетак у оваквом приступу делу био би први став јер он сувише видљиво не подлеже упоредном ишчитавању и категоризацији.

У шестом ставу, *Dance of Furry*, композитор нас стално подсећа на „последњи суд“ из *Јовановог Ошкровења* и бира формални концепт који ће најбоље пренети идеју таквог догађаја кроз музику. Концепт форме је позајмљен од грчке трагедије, а музички материјал је третиран, у основи, као поетски материјал у трагедији (као три главна карактера-типа: „протагониста“, „антагониста“ и неутрални „тригониста“). Свакако, само главни и довољно препознатљиви елементи форме су узети из трагедије, више се не може бранити форма ронда (осим као ослабљена основа).

Једна од највише коментарисаних (исмеваних) ствари у делу је текстура. Сви инструменти свирају унисоно, као у трагедији у којој је први хор једногласан. Аугментација нотних вредности и тонског простора, од 94. такта, наглашава важност – значај момента у делу који представља помирење Антагонисте са судбином (вредносни акценат). Симетрија треће теме одговара лику „гласника-посредника“ између света реланости и Божјег света. Друга тема има неколико фаза развијања (“transitions”), односно степена трансформације пре него што започне „централни развој“ (48. такт).

Можда је најзначајнији аспект форме постојање „центра“ у деловима композиције, као и „центра“ целог става (55. такт). Круг или прстен (“ring”) у концепту форме познат је у грчкој трагедији, а онда и код Вагнера, па не треба да буде изненађење што га има у Месијановом делу. Само је мало необично што до сада није привукао ничију пажњу. Елементи структуре су добили објашњење, али не и концепт форме у овој познатој композицији, насталој усред Другог светског рата.

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