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Discontinuous vs. Linear? Olivier Messiaen and 19th-Century Formal Traditions

ABSTRACT

Background

According to Paul Griffiths, Olivier Messiaen was ‘the first great composer whose works exist entirely after, and to a large degree apart from, the great Western tradition’ (Griffiths 1985, 15). In this pointed statement, Griffiths referred not so much to the ‘new’ materials used by Messiaen in his works, but rather to the special way in which he put them together.

Indeed, Messiaen’s music keeps a great distance from traditional concepts of form — such as sonata form — and especially from their linear, goal-oriented dramaturgy. He who called himself a ‘static musician’ developed an individual concept of additive, cumulative form based on the juxtaposition and repetition of rather autonomous elements, thus evoking an impression of discontinuity and stasis. This formal concept seems at odds with the ideas of organic growth, thematic process, and development that dominated 19th century instrumental music from Beethoven to Schoenberg.

Nevertheless, Messiaen’s works also contain linear phases that drive to powerful climaxes. Furthermore, he showed a constant interest in some techniques of thematic development.

Aims and Repertoire Studied

The aim of this paper is to question the common image of Messiaen’s music being completely static and to unveil some hidden ties to 19th century traditions by taking a closer look at his formal devices.

The study focuses on two movements stemming from cyclic compositions of Messiaen’s first mature period, which display a particular affinity to developmental techniques and linearity: ‘Combat de mort et de vie’ (4th movement of the organ cycle *Les corps glorieux*, 1939) and ‘Développement de l’amour’ (8th movement of *Turangalila-Symphonie*, 1946–48) are discussed in detail and compared with other works. Messiaen’s theoretical writings *Technique de mon langage musical* (1942) and *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d’ornithologie* (1949–92) are also taken into account.

Methods

An approach of comparative analysis is taken, examining Messiaen’s relationship to 19th century traditions of composition, especially to *Formenlehre* — theory of sonata form — and to techniques of thematic development. Messiaen’s creative use of these techniques is confronted with his theoretical statements. His dependency on earlier treatises of music theory and analysis — e.g. Vincent d’Indy’s *Cours de composition musicale* — is also pointed out.

The intended linearity resulting from the application of development procedures is analysed according to a theoretical

approach introduced by Jonathan D. Kramer (1988) and further developed in my monograph on Messiaen’s opera (Keym 2002).

Messiaen’s various devices of manipulating rhythmic patterns — such as augmentation, diminution, rhythmic canons etc. — may be interpreted as a continuation of 19th century traditions of thematic work (*thematische Arbeit*). In fact, they often display linear and process-like tendencies even more rigorously than classical sonata development sections. However, these rhythmic processes usually proceed on a rather abstract level and hardly affect the listener’s perception of time — especially when there is no regular meter. In contrast, the development procedures discussed in this text show a clearly recognizable goal-oriented motion and have a strong impact on the listener. The composer himself emphasized this difference in his analysis of *Turangalila-Symphonie* (Messiaen 1995, 309).

Implications

Messiaen’s theoretical writings reveal an interest in some technical procedures of 19th century instrumental music, especially in Beethoven’s processes of thematic ‘elimination’ — *Abspaltung* in the terminology of German *Formenlehre* (Messiaen 1995, 401–4). This interest also includes semantic connotations, especially d’Indy’s assertion that Beethoven turned his themes into ‘living characters’, acting and fighting like human beings (d’Indy 1909, 241–2 and 262). However, Messiaen largely disregarded the formal function of development sections within the traditional framework of sonata form. He even recommended to strip this form off its ‘obsolete’ parts and to write complete pieces in the style of a development section (Messiaen 1944, 28). Just like various other pre-existing ‘materials’ which he incorporated into his own style, sonata development techniques were considered by him as ‘ahistorical’ tools that may be used independently of their original context.

The two movements analysed in this study document Messiaen’s handling of development techniques with a clear linear tendency as well as his affinity to more general aspects of 19th-century music’s formal and expressive dramaturgies.

1. In ‘Combat de mort et de vie’, the main theme is presented three times, alternating regularly with an *ostinato* of toccata-like semiquaver chords. With each repetition, it is transposed a major third upward, its melody is enlarged and a new contrapuntal voice added. A further increase of tension is achieved by the superimposition of the theme and the chord — a procedure typical of late 19th century apotheoses. At the same time, the theme is subjected to a rigorous procedure of ‘elimination’ already analysed in *Technique* (Messiaen 1944, 28) and leading to the complete dissolution of the theme in a ‘sound field’ of trills. The dramatic climax is reached when the theme returns only to be cut into pieces culminating on two highly dissonant ‘cry-like’ chords. These chords as well as the trills are rhetorical figures adopted from the improvisatory organ style of

Charles Tournemire, one of Messiaen's most important models who reached the limits of tonality in his late works, but remained faithful to 19th century concepts of symphonic dramaturgy — growth, apotheosis, rise and release of tension. The formal strategy to conclude the piece with an extremely slow section and to reintroduce the main theme here with a completely transformed character can already be found in 19th-century music, too. Whereas the slow final section itself is very static, it is nevertheless perceived as the goal of the whole piece since the preceding climax is based on a pedal point on C-sharp that emerges retrospectively as the dominant of F-sharp major, the tonality of the slow final.

2. 'Développement de l'amour' functions as a development section of the whole *Turangalîla-Symphonie*. The central and main part of this movement is completely dominated by development techniques, its short main motif (A) being primarily conceived for this purpose — in difference to the cyclic themes of the work which have a more elaborated melodic profile. The motif is subjected to procedures of elimination, of confrontation with another short motif (B) and of transposed repetition (*Sequenzierung*) on three formal levels: immediate transposition of the motif itself, then of its extended exposition phrase and finally of the whole ternary section group. Even a rhythmic canon contributes to the impression of hot and ever-rising tension characteristic of this movement, thanks to the use of a simple series of *durées chromatiques* coupled with ascending and descending melodic scales.

However, the overall impression of both movements is very different from traditional development sections. There is no continuous motion because every section concludes with a cadence. Thus, the curve of tension rises not like a straight line, but step by step. Being composed of many little, mosaic-like moments, the form does not provide the illusion of organic growth dear to 19th century aesthetics. This 'mechanical' or rather 'ritual' aspect of form is further strengthened by the many repetitions of the main motif and by its periodical alternation with other material. Even if the concept of ecstatic apotheosis in 'Développement de l'amour' is clearly indebted to late 19th century romantic music — including its erotic connotations —, it is difficult to find a similar accumulation of no less than ten climaxes — three big and seven smaller ones — within a span of only seven minutes in works by Wagner, Bruckner or Mahler.

On the whole, Messiaen's treatment of form has more in common with 19th century traditions than has hitherto been assumed. He consciously drew on some techniques of thematic development in order to achieve a sense of goal-oriented motion and rise of tension. His use of this effect was always motivated by programmatic issues such as combat — in the tradition of Beethoven reception — or growth of love. However, Messiaen decontextualized the development devices, using them e.g. for a whole movement. He also adapted them to his own concept of additive, discontinuous form consisting of many short and often repeated sections.

Consequently, the study of Messiaen's relationship with 19th century traditions of musical form also confirms the significant difference between these traditions and his own, highly individual approach.

Keywords

Form, *Formenlehre*, Sonata Theory, Analytical Traditions, Musical Time, Contemporary Music.

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