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# St Francis at the Opéra

Jann Pasler

Can the representation of religious emotion in an anti-dramatic form have interest for a 20th-century audience? can it work as the basis of an opera? These questions intrigued the Parisian public and the critics who attended the première of Olivier Messiaen's *Saint François d'Assise* on 28 November 1983. Since Rolf Liebermann's commission in 1975 this opera, the composer's first, has aroused great interest. Messiaen, who is now 75, has hinted that it might be his final work – the last testament of one who led the French avant-garde for much of this century.

For years Messiaen told interviewers he would not write an opera, that the form was practically dead, and that composers should seek a new formula, perhaps inspired by Balinese theatre or Japanese *no*. Yet earlier in his career he composed several song cycles, primarily to his own texts, and claimed the theatre as one of his most important childhood influences. Moreover, having written three works based on the Tristan legend (*Harawi*, *Turungalila* and *Cinq rechants*), he owes some debt to Wagner. The 'psychological, philosophical, cosmic, social and thaumaturgic resonances' that he claims to admire in Wagner's operas can be found in his own latest work. Like *Parsifal*, it focusses on medieval times and a saint's religious experiences. There is no story; the drama is internal. Messiaen describes it as 'scenes that show the different aspects of Grace in St Francis's soul'. Inspired by Franciscan writings of the period, Messiaen wrote most

of the text himself, although he did incorporate stanzas from St Francis's 'Cantique des créatures'. As in Wagner's operas, music and characters are symbols (including the only woman in the cast, the Angel). With St Francis representing Christ himself, and his inclusion of numerous birdsongs from around the world, Messiaen suggests a message to a world he finds fraught with difficulties, a message of peace, hope and harmony.

For the occasion the Paris Opéra was transformed. The abundance of instruments necessitated the construction of special platforms on each side of the stage. With 22 woodwind on the left and xylophone, xylorimba, marimba, vibraphone and glockenspiel on the right, in addition to four trumpets, three trombones, six horns and three tubas in the boxes overlooking the stage and two ondes martenot in adjacent boxes, the instruments and their execution became an integral part of the spectacle, as intended by the producer, Sandro Sequi. At the centre, raised slightly more than usual and dancing in his position above the strings and percussion in the pit, Seiji Ozawa brilliantly coordinated this symphony of 150.

On stage, an oriental paper wall replaced the traditional curtain. After a short but intensely rhythmic introduction on the xylophones, the middle of the wall opened to reveal a small cubicle where José Van Dam as St Francis and Philippe Duminy as Brother Léon stood in front of a romanescque church. Conceived to resemble

tableaux by Giotto and Cimabue that Messiaen had seen in Assisi, this portrait by the designer Giuseppe Chrisolini-Malatesta and the producer admirably respects his desire for realism in the visual design as it avoids too literal an interpretation of the work's sources. To achieve this the designers played with proportions, inserting the singers in cubes and placing the cubes within the larger theatrical context. The juxtaposition of the three cubes on the lower stage with the vast emptiness of the upper space represents the division between heaven and earth; the staircases used by the Angel vividly bridge this separation. From the use in the first tableau of a single cubicle to the Angel's animation of the entire space later in the opera, the set's evolving perspective parallels St Francis's spiritual progress. Such a visual conception, stunning in its coherence and rich in its diversity, contributes immeasurably to maintaining the audience's interest throughout the four-and-a-half hours of music.

Musically, the first tableau sets the tone for the other seven and presents the work's principal ideas. With the instrumental families placed apart and treated as distinct entities, Messiaen makes much use of spatial effects. The xylophones play the song of the skylark as an introduction and as interludes; the woodwind regularly interject their dry, rather aggressive chords; and the strings maintain a lyrical theme played in unison, sometimes punctuated by light percussion. These groups often interrupt the singers, either to punctuate their music or to underline their text through the use of particular musical themes. While the themes for joy, decision and solemnity are not treated as leitmotifs, they recur for specific semantic reasons. Others are associated with certain characters, such as the strings, heard each time St Francis is on stage. Messiaen, in fact, uses a specific sonorous vocabulary (including birdsong) for each character. As elsewhere in his music, these themes appear most often as grand unisons.

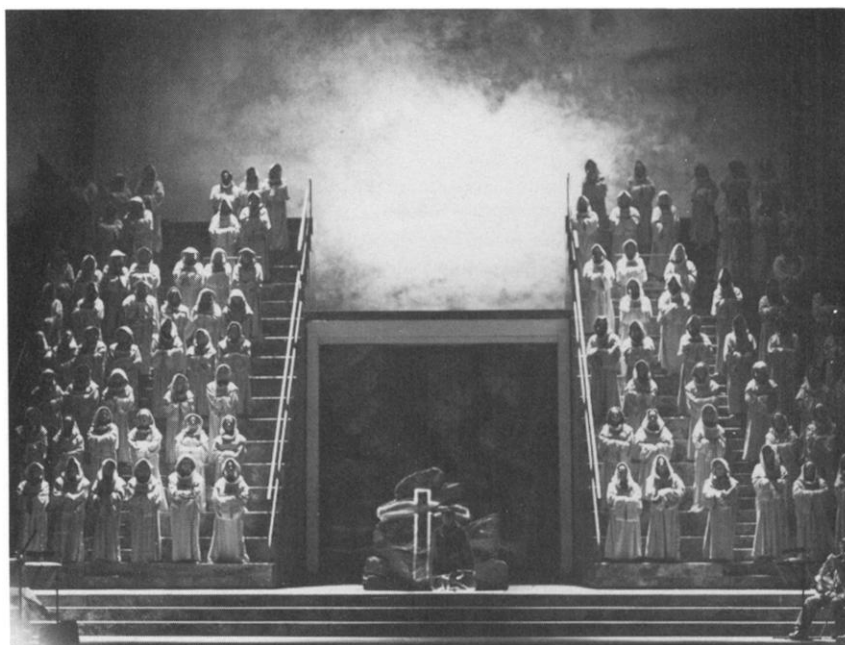
The structure of the eight tableaux is largely articulated by juxtapositions, implicit in the text and reinforced by the staging. Because the singers are often unaccompanied and their declamation uncomplicated, the text is easy to follow. In the first



*St Francis (José Van Dam) and Brother Léon (Philippe Duminy) in Tableau 1*

tableau Brother Léon's song, 'J'ai peur', recurs three times in alternation with St Francis's discussion of 'la joie parfaite', dividing the scene into clearly audible parts. The second tableau continues this pattern of juxtapositions. Two choirs of monks in turn chant the almost static monody of their morning Office, also alternating with St Francis who sings four stanzas of his 'Cantique des créatures' in praise of the four elements; similarly, the voices alternate with instrumental themes from the first tableau and the almost inaudible low register of the ondes martenot coupled with the double bassoon, adding a juxtaposition of *fortissimo* and *pianissimo*. In the third tableau, the blessed comes in contact with the unfortunate – St Francis meets a leper. Here, as in the fourth tableau, the two cubicles on stage and the stark juxtapositions in the music draw attention to the various characters' contrasting lives. Harsh dissonances and the agitated rhythm associated with the leper intermingle with the wind motif from the previous tableaux and St Francis's solemn theme in the strings. When the Angel, appearing as a traveller, knocks on the monastery door that divides the two cubicles in the next scene, the coordination between musical and visual juxtapositions becomes explicit and exact.

Tableaux five and six are the central scenes, in which the mysterious, the marvellous and the magical begin to play important roles. After exploiting the human aspects of his drama, the opposition and reconciliation of man with his fellow men, Messiaen places human existence in confrontation with the divine and then the animal. (The Angel's magnificent multi-coloured wings suggest a liaison between divine and animal.) Even in the Angel's brief appearances before the leper's cure and in disguise as a traveller, the divine is associated with calm, slow and deliberate declamation, somewhat like the monks' chant but now richly harmonized by the orchestra. (St Francis uses such a technique in his recurring words 'la joie parfaite' and 'mon Seigneur'.) The Angel is announced each time by glissandos of string harmonics that suggest something magical, shrill notes in the oboe and clarinet (as in *no*) that evoke something exotic, and a bird-song specifically associated with her in the piccolos and xylophones. When she takes up her viol in the fifth scene the audience



is blessed with a moment of pure beauty not unlike that of the Good Friday scene in *Parsifal*. 'The music of the invisible' could not have been more perfectly orchestrated, played as it is in the highest register of the ondes martenot, an electric instrument separated from the others both physically and in nature.

While the fifth tableau centres on the idea of self-containment and unity – a solo voice and a solo instrument often repeating the same pitch – the sixth opens to the world of boundless multiplicity that borders on chaos, the world of nature and the birds who inhabit it. For this scene Messiaen envisaged a 'constant movement of blue, red, violet, orange, green, purple and gold', for which he conceived musical equivalents. The birds' concert in response to St Francis's sermon is fascinating, not however because of the dubious synaesthesia intended between the numerous coloured discs projected on stage and the many timbres in the music but rather because here the soloists themselves are the spectacle. One can both see and hear the birdsongs gradually played one after another, at first as a thinly textured counterpoint in the introduction and later superimposed in such numbers and moving in so many independent tempos that it is difficult to single out any one of them. Sections of the fifth and sixth tableaux could easily be extracted for concert performance.

In the last two scenes, the shortest, the chorus dominates. Standing on the narrow steps used by the Angel to descend from heaven, the 150 voices symbolize that of

Christ; a red cross projected on the rocks suggests his presence. As St Francis prays to relive Christ's Passion, the voices enter into the dialogue with him; when the wounds are given to him, five red laser beams pierce the dark theatre, aimed at his hands and feet. St Francis approaches death in the last tableau, singing 'Music and Poetry have led me to You: by image, by symbol . . . Lord illuminate me with your Presence, deliver me'. Everyone reappears to pay their tribute, the leper now in the glorious red robe he received when he was cured, even the Angel, who provides the only relief from the rather heavy, static ambience. The music of these scenes recalls what has passed. Entire sections are reiterated – Brother Léon's 'J'ai peur', the monks' chant alternating with the low ondes martenot and double bassoon, the last stanzas of St Francis's 'Cantique' from the second tableau as well as other stanzas from the fifth, the birdsongs and themes that accompanied each character (each receives an 'adieu') and the joy theme that follows the leper's cure.

*Saint François d'Assise* has a clear structure and a coherent musical language, thanks to the continual recurrence of its themes and ideas. But the inordinate amount of repetition grows tiresome. True, the themes sometimes move from one set of instruments to another (most effectively, their change of register on the appearance of the Angel). But their essence remains unchanged. In an opera of such a length, more variety not just of timbre but of musical substance would have been

welcome.

One can understand that Messiaen chose to repeat his themes frequently because they are intimately connected with the central ideas of his drama. Yet while the return of ideas may be called for in the scenario or the characters' psychological development, the return of the associated themes does not always serve a musical purpose, nor is there always an attempt to integrate these themes (hence the style of juxtaposition). Given the importance of their semantic role, one wonders if the work can be fully appreciated without knowing what they signify, as in Wagner.

Another problem, consequent on the frequent repetitions, is the overwhelming predominance of monody. The unaccompanied recitative allows for clear enunciation of the text and the playing of themes in unison on one family of instruments makes them immediately recognizable when they return. But Messiaen's harmonization of these lines is rare, and many are thus somewhat lacking in a dimension. Still

rarer is the composer's use of counterpoint, perhaps because his themes – self-contained like the cubes on stage – are more suited to juxtaposition than to interplay. For the most part, Messiaen reserves the superimposition of his themes for special moments, the end of scenes and, in particular, the bird concert. But such moments are infrequent. Because the instruments are spatially separated, problems of coordination can arise in the performance of the monodies; José Van Dam, for example, had difficulty when the *ondes martenot* doubled his line.

As with *Parsifal*, the length is an issue. Given the nature of the subject, a composer may plausibly take over four hours to complete his thought; the point is to depict religious emotion, and long duration characterizes the religious experience. However, Messiaen's opera not only *is* long but also *seems* long because the phrases are short and the continuity of the vocal line is constantly interrupted by the interjection of instrumental themes. Without the

scenario, it is not clear on what basis the continuity of the work would depend.

The ultimate question is whether Messiaen's opera is an ideal synthesis of the sources that have inspired him and the techniques he has invented, or whether it is a mere catalogue. Along with the Catholicism and the birdsong, elements from Balinese theatre and Japanese *no* are indeed there, but do not seem to contribute sufficient influence for the work to constitute any 'new formula' for the genre. It is certain that *Saint François d'Assise* has many elements in common with *Parsifal*, but whether it will be judged a 20th-century equivalent remains to be seen.

As for the performance, Messiaen must have been pleased. The playing of the instrumentalists was energetic and impeccable. With his rich, warm voice, José Van Dam transformed the simple discourse of St Francis into a convincing portrait of a man driven by his faith. The other monks and the chorus provided good, strong dialogues with him.

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## Book Reviews

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### The Romantic North

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**Scotland in Music** by Roger Fiske  
Cambridge UP (Cambridge, 1983); 234pp.;  
£17.50

When in 1764 Boswell mentioned to Voltaire his plan to visit the Hebrides with Dr Johnson, the alarmed sage 'looked at me, as if I had talked of going to the North Pole', pretending fear that he might be required to accompany these mad-cap adventurers. A couple of generations later, Scotland was virtually part of the Grand Tour, and no surprise was occasioned by Mendelssohn writing a Scottish as well as an Italian symphony. The transformation was principally due to 'Ossian' and Scott, with musicians following eagerly in their wake; but many other factors went into the Romanticization of Scotland, or rather the Scotlandization of Romanticism.

Dr Fiske discusses them with knowledge and enthusiasm in this agreeably discursive book. He studies in detail the 'Scotch song' as it infiltrated London, identifying characteristic features such

as a tendency to slip down a tone in the second strain (deriving, he suggests, from the bagpipe's inability to play a leading-note) and the insouciance about ending on the tonic which bothered orthodox musicians. He examines the craze for James Macpherson's Ossian which (as Matthew Arnold said) took 'a vein of piercing regret and passion' through Europe, despite Johnson's robust antagonism affecting even Goethe and Napoleon. A small lance is broken for the much-scorned Macpherson, with whom Dr Fiske credits certain gifts since the results were so impressive. But so potent a myth, as German Romantics led by Herder fastened upon the primitive northern Homer their theories demanded, had little to do with real quality (as anyone who nowadays attempts to read Ossian must surely agree). For all the historical interest in Le Sueur's *Ossian* and Méhul's *Uthal* (a work which, *pace* Dr Fiske, never lives up to the promise of its overture), the only Ossian surviving in the opera house is, ironically, 'Pourquoi me réveiller' in Massenet's *Werther*.

Dr Fiske is in his element in his chapter on Scott, who never pretended an interest in music despite some amiable descriptions in the novels

(such as the domestic music-making in *Guy Mannering*, with Julia 'playing Scarlatti with great brilliancy'). Though he does not try to match the coverage of Jerome Mitchell's *The Walter Scott Operas*, he has some useful comments on the process of translating Scott into music (especially in Schubert) and gives a readable survey of the most striking instances. His list of Scott operas, prepared for *The New Grove*, is incomplete, but I throw this stone from a glass house as mine in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Opera* is also incomplete: even Dr Mitchell has found some 20 more since his book was published.

Dr Fiske's knowledge of Scotland, from Galloway to the Hebrides, contributes some local information here, as it does when he sets off in the steps of Mendelssohn. He has even scrambled over rocks to discover the viewpoints from which some of the drawings were made. However, in his discussion of the *Hebrides* overture and its versions, either he or the publisher has decided against reproducing *Ein Blick auf die Hebriden und Morven* on the grounds that many of Mendelssohn's sketches are too delicate for reproduction. This one, now in the Bodleian,