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¹vpb2@psu.edu**Birdsong in Olivier Messiaen's Opera, *Saint François d'Assise*****ABSTRACT**

This paper examines Messiaen's use of birdsong in *Saint François d'Assise*. Drawing from tome V of the *Traité de rythme*, it considers the physical and musical characteristics of the opera's major avian protagonists, namely: 1) skylarks I and II (*alouette des champs*); 2) blackcap (*capinera* or *fauvette à tête noire*); 3) fan-tailed gerygone (*gerygone* or *fauvette à ventre jaune*); 4) blackbird (*merle noir*); 5) garden warbler (*fauvette des jardins*); and 6) tawny owl (*chouette hulotte*). The paper then analyzes selected passages of music linked with these birds from referential perspectives, showing how they typify the broad spectrum of Messiaen's harmonic vocabulary. It likewise assesses how birdsong links the theological themes associated with Saint Francis's spiritual journey at deeper levels of structure through instrumental color. The songs of the skylarks I and II lead the way in this regard, as their respective xylo and woodwind timbres function as referential timbres, assuming priority over focal pitch classes, chords, or even scale collections.

1. INTRODUCTION

In a conversation with Claude Samuel in 1986 about *Saint François d'Assise*, Olivier Messiaen declared that *Le prêche aux oiseaux*, scene 6, was his 'greatest success in the bird-song style', adding that the scene featured his 'best bird tutti' (Samuel 1994, 239).¹ He based the scene on Saint Francis's sermon to the birds, as described in the sixteenth chapter of the *Fioretti* (Hopcke and Schwartz 2006, 56–58). But this connection between composer and saint goes beyond a musical rendering of a sermon to the birds in an opera; rather, it speaks to an important motivation of Messiaen regarding his choice of Saint Francis as the subject for his magnum opus.² He considered Francis — a bit irreverently I suppose — as a colleague. As a composer and ornithologist, Messiaen admired the saint for his love of nature, particularly in relation to how birds reflect God's providence. Not surprisingly, birdsong plays a significant role in the theology of *Saint François*, as well as in its musical language and structural designs.

This essay explores how Messiaen uses birdsong in *Saint François d'Assise*. Using tome V of the *Traité de rythme* (Messiaen 1994–2002) as a springboard, it considers the

physical and musical characteristics of the opera's major avian protagonists, as well as how their songs underscore its theological symbolism.³ In addition to giving a general indication as to how they are employed in the opera, this essay analyzes the pitch components of these birdsongs from referential perspectives, in order to better understand how Messiaen structures these pitch materials. It concludes by assessing how birdsong links the theological themes associated with Saint Francis's spiritual journey at deeper levels of structure through instrumental color. The songs of the skylarks I and II lead the way in this regard, as their respective xylo and woodwind timbres function as referential timbres, assuming priority over focal pitch classes, chords, or even scale collections. These timbres intensify the dramatic meaning of *Saint François* by reinforcing its theological themes at critical junctures along Francis's spiritual path.

2. MUSICAL STYLE AND RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM IN THE PRIMARY BIRDSONGS OF *SAINT FRANÇOIS D'ASSISE***2.1 Skylark**

We begin our analysis of the eclectic collection of birdsong employed in *Saint François d'Assise* by considering the two skylarks that appear prominently throughout the work. In the *Traité de rythme*, Messiaen remarks that although the skylark is found throughout Europe, he regards it as a French bird (the following discussion is derived from the *Traité de rythme* vol. 5/1, 244–304). This avian virtuoso sings while in flight. When the female skylark is hidden in a grass nest on the ground, the male ascends almost vertically from this unseen location, rising to an altitude of about 150 meters. While hovering high in the sky and barely visible, the bird sings for a long time, gushing out — in Messiaen's words — a 'torrent of melody', a veritable 'masterpiece of joy'. The skylark will depart from its song and remain silent for a few seconds, as if suspended between heaven and earth. It then plummets to the ground. Throughout all phases of its flight, the bird makes music. Finally, Messiaen regards the skylark's melodic line as shaped by a high-pitched dominant note B, reminiscent of the dominant notes found in plainchant. In his view, this 'acute dominant'

¹ This essay is based on 'Birdsong in *Saint François d'Assise*', which forms chapter 6 of my forthcoming book entitled *Olivier Messiaen's Opera, Saint François d'Assise*, to be published by Indiana University Press in 2019. I want to thank Indiana University Press for granting me permission to publish this modified version of chapter 6 in these online proceedings.

² Another motivation for Messiaen choosing Saint Francis as the subject for his opera was his desire to avoid the pitfalls of writing one on the Passion or Resurrection of Christ (Samuel 1994, 209–10). He believed that he was unworthy of attempting such a project due to its sacred subject matter, and that such a topic could 'lapse into either the ridiculous or the inappropriate'. Accordingly, Messiaen turned to Saint Francis as a dramatic subject because he felt that the friar was the only human being who most closely resembled Christ: in addition to his personal holiness, Francis suffered greatly from the stigmata he received.

³ The birds to be covered in this essay are the following: 1) skylarks I and II (*alouette des champs*); 2) blackcap (*capinera* or *fauvette à tête noire*); 3) fan-tailed gerygone (*gerygone* or *fauvette à ventre jaune*); 4) blackbird (*merle noir*); 5) garden warbler (*fauvette des jardins*); and 6) tawny owl (*chouette hulotte*). This essay will not consider what I view as the opera's more minor birds: 1) blue rock thrush (*merle bleu*); 2) song thrush (*grive musicienne*); 3) New Caledonian friarbird (*philemon* or *oiseau-moine*); 4) kestrel (*gheppio* or *faucon crécerelle*); 5) nightingale (*rossignol*); 6) turtle dove (*tourterelle*); 7) wren (*troglo-dyte*); 8) robin (*rouge-gorge*); and 9) superb lyrebird (*oiseau-lyre superbe*).

(*dominante aiguë*) suggests that the bird is trying to poke a hole in the sky.

The evocative imagery associated with the skylark's spectacular rise from the ground, followed by its high-altitude song, has endeared the bird to poets and writers. In the *Traité* (Messiaen 1994–2002, vol. 5/1, 254–56), Messiaen cites some of these authors — such as his mother Cécile Sauvage, William Blake (1757–1827), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822), and Paul Claudel (1868–1955) — and supplies excerpts from their works.⁴ Driving these references, however, is his reading of literature from religious perspectives, with Shelley's 'To a Skylark' (1820) and Claudel's modern mystery play *L'annonce faite à Marie* (1912) as most consequential in relation to *Saint François d'Assise*.⁵

The religious symbolism of Shelley's avian ode and Claudel's play strongly suggests that of all the avian protagonists in *Saint François*, the skylark holds a preeminent position when it comes to expressing the opera's theology. Shelley's use of synesthetic imagery to link the bird's music to the luminosity of the planet Venus evokes connections with Pauline notions of the resurrected body. Moreover, Claudel's likening of the skylark to a seraph reinforces the view that birds evoke angels in Messiaen's compositional aesthetics. As will be argued, it is no surprise, then, that the skylarks I and II should appear often and at significant junctures in *Saint François*.

In his poem 'To a Skylark', Shelley addresses a soaring, avian songster that is barely noticeable in the deep-blue sky. The skylark is not a bird but a blithe, happy spirit that radiates divine beauty. Its joyous song pours forth from high above, resounding in both the heavens and on earth. Through a series of elusive but colorful similes in stanzas 8–11, Shelley compares the skylark to a poet creating verse, a highborn maiden soothing her lovelorn soul with music, an unseen glowworm diffusing its light on the flowers and grass, and the wind blowing a rose's sweet scent. Such synesthetic imagery would have obviously appealed to Messiaen. But the crux of the poem is the Venus complex of stanzas 4 and 5. A term coined by Glenn O'Malley, the Venus complex describes Shelley's literary ideas about the planet in relation to its brightness and spherical music.⁶ These ideas have significant ramifications for his skylark.

Shelley likens the nearly invisible skylark to the planet Venus in stanza 4, equating the bird's radiant song synesthetically to the sphere's brilliance as the Morning Star: 'Like a star of Heaven/In the broad day-light/Thou art unseen, but yet I

hear thy shrill delight' (the following discussion about the skylark's symbolic association with Venus is indebted to O'Malley 1964, 29–30, 70–75, 84 and 106). At dawn, the Morning Star, or as it is also known, Lucifer, gradually disappears. Shelley still feels its continued presence, however, through the spherical music it evokes. Since it is barely visible in the sky, the skylark is also like Lucifer, hiding during the day but still making its presence known to Shelley through the spherical music it makes 'from Heaven, or near it' (stanza 1). This comparison suggests that the continued presence of the skylark via its song resembles that of the hidden Morning Star during daylight hours.

Shelley's association of the skylark's song with the planetary brilliance of Venus is redolent of the resurrection metaphor discussed in 1 Corinthians 15: 40–42, which is emphasized in the theology of *Saint François d'Assise*. In the fifteenth chapter of that epistle, Saint Paul offers the most comprehensive discourse on the Resurrection of Christ in the entire New Testament. After noting its central significance to believers, the consequences for those that deny it, and the hope for those that embrace it, the Apostle to the Gentiles explores the nature of the resurrected body assumed by believers. He states in verses 40–42 that, 'Then there are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies; the heavenly have a splendour of their own, and the earthly a different splendour. The sun has its own splendour, the moon another splendour, and the stars yet another splendour; and the stars differ among themselves in splendour. It is the same too with the resurrection of the dead' (*New Jerusalem Bible* 1985). With these comparisons, Saint Paul is instructing Christians in Corinth that their present bodies will be different and ultimately resplendent after they are resurrected.

In two pivotal scenes of *Saint François*, Messiaen underscores Saint Paul's discourse on the nature of the resurrected body from 1 Corinthians 15: 40–42. *L'ange musicien*, scene 5, centers around the Angel playing its viol for Saint Francis in order to give the friar an indication of the celestial joy that he will experience as a resurrected believer. Before that encounter, the friar sings verses 41 and 42 of 1 Corinthians 15 ('There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon'... [Autre est l'éclat du soleil, autre l'éclat de la lune...]), which echo the Brother Sun and Sister Moon stanzas (II and III) from his *Cantique des créatures* that he sang at the beginning of the scene. Francis adds that all the glories of which Saint Paul speaks delight him, but even more so the joy of the blessed and the bliss of eternal contemplation. *La mort et la nouvelle vie*, scene 8, focuses on Francis's death and resurrection, a new life that the chorus celebrates in a chorale by singing verses 40–42 from 1 Corinthians 15 at the end of the opera.

Although there is no evidence that Messiaen was aware of Shelley's Venus complex in connection with 'To a Skylark', this synesthetic metaphor is in accord with the composer's idea of a perpetual bedazzlement, as stated in the *Lecture at Notre-Dame*, where one 'sees the music' and 'hears the light' (Messiaen 2001, 15–16). Accordingly, it can help us to interpret how the two skylarks that sing throughout *Saint François* enhance its theological message about the Christian afterlife.⁷

⁴ In these instances, Messiaen cites passages from: 1) 'Le Vallon' (1913) by Sauvage, a poem that she dedicated to Jean de Gourmont, with whom she was in love; 2) 'Milton' (1804) by William Blake, in a translation by Messiaen's father Pierre (1955, 'Oiseaux et fleurs', 190–93, lines 2–10); 3) 'To a Skylark' (1820) by Shelley, in a translation by Pierre Messiaen (1955, 'à une alouette', 742–49, lines 1–10, 31–35, 56–60 and 96–105); and 4) *L'annonce faite à Marie* (1912/1940) by Claudel.

⁵ Given that Claudel was a great Catholic playwright and poet, Messiaen's reading of *L'annonce faite à Marie* was probably less problematic from religious perspectives than Shelley's 'To a Skylark'.

⁶ Writing as if Ptolemaic and Pythagorean conceptions of the universe were plausible, Shelley regarded the Earth as the center of the universe. He restored Venus to its position as the third sphere in a series of crystalline heavens ensphering the Earth. He proposes, furthermore, that Venus not only emits a Pythagorean music of the spheres but also one that makes the planet's light synesthetically audible, and, conversely, its ethereal harmony luminous. See O'Malley 1964, 27–33, 58–61.

⁷ In the *Traité de rythme* (Messiaen 1994–2002, vol. 5/1, 255–56), Messiaen does not cite stanzas 4–5 (lines 16–25), nor 8–11 (36–55), of 'To a Skylark' that describe the bird and its song in synesthetic terms. Instead, given that the ode is rather long, he lists only what he considers to be its

In scene 1, *La croix*, which focuses on the Cross of Christ, skylarks I and II synesthetically evoke the Morning Star through their music. But these nearly invisible birds may also be suggesting Christ himself, the self-described ‘bright Morning Star’ of Revelation 2:28, who is the focus of scene 1 via the Cross. Not only symbolic of Christ’s suffering and death, without which the Resurrection would be impossible, the Cross of Christ is also the source of ‘perfect joy’ for Saint Francis and Brother Leo. Skylarks I and II return in *Le prêche aux oiseaux*, bringing a divine light that alludes to the presence of God’s providence, exemplified by Saint Francis quoting Matthew 6:26 at the scene’s end. Finally, these blithe songsters participate in the closing Resurrection chorale in *La mort et la nouvelle vie*. The Morning Star they educe celebrates the resurrection of Saint Francis and that of all believers, particularly the new radiant bodies that they possess, since stars differ from other stars in splendor. But it also brings to mind the ‘joy and clarity of the resurrected body’, depicted in the seventh movement of Messiaen’s *Les corps glorieux* and expressed by its epigraph from Matthew 13:43: ‘the upright will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father’ (*New Jerusalem Bible* 1985).

In *L’annonce faite à Marie*, one of his most emblematic works, Paul Claudel frames his admiration of the skylark within a Biblical context. The protagonist Violaine compares the bird to a Seraph when she exclaims to Pierre de Craon:

It is the lark, alleluia! The lark of the Christian earth, alleluia, alleluia! Do you hear it cry four times in a row: hi! hi! hi! hi! higher, higher! Do you see it, the little intense cross, with its wings extended, like the seraphim, who have only wings but no feet, and a piercing voice before the throne of God? (Messiaen 1994–2002, vol. 5/1, 256; see also Claudel 1940, 27–28.)

In Christian thought, the Seraphim are angelic beings that are thought to occupy the highest rank in heaven (see Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 160–66; Rorem 1993, 62–65). They appear around the celestial throne in a double choir, rendering thunderous praise to the Almighty.

In the passage in question, Claudel alludes to the prophet Isaiah’s vision of heaven (Isaiah 6: 1–6) in which God called him to be a prophet. Situated in a heavenly court, Isaiah beheld God sitting on His Throne, with Seraphim standing above Him, with one Seraph calling out to another in loud praise of God. Isaiah describes a Seraph as having six wings, with two covering its face, two covering its feet, and the remaining two enabling it to fly. When Isaiah beheld the Seraphim worshipping God, he became cognizant of his sinfulness, in contrast to the holiness of God that the Seraphim were celebrating. As a result, Isaiah cries out in fear. Then a Seraph flew to Isaiah with a burning coal in its hand that it took from the altar in order to touch the prophet’s lips, cleansing him with celestial fire.

Analogously, in *La croix*, the songs of the two ubiquitous skylarks seemingly fly down from heaven in order to touch both Brother Leo and Saint Francis, cleansing them symbolically through the ‘perfect joy’ of the Cross that Francis encourages his followers to embrace. According to Brothers Leo and Angelo, while on Mount La Verna and prior to his receiving the stigmata, Saint Francis had a vision of a Seraph,

most beautiful and ornithological passages (stanzas 1–2 [1–10], 7 [31–35], 12 [56–60], 20–21 [96–105]), which may ultimately be intended for consumption by more general audiences.

which, according to Angelo, assumed the form of Jesus Christ crucified (House 2001, 258). And similar to Isaiah 6:2, this angelic being had six wings, two wings that met above its head, two covering the rest of its body to its feet, and two spread as if in flight.

2.2 Blackcap

In the *Traité*, Messiaen states that the blackcap earns its name in different languages due to the neat black cap it sports on its head, which males only possess (the following discussion is derived from the *Traité de rythme*, Messiaen 1994–2002, vol. 5/1, 314–69). In addition to this distinctive covering, the sides to the bird’s head are gray ash, its coat grayish-brown, and its throat and underparts a whitish color. As for its habitat, the blackcap is commonly found in Europe, practically everywhere in France. Like the garden warbler, it can be found in undergrowth, coppice, and bushes, although it does frequent trees.

According to the composer, the blackcap is a small, energetic, and jubilant bird. Although the blackcap does not match the garden warbler in virtuosity, its music is still imaginative. Its song is generally divided into two parts, the first characterized by a chirping, which is full of appealing patterns that are only audible when the bird is in close proximity, and the second by a strong refrain distinguished by a flushed, limpid timbre, making it easy to identify. More critically, Messiaen often situates the blackcap’s music within the key of A major. In light of this tonal context, both the chirping and the refrain contain B-flats, which changes the color of the bird’s song.

The blackcap is a typical bird of Umbria and the hermitage of the Carceri in Assisi, Italy where Saint Francis and his companions lived. While in Assisi in early June 1976, Messiaen notated a number of blackcap songs in a birdsong notebook, in addition to compiling assorted materials while in La Verna and Florence (Messiaen 1976). As a probable consequence of the bird’s association with the Carceri, he connected the blackcap with Francis throughout *Saint François*, more likely than not to give the work a sense of authenticity. Through its song, the blackcap is present when Saint Francis is on stage, and in scene 6 the songster interrupts the Sermon to the Birds from time to time to punctuate the discourse’s phrases.

2.3 Fan-Tailed Gerygone

The fan-tailed gerygone is a bird from the Isle of Pines, New Caledonia (the following discussion is derived from the *Traité de rythme*, Messiaen 1994–2002, vol. 5/2, 287–301). Physically, it is a small bird, reaching ten centimeters in length. Its head and coat are olive-gray; throat and chest, grayish-white; belly, yellow; beak, black; and tail marked with white. The bird also has a white circle around its eyes. Last but not least, the gerygone inhabits the treetops of the island’s forests and gardens.

According to Messiaen, the gerygone is a virtuoso of staccato notes, making the best flutists jealous, since it can easily sing quickly moving notes during long stanzas. Taken as a whole, great musical invention characterizes the bird’s song. Indeed, while notating a gerygone on the Isle of Pines on September 30, 1975, around 6 p.m., Messiaen remarked that the bird sang two extraordinary solos, which were character-

ized by an incessant staccato and an exquisite timbre comprised of the sounds of a piccolo mixed with crotales.

Messiaen's decision to use the gerygone in *Saint François* is driven — in my estimation — by two theological considerations, one of which is alluded to in the opera's libretto. First, the bird's song, set in a high, ethereal C₇ octave register, fittingly suggests the presence of the Angel, a celestial being that comes from a realm beyond time and space. The gerygone evokes this atemporal realm through its breaking of 'time with her staccato'.⁸ Second, the gerygone is part of a cohort of birds from the Isle of Pines that Messiaen included in scene 6, *Le prêche aux oiseaux*, to underscore the miraculous nature of Saint Francis's dream of the island, which he could not have possibly visited.⁹ As indicated in a birdsong notebook compiled while he was there in 1975, Messiaen wanted to include the birds and scenery of the Isle of Pines in *Le prêche aux oiseaux* in order to underscore Psalm 97:1 'that the islands applaud!' ('que les îles applaudissent!'), see Messiaen 1975, 33). After announcing his dream and describing the colorful scenery of the Isle of Pines to Brother Masseo, Saint Francis introduces and discusses four birds from that island which he experienced in the dream, one of which is the gerygone.

2.4 Blackbird

In the *Traité de rythme*, Messiaen begins his examination of the blackbird by noting (rather obviously) how it is completely black with a yellow beak (the following discussion is derived from the *Traité de rythme*, Messiaen 1994–2002, vol. 5/1, 483–90). Although he classifies this avian songster as a bird of the woods, he acknowledges that it is found practically everywhere in France, because of its gradual migration from the countryside to urban areas. The blackbird sings in the morning, late afternoon, and at dusk, with its most beautiful melodies occurring very early on in the morning. More significantly, Messiaen regards the bird as unique among others in that, while some species feature typical themes that all in that species sing, each individual blackbird has its own collection of themes, while retaining a style and aesthetic common to others in its family.

Messiaen characterizes the blackbird anthropomorphically as a perfectionist, continually attempting to refine its motives while never discarding what it has found. He states that the bird has accumulated a large repertory of themes and varies them in ingenious ways, allowing it to sing stanza after stanza without repeating itself. Possessing a medium register, and a colorful, joyful tone, the blackbird executes melodies that evoke a variety of sentiments, from mockery, irony, gaiety, calm, to solemnity. Messiaen even mentions that in its song, one can find the major mode and even a hypermajor one (that is, C major with an added F-sharp), at times mixed with a little chromaticism.

Since Messiaen did not associate any theological imagery with the blackbird — however general — in the *Traité* or other writings that could be related to Saint Francis's spiritual journey, we must infer them from his compositional practice. As with the garden warbler to be discussed below, the music of the blackbird may reflect glimpses of the beyond, that is, a sonic world that humans cannot control, suggesting a transcendental experience of time bordering on eternity. As exemplified in *Les laudes*, scene 2, for instance, the blackbird provides such glimpses in response to Saint Francis's stanzas from his *Cantiques des créatures* and the friars' *Louanges avant l'Office*. Clearly, Messiaen admired the bird's virtuosity, as evidenced not only by his writings but also the bird's frequent appearances in his music and birdsong notebooks in the guise of numerous transcriptions. But this feathered protagonist's virtuosity has to take a backseat to the numinous qualities evoked by its music.

2.5 Garden Warbler

Messiaen offers a long commentary about the garden warbler in the *Traité* (Messiaen 1994–2002, vol. 5/1, 370–418) (which includes analyses of excerpts from *La fauvette des jardins*, 1970, and the third cadenza from *Un vitrail et des oiseaux*, 1987). He notes that the garden warbler does not frequent actual gardens; rather, it is rarely seen, as it stands hidden in thick undergrowth. It is found throughout France, especially in the southeastern Dauphiné where it can live in altitudes of up to 1,000 meters.¹⁰ On the other hand, the garden warbler is not found on the Mediterranean coast nor in the eastern Pyrenees. Finally, although it sings before sunrise and sunset, the bird often sings during the day, producing great solos.

For Messiaen, the garden warbler is a magnificent and virtuosic songster, possessing a melodic invention unparalleled in the abundance of its arabesques. The bird's solos are very long because it sings for a few minutes and then pauses and begins again, repeating this two-pronged strategy for more than thirty minutes. Throughout its solos the garden warbler produces a seemingly never-ending series of musical ideas that contain no particular motives or themes, resulting in solos that sound different each time. Since these ideas — often a mixture of repeated notes and descending arpeggios, plus the inclusion of disjointed lower embroideries — flow in such a uniform fashion at a mezzo forte dynamic, unfolding in equal segments with great power and volubility, the bird's song is clearly recognizable, even from a distance.

As reflected by the preface to *La fauvette des jardins* (1970), Messiaen regarded the garden warbler as capable of suspending time through its immense song, a music that is replete with rapid virtuosic twitterings and a regularly evolving discourse (Messiaen 1972). In other words, when it sings, the garden warbler seems to make time stand still. Given Messiaen's preoccupation with exploring time as one way to understand eternity, I consider this music as more than just a rich temporal

⁸ This observation is stated in a response to Brother Masseo during his ornithology lesson in *Le prêche aux oiseaux* (p. 167, R66:5–8).

⁹ Messiaen modelled Saint Francis's dream in scene 6 on the Isle of Pines, which lies southeast of New Caledonia's main island, the Grand Terre. Dubbed 'the closest island to Paradise', the smaller Isle of Pines forms an exclamation point with the longer and narrow Grand Terre, all of which Saint Francis points out when he discusses his dream with Brother Masseo.

¹⁰ Messiaen jotted down numerous garden warbler songs outside of his summer home in Petichet (located in the Dauphiné), as evidenced by the bird's conspicuous presence in his birdsong cahiers, to which I can testify, based on my archival study of primary source documents related to Messiaen at the Département de la Musique, Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF). Considering its presence in his avian notebooks and in the environs around his summer home, the composer was surely fond of this bird.

experience, as some have suggested (Chadwick 2013). For me, the garden warbler's song evokes the beyond, as if it were a 'music of the invisible' delivered by an angel. And that happens near the end of *Les laudes* as the bird's singing evokes divine approval when Saint Francis prays for help to overcome his fear of lepers in order to meet and demonstrate Christ-like love for someone. Symbolized by a kiss, this compassionate act will result in the friar achieving his sanctity.

2.6 Tawny Owl

Messiaen has long regarded the tawny owl as a mysterious, supernatural bird with a cry that has always frightened him (the following discussion is derived from the *Traité de rythme*, Messiaen 1994–2002, vol. 5/1, 229–31). He claims to have heard it regularly around 2:00 AM in the woods of Orgeval, of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, and on the road from Petichet to Cholonge (Isère). Messiaen describes the owl's cry in histrionic terms, declaring it to be lugubrious and painful, at times vague and disturbing, and even capable of sounding like a cry of a woman or child being murdered. Musically, the cry consists of two parts (see Messiaen 1994–2002, vol. 5/1, 229). It begins with a loud, piercing, up-and-down minor-third shriek, followed by a chant-like anacrusis comprised of three notes — which sounds dry, like a Bartókian pizzicato — that culminates with an accented C₆. Then a chromatic descent ensues with a tremulous quality, reminiscent of the chromatic range of an Ondes Martenot.

Given all of these factors, it is hardly surprising that Messiaen employs the tawny owl's cry at the beginning of scene 7, *Les stigmates*, in order to enhance the nightmarish anxiety associated with Saint Francis receiving the stigmata. And like the movement devoted to the tawny owl in the *Catalogue d'oiseaux* (1956–58), *Les stigmates* features quasi-serial passages evoking gray or black in Messiaen's colored-hearing synesthesia, somber colors that accentuate the scene's distressful mood.

3. PITCH ORGANIZATION AND BIRDSONG IN SAINT FRANÇOIS D'ASSISE

Let us now turn to the structural analysis of the major bird songs in *Saint François d'Assise* from referential vantage points in order to uncover various aspects of Messiaen's approach to pitch organization. In this discussion, we will examine each of the birds we considered above in turn, showing how the abstract qualities of their pitch materials, along with their transformational relationships, shed light as to how these avian songs work as blocks of sound at both surface and deeper levels of structure.

3.1 Skylarks

To understand the pitch collections connected with the music of the skylarks I and II in *Saint François*, and how Messiaen organizes them, let us return to *La croix*.¹¹ The scene opens with twenty measures of the skylark I's music played by the xylo ensemble, enhanced by the resonance of the tubular bells and suspended cymbal (*La croix*, pp. 1–2, R1:1–20). Structur-

ally, this avian prelude is comprised exclusively of trichords. In pitch space, a high tessitura characterizes the skylark I's song, with each line proceeding by disjunct motion. The notes of the prelude's trichords are distributed widely in pitch space, with intervals ranging from a minor ninth [13] to a compound major seventh [23] forming the largest intervals between the xylophone and xylorimba, and between the xylorimba and marimba, respectively. Although these wide interval spacings might reflect Messiaen's desire to avoid the pungent effects of cluster-like realizations, they more likely than not indicate his attempt to approximate the skylark I's timbre. These wide spacings are in keeping, moreover, with his conception of the bird's song as being registrally defined by high and low pitches. As noted in his description of the skylark's music in the *Traité* (Messiaen 1994–2002, vol. 5/1, 244–47), Messiaen refers to a high-pitched dominant (*dominante aiguë*) — B₅ — that a skylark would regularly hit but not go beyond. This high-pitched 'ceiling' (*plafond*) can be balanced, moreover, by a low-pitched 'floor' (*plancher*) usually constituting either a C₄ or A₃-flat (Messiaen 1994–2002, vol. 5/1, 245–53). In the skylark I's prelude in *La croix*, this 'ceiling' is regularly exceeded by the tessitura of the xylophone part, which typically features an F₇-sharp as a 'ceiling' pitch. But in the xylomarimba part, B₆ functions as its registral extreme, suggesting a more immediate connection to Messiaen's transcriptions. On the other hand, the floor is exceeded three times in the marimba part by a G, F₃-sharp, and F₃, respectively.

To make sense of the extreme variety linked with the skylark I's pitch materials operating in the literal world of p-space, let us examine them now from the more abstract one of pc-space. Although these trichords are derived from a variety of set classes, (012), (015), and (016) predominate. As a matter of fact, throughout *Saint François*, the skylark I's music ends each time with sc (012). Since these three set classes exhibit exclusive or some semitonal content, I consider them as chromatic in nature, which describes the overall sound of the prelude to *La croix*.

Set classes (015) and (016) shape the harmonic successions of the first seven measures of the bird's prelude through their projection as centric sonorities (*La croix*, p. 1, R1:1–7). Set class (016) begins and ends the first musical flourish (mm. 1–2), and then closes the second (m. 3). The next three flourishes emphasize sc (015), as that trichord closes the first one (m. 4), and begins and ends the next two (mm. 4, 5–7, respectively). All in all, through the special treatment accorded to them as points of departure and/or arrival, these two chromatic collections impose order on a music to all intents and purposes devoid of it. They continue to shape subsequent appearances of the skylark I's music in the rest of *La croix*.

Compared to the quality of the skylark I's music, that of the skylark II is more luxuriant in sound. The woodwinds associated with this birdsong play larger nonmodal and modal pitch structures, such as the *chords of transposed inversions on the same bass note* and the *first chords of contracted resonance*, as well as hexachords drawn from different transpositions of mode 3. These varied harmonic contexts are typically given centric focus by the strategic placement of nonmodal chords. They are interspersed with modal ones, resulting in highly coloristic displays of musical sound.

For an example of such music, let us look at a one-measure gesture (repeated in the next bar) that interrupts the first ex-

¹¹ Since my aforementioned discussion of the skylarks' theological significance intersects with how they are generally used in the opera, I shall omit that extra-musical consideration in the following examination of the birds' pitch materials.

change between Brother Leo and Saint Francis in strophe 1 of their opening dialogue in *La croix* (p. 6, R4:1–2). Here, a CTI₃/B-flat (sc 7–20 [567TE02]) supplies the harmonic focus for a musical flourish centering on the bird’s high-pitched dominant sounded an octave higher (B₆).¹² From the perspective of Messiaen’s ideas on melodic accentuation (derived in turn from those of Vincent d’Indy), this flourish consists of the threefold group of anacrusis, accent, and inflection.¹³ The B₆ is the melodic apex of the bird’s gesture, preceded by an anacrusis that crescendos to this accented note. This apex receives a fortissimo dynamic and is followed by a C₅-sharp, an ending suggesting a relaxation of the music’s previous tension. Because it supports the skylark II’s B₆, the CTI₃/B-flat guides a harmonic succession involving mode 3:2 <1345789E0> (sc 6–21 [E13457], sc 6–15 [901345]) and 3:4 <35679TE12> (sc 6–15 [3679TE]) chords, falling away to a 1CCR₂/B-flat (sc 7–Z12 [9TE0146]) chord that concludes the gesture. When all is said and done, in conjunction with the B₆, the centric CTI₃/B-flat effects a sense of direction for the bird’s sonorities by guiding them to a specific goal.

To cap our discussion of the music of the skylarks in *La croix*, let us consider their simultaneous duo that crowns the scene’s revelation of what constitutes ‘perfect joy’ (*La croix*, pp. 97–121, R66:1–R73:11). In this energetic and lengthy musical passage of one hundred measures, these birds sing simultaneously, providing a divine affirmation to Saint Francis’s answer to Brother Leo that to know ‘perfect joy’ is to embrace the Cross of Christ. From a musical-structural perspective, this lengthy passage is cast as a contrasting additive design, which features two simultaneous pitch schemes highlighting intense contrasts of pitch and timbre.¹⁴ In *Saint François*, this design type is often employed at critical formal junctures in order to enhance its drama. To grasp how the songs of these two birds work in this grandiose duo, then, let us analyze the following representative passage (*La croix*, p. 98, R66:6–9).

The skylark II’s harmonic support is characterized by its archetypal nonmodal and modal pitch structures. The chords of transposed inversions (sc 7–20; all CTI₁s) guide the bird’s flourishes, with chords suggesting mode 3:3 (sc 9–12 <245689T01>) serving as harmonic foil. A CTI₁/C-sharp, the

passage’s concluding chord, provides harmonic focus to the bird’s chordal support, which includes other chords of transposed inversions (CTI₁/D-sharp, CTI₁/B-flat, CTI₁/D) that alternate with modal subsets (scs 6–14 and 6–15).¹⁵ The harmonic content of the passage is indicative, moreover, of the skylark II’s music throughout the commentary. Chords of transposed inversions and, to a lesser extent, the first chords of contracted resonance (scs 7–Z36 and 7–Z12) play prominent roles in shaping the bird’s flourishes. Modes 3:3 and 3:2 (<1345789E0>) continue to serve as harmonic contrast to these nonmodal structures. They are consistently represented by their subsets scs 6–14, 6–15, and 6–21.

When viewed in connection with the skylark II’s harmonies, the skylark I’s chords do not exhibit comparable variety. The bird’s pitch structures consist of trichords, drawn primarily from scs 3–1, 3–4, and 3–5, realized in pitch space with wide interval spacings. These trichords establish a chromatic harmonic field and hence distinguish themselves from the larger and more tertian-sounding chords of the skylark II’s music that outline nonmodal and modal ones. The skylark I’s musical modules are shorter than their counterpart’s, which heightens the harmonic contrast between the two pitch schemes. For instance, sc 3–4 initiates three of the bird’s gestures in the same amount of time taken up by one gesture in the skylark II’s music. But in a certain sense, this is a logical corollary of the skylark I’s more static harmonic content, for its modules must proceed at a faster rate to balance the slower but more harmonically varied modules of the skylark II. As a final point, as with the skylark II’s music, the harmonic content of the passage is strongly suggestive of the skylark I’s music throughout the commentary.

The simultaneous pitch strata that make up this exuberant avian duo merge with their respective instrumental colorings to form referential timbres. As a consequence, this span of music functions as a huge timbral block in *La croix*. It not only reinforces the notion of what ‘perfect joy’ is but also serves as the theatrical highpoint of the scene. The contrast in these simultaneous birdsongs is, in the final analysis, one of both pitch and timbre, indissolubly linked together.

3.2 Blackcap

Because its song accompanies Saint Francis throughout the opera, the blackcap is one of the prominent songsters in *Saint François*. In the grand bird concert of *Le prêche aux oiseaux*, for example, it sings frequently, with various instruments of the orchestra playing its song, such as the violins II (div., 7–12), Ondes Martenot 2 (performed out-of-tempo — *en dehors du tempo* — with the rest of the orchestra, which results in a superimposition of different tempos), and muted trumpet in D (also *en dehors*). But for Messiaen, the most beautiful blackcap songs are those frequently entrusted to the woodwinds, with each note supported by a chord to make the bird’s musical timbre more luminous.

In my examination of the numerous blackcap notations in Messiaen’s cahiers at the *Département de la Musique*, BnF, the vast majority of them evoke A major through various melodic gestures that accentuate that tonality’s structural notes or even

¹² I use the following abbreviations to denote the chords of transposed inversions on the same bass note, root position through third inversion, respectively: CTI, CTI₁, CTI₂, and CTI₃. Furthermore, a forward slash followed by the name of a pitch class indicates the bass note upon which the chord is constructed (e.g., CTI/E, CTI₁/E, etc.). I follow like-minded procedures with respect to the first chords of contracted resonance (1CCR₁ and 1CCR₂). My approach is at odds with Messiaen’s labeling system for the chords of transposed inversions, which is more idiosyncratic (see Messiaen 1994–2002, vol. 7, 142–47). For example, he identifies CTIs abstractly by assigning a number to the bass note and referring to the chord type’s root-position form and inversions as A, B, C, and D. Respecting pitch-class levels, he designates C-sharp as 1, D as 2, and so on up to C as 12.

¹³ For more information about Messiaen’s views on melodic accentuation, see Benitez (2000, 133–37).

¹⁴ In my approach to analyzing the music and drama of *Saint François d’Assise*, I have developed the theoretical concept of additive pitch designs derived from color theory. They comprise the simultaneous combination of different sound strata, of which contrasting additive designs form one part (the other two being analogous and compound additive designs). For more information, see Benitez 2019, chapter 5, ‘Additive Designs’.

¹⁵ Within the passage, Messiaen uses sc 6–Z17 to suggest a CTI₁/B-flat [678T12]. This is a rare occurrence in *Saint François*, for the composer seldom uses subsets to represent the chords of transposed inversions.

arpeggiate A-major or A^{add6} chords. In *Saint François d'Assise*, A^{add6} chords are routinely used to support the blackcap's song. In a passage from strophe 4 of the ornithology lesson that Saint Francis gives to Brother Masseo in *Le prêche aux oiseaux*, the blackcap sings a musical passage that includes several A^{add6} chords while Brother Masseo sustains an A₄ (pp. 100–1, R39:26–R40:2). This assertion of A major, after previous strophes stressed E-flat as a focal pc, is reinforced by Saint Francis's response to Masseo: a chord of transposed inversions on A (third inversion), which contains an A^{add6} chord in its bottom register, supports the end of his melodic phrase that identifies the capinera to his pupil (p. 102, R41:9).

3.3 Fan-Tailed Gerygone

Since it is associated with the character of the Angel, the fan-tailed gerygone, like the blackcap, is another prominent bird in *Saint François d'Assise*. This avian character not only announces the Angel's entrance in the opera but also its exit from the stage. Piccolo-like staccato lines traversing serpentine melodic contours distinguish the gerygone's music. Because of its superb staccato, Messiaen assigns the gerygone's song to two piccolos, joined at times by the xylophone and glockenspiel.

From harmonic perspectives, the chords of transposed inversions (sc 7–20) and the first chords of contracted resonance (scs 7–Z–36 and 7–Z12) often support the gerygone's song. For example, in scene 4, *L'ange voyageur*, when the Angel visits the Franciscan monastery on Mount La Verna (p. 46, R34:3–5), two chords of transposed inversions on E-flat (CTI, CTI₁), followed by a pair of first chords of contracted resonance on D-flat (1CCR₁, 1CCR₂), support the bird's song. But the gerygone's music also features mode 3 harmonizations. In a passage from scene 5, *L'ange musicien*, in which diverse birds are superposed, the gerygone's song is supported by chords drawn from mode 3:2. If we consider the mode from referential perspectives, subsets 6–15, 6–14, and 6–21 establish it through *inclusion relations*.¹⁶ What is more, the mode's generative interval prolongs the collection through T4 and T8 transpositions, thereby establishing it as a harmonic field within which the gerygone's song operates.

3.4 Blackbird

Messiaen's decades-long fondness for the blackbird translates into a significant presence in *Saint François*. The bird has its most weighty role in *Les laudes*, as it supplies a divine commentary to the scene's verse-response structure in which stanzas from Saint Francis's *Cantiques des créatures* are answered by those from the friars' *Louanges avant l'Office*. The blackbird returns at the end of scene 3 to provide a commentary to the final dialogue between Saint Francis and the Leper when the two discuss their spiritual growth. The bird also comes back in scene 5 where it provides music during Saint Francis's prayer response based on 1 Corinthians 15: 41–42. Later in the scene, the bird participates in the Angel's multi-layered 'music of the invisible'. Finally, the blackbird is present in scene 6, especially in the grand bird concert.

In the opera, the blackbird's song is usually associated with the woodwinds. On the musical surface, its melodic gestures

¹⁶In my approach to analyzing birdsong in *Saint François*, I define inclusion relations as involving subsets that suggest a larger parent collection.

are mostly chromatic, although there are some inflections of the major mode (sc 7–35) and what Messiaen calls hypermajor, that is, the major mode with an added tritone (sc 8–23). From a harmonic point of view, the blackbird's song contains a wider variety of chords than that of the skylark II. Yet, in Messiaen's use of the blackbird's song in the multi-layered 'music of the invisible' of *L'ange voyageur* (e.g., pp. 120–23, R89:1–16), he departs from this harmonic paradigm. In this case, the blackbird's song is supported mostly by pitch collections featuring embedded C-major chords enhanced by resonance elements sounding above and below (R89:2–4). These harmonic types emerge from the music's center of gravity that is C major, as different parts play chords or lines connected with that tonality. And instead of suggesting a more typical chromatic harmonic field, this particular birdsong projects mode 3:1.

3.5 Garden Warbler

In *Saint François d'Assise*, the garden warbler is featured in the second half of scene 2, *Les laudes* (pp. 36–83, R39:1–R82:3), and in scene 8, *La mort et la nouvelle vie*, when part of scene 2's music returns (pp. 72–75, R70:1–R73:14). The garden warbler also participates in both the small and grand bird concerts in scene 6, *Le prêche aux oiseaux*. In the small concert, violins I and II play its song in constant 32nd-note triplets (pp. 183–98, R72:1–R76:3). Conversely, in the grand bird concert (pp. 282–318, R118:1–R124:30), the Ondes Martenots 1 and 3, along with violins I (div., 1–6), play three garden warbler songs, respectively, with the Ondes Martenots performed out-of-tempo with the rest of the orchestra, while violins I are in tempo with it.

Let us take a closer look at the garden warbler's music from *Les laudes*. After a chorus sings 'Praise be to God', and the friars and chorus leave the stage, Saint Francis prays to the Lord, asking for the compassion necessary to embrace a leper. In two cycles, the garden warbler's song follows the Call, Solemnity, and Decision themes. Interestingly, the xylo ensemble that plays the skylark I's music throughout the opera likewise performs the garden warbler's song in this instance. In pitch space, the bird's song is less angular and more flowing than that of the skylark I, although wide intervallic spacings between the adjacent parts persist. In pitch-class space, the warbler's music is associated with more pungent trichordal set classes, that is, (012), (013), and (014).

In keeping with the avian music associated with the xylos, sc 012 is consistently emphasized through its position as an initiating and/or closing sonority. In fact, it serves as the final sonority for most of these birdsongs. In the garden warbler's song that begins section 2 of *Les laudes* (p. 36, R39:1–14), sc 012 is given priority via the above-mentioned centric functions and consequently imparts harmonic focus to the bird's music. Through its critical placement in different flourishes, sc 012 functions as a point of reference for the music's constantly changing pitch content on the musical surface. As characteristic of the avian music played by the xylos, sc (012 [345]) concludes the garden warbler's song (*Les laudes*, p. 37, R40:10).¹⁷

¹⁷As with the skylark I's music in general, the garden warbler's trichords are colored by bells and suspended cymbal, which does not affect the structural integrity of any of its trichords. Rather, it is yet another example of Messiaen enhancing the sound of these avian flourishes by means of pitched and non-pitched elements.

3.6 Tawny Owl

The tawny owl serves as an aesthetic foil to the more joyful birds that populate the opera. Its solemn gaze evokes a sense of both mystery and wisdom, portending, in essence, a foreboding, nocturnal atmosphere, which is compounded by the dreadful screech with which the bird is also associated. In addition to its use at the beginning of *Les stigmates* to underscore the impending stigmatization of Saint Francis, the tawny owl's cry, along with that of the little owl, is heard in *La croix* during the friar's explanatory parable regarding 'perfect joy' when he recounts its unnerving elements to Brother Leo. The Ondes Martenot 1 plays the bird's screech, which consists of a falling minor third — C₆ to A₅ (the same notes that are emphasized in the tawny owl's cry in *Les stigmates*). In two instances, sound-pedals (*sons-pédales*) played by the trombone 3 sound below this high-pitched wail, the first time with a B₁-flat (p. 65, R43:10–11), and the second, with an A₁ followed by an A₁-flat (p. 70, R46:4–5), which are both preceded by the aforementioned B-flat1.

From pitch perspectives, the tawny owl's music is not as complex as other birdsongs in the opera. As we have just noted, the owl's music in *La croix* consists of a bare C₆ to A₅ that is sometimes articulated above sound-pedals. Things get a little more complex, however, in *Les Stigmates*. That being the case, let us frame it within the bird's two-part cry as described earlier in this essay. Horn 1 plays the bird's descending interval — C₅–A₄ — at the beginning of the scene (*Les stigmates*, p. 2, R2:1–3), accompanied by a string sonority that colors the gesture. It includes the interval's notes at pitch as well as in higher-octave registers through the use of harmonics. It also contains these notes transposed chromatically from T₁ through T₄, a coloring coordinated with the chromatic harmonic field established in the scene's opening. The tawny owl's cry is also sounded within a huge harmonic block comprised of choral clusters performed *bouche fermée*.

Chromatic pitch collections in the flutes and Ondes Martenots 1–3 evoke the second half of the tawny owl's cry that follows its initial shriek. In *Les stigmates*, the flutes play a chromatic line that ascends and descends by a minor third, and the Ondes Martenots play one that ascends by a minor third and subsequently descends by a tritone. In light of the fact that they follow the aforementioned brass/strings minor-third shriek, these instruments suggest the beginning of the cry's second half — the owl's ascending tritone — through their rising chromatic lines encompassing a minor third. They then evoke the tremulous nature of the sinking chromatic line that concludes the cry through a chromatic descent colored by flutter-tonguing (flutes) and glissandos (ondes).

4. STRUCTURE, THEOLOGY, AND THE UNFOLDING OF REFERENTIAL TIMBRES

The xylos and woodwinds help define the large-scale musical-dramatic design of *Saint François d'Assise* through their function as referential timbres. In this capacity where sections of music are identified more readily by their instrumental colors than pitch materials, these two instrumental ensembles bring about deeper-level structural connections between seemingly static tableaux. Through their strategic presence, the xylos and woodwinds also intensify the opera's drama by reinforcing theological themes at critical junctures along Saint

Francis's spiritual path. Their use as referential timbres points toward, in the final analysis, the close association between pitch and timbre in Messiaen's compositional aesthetics. Whether in the form of artificial harmonics that are added to chords or referential timbres that subsume their pitch materials, the merging of timbre with harmony is an important facet of his music. To close this essay, let us consider how birdsong — in the guise of the referential timbres of the xylos and woodwinds — powers the opera at deeper levels of musical structure. In so doing, we will return to passages that we have previously discussed.

By supporting various musical passages within a scene or across different scenes, the xylos and woodwinds, as referential timbres, establish important structural and theological connections in *Saint François*. For instance, the fourth section of scene 1, *La croix* (pp. 97–121, R66:1–R73:11) features the avian commentary on 'perfect joy' in which the two skylark songs are superimposed. Their use at this strategic juncture complements an earlier one, the scene's first section in which Saint Francis and Brother Leo discuss the meaning of this type of joy. Obviously, the referential timbres associated with the skylarks connect these two sections musically; but more critical is the xylos and woodwinds' connection with the theme of 'perfect joy'. Unquestionably, this musical-dramatic association continues in the opera, particularly with respect to the xylos. For example, the Leper's dance of joy in scene 3, *Le baiser au lépreux* (pp. 147–53, R104:1–R108:29), culminates in a contrasting additive design in which the blue rock thrush's song, played by the xylos, is combined with string, bell, cymbal, and wood chime trills on a C^{add6} chord. In scene 5, *L'Ange musicien* (pp. 120–23, R89:3–7, 9–11, 13–16), the xylos, performing the nightingale's song, participate in the climactic compound additive design that represents the Angel's playing of its viol. Through its music, the Angel presents Saint Francis with a foretaste of celestial joy.

In addition to assisting the xylos in defining various aspects of the large-scale structure of *Le prêche aux oiseaux*, along with reinforcing the scene's theological emphasis on nature, the woodwinds make their own structural connections through their use at pivotal moments. In their association with the blackcap's refrain, the woodwinds punctuate Saint Francis's sermon to the birds. During the closing dialogue between Brother Masseo and Saint Francis, the scene's eighth and last section (pp. 319–64, R125:1–R138:31), the woodwinds, in their support of various birds, respond to the human characters as they discuss the meaning of the birds' departure, which centers on God's providence in relation to nature.

In scene 8, *La mort et la nouvelle vie*, the xylos and woodwinds establish several links to previous scenes, suggesting a final intensification of the opera's referential timbres and their expression of theological themes. By supporting the blackcap as the saint bids good-bye to his beloved birds, the woodwinds link the last scene with the bird's previous appearances in *Les laudes* (scene 2) and *Le prêche aux oiseaux* (scene 6), subsequently deepening their presence as a timbre evoking the theme of nature. The garden warbler comes back in its xylo timbre in response to Saint Francis's final stanza (addressed to Sister Death) from his *Cantique des créatures* and, in like manner, links scenes 8 and 2. The two superimposed skylark songs from scene 1 return in scene 8's last section, a Resurrection Chorale in three strophes (*La mort et la nouvelle vie*, pp. 155–202,

R128:1–R153:12). As referential timbres, the xylos and woodwinds now underscore theological themes involving both joy and the resurrection at the end of the opera. Each strophe of this chorale features Saint Francis’s primary theme in augmentation, followed by the transformed Leper’s theme denoting his resurrected state, a brass fanfare, and the two superimposed skylark songs in question.

Let us close this discussion by summarizing how the referential timbres of the xylos and woodwinds underpin the theological themes associated with Saint Francis’s spiritual journey. The xylos reinforce joy by their strategic use in scenes 1, 3, and 5. Both xylos and woodwinds support themes of nature, joy, and resurrection in scenes 1, 2, 5, 6, and 8. Finally, both ensembles are associated with death in scene 8.

The xylo and woodwind timbres suggest even larger structural and dramatic connections in the opera. Obviously, they are involved with the beginning and end of Saint Francis’s spiritual journey by their presence in scenes 1 and 8. But their greater significance lies in their use at the end of each act where miracles mark definite stages in the saint’s development of grace. As noted previously, after the Leper’s miraculous cure in scene 3, the xylos crown the épôde of his dance of joy by their support of the blue rock thrush’s music. The xylos and woodwinds are prominently involved in the grand bird concert after the sermon to the birds in scene 6, a discourse made possible by Saint Francis’s new-found miraculous capacity to converse with his avian friends. In the last scene when Francis is resurrected, the xylos and woodwinds are involved in each strophe of the closing Resurrection Chorale.

5. CONCLUSION

Birdsong in *Saint François d’Assise* epitomizes a transcendent Christian perspective in connection with its import and symbolism. Because they are likened to angels, birds represent the unseen realm of God in the opera through their songs, serving as celestial characters that observe — and even react to — the seen realm of Saint Francis and his followers. For theologian Père Pascal Ide, in relation to Messiaen’s works, birdsong is the mediator to the heavenly music that it anticipates. In the context of Messiaen’s compositional aesthetics, Père Ide regards birds as anticipating the four qualities of glorious resurrected bodies (glory [totally luminous], impassibility, agility, and subtlety), especially those linked with agility and lucidity. Systematized by Saint Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologiae* (ca 1265–1274), which the Angelic Doctor based on his reading of 1 Corinthians 15: 42–44, these four qualities were celebrated in Messiaen’s *Les corps glorieux* (1939).

Birdsong also evinces a transcendent universalism in *Saint François* through Messiaen’s use of avian melodies from all over the world, which come together as part of Saint Francis’s sermon to the birds in scene 6. Thanks to modern comforts and technology, Messiaen was able to incorporate birdsongs from Asia, Australia, Europe, New Caledonia, North Africa, and North America into the opera. Through these birdsongs, as well as other eclectic musical elements suggesting the music of Bali, India, and Japan, for that matter, he is conversing with the modern world, suggesting that he is in tune with the universal spirit of his time. This is part and parcel of his compositional purview. According to Pierre Boulez, Messiaen liberated French music from the narrow confines of *le bon goût*, the good taste that dominated the aesthetic of that country’s past musi-

cians (Boulez 1995, 267–68). He opened up new vistas for Western musicians by treating music as a universal phenomenon with no boundaries. Diverse musical cultures, materials, and systems, both past and present, offered opportunities for artistic enrichment.

But this spirit of universality may actually have its roots in the thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas (Benitez 2010, 110; Ide 1995, 76–79). Like the Angelic Doctor, Messiaen believed that Christian truth is present in unlikely sources. Akin to Aquinas’s philosophical synthesis of Christian, Greek, Jewish, and Muslim thought, Messiaen’s musical synthesis of highly diverse compositional elements — including birdsongs from all over the globe — in his music exemplifies his desire to ‘touch all things without ceasing to touch God’ (Benitez 2010, 110).

Messiaen regarded his magnum opus *Saint François d’Assise* as expressing the principal mysteries of his Catholic faith through the compositional prism of his idiosyncratic sound-color structures. His feathered protagonists sing within this colossal framework, enhancing the opera’s message of God reaching out to humankind through His Son Jesus Christ, who is the very image of the invisible God (Col. 1: 15). But there may be more to Messiaen’s use of birds in *Saint François* or, for that matter, in his compositional aesthetics, than simply meets the proverbial eye. Rather than just regarding them as conduits to the divine, as suggested by the epigraph drawn from Saint Bonaventure’s *The Journey of the Mind to God* (chapter two, paragraph 11, p. 16) in tome 5 of the *Traité* (Messiaen 1994–2002, vol. 5/1, 12), birds may actually symbolize God Himself. In the highly colorful and surrealistic text of *Trois petites liturgies de la présence divine*, Messiaen declares that God is the only bird of eternity (‘L’unique oiseau de l’Éternité, c’est vous!’).

KEYWORDS

Birdsong, Music Aesthetics, Harmony, Structure, Musical Time, Advanced Tonality, Post-Tonal Music.

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