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Borrowing and Development in Messiaen's *Thème et variations*

ABSTRACT

Background

Recent studies (Anderson 2009; Cheong 2014) have pointed out the presence of borrowing in Messiaen's music with the latest work of Balmer *et al.* (2016 and 2017) going further to affirm that borrowing is wide-ranging, varied, and central element of Messiaen's compositional process. Building upon those findings, this ongoing research project uses the newly available sketch materials in the recently opened fonds Messiaen of the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* to revisit and combine two veins of my earlier research: on one hand the relationship between the content of Messiaen's Conservatory education and the sound of his music (Murray 2010) and, on the other, his borrowing technique and its compositional use of pre-existing musical material (Balmer *et al.* 2016 and 2017). My project proposes to explore a range of sketches for variation forms from the late 1920s to the early 1940s because forms based on pre-existing musical themes, variations among them, were central in the education of composers and organists at the Conservatoire when Messiaen studied there with Dupré and Dukas in the late 1920s. Concentrating on Messiaen's early sketches for variation forms allows the observation of an evolution in practice from his student days to his mature works and makes it possible to describe the interaction of Messiaen's borrowing technique with methods of traditional motivic development and structural modelling that may have been learned or encouraged by Conservatoire instruction.

Aims and Repertoire Studied

Although the sketch for Messiaen's theme for his *Thème et variations* for violin and piano of 1931–1932 occupies a single page of the early sketchbook known as the *cahier vert* or 'green notebook' (BnF musique, Res Vma 1491), its contents indicate the archive's potential for shedding light on the development of Messiaen's early compositional practice. I first describe the theme of the *Thème et variations* as it was possible to do so before the archive opened, by focusing on the language of Messiaen's short analysis in *Technique de mon langage musical* and then turn to Messiaen's sketch for the theme to show how knowledge of Messiaen's borrowing technique, coupled with access to his working notes promises to continue enriching our understanding of how he composed.

In *Technique de mon langage musical*, Messiaen uses the theme from the *Thème et variations* as an example of a characteristic structure in his music, the three-part *phrase lied*. Messiaen writes that the *phrase lied* is cited in Vincent d'Indy's *Cours de composition Musicale*. His own definition essentially reproduces d'Indy's vision of the *phrase lied* as employed by Beethoven: a three-part structure composed of a *thème* with antecedent and consequent phrases; a median pe-

riod tending toward the dominant, and a concluding period issue from the *thème*. Messiaen's theme replaces the shift toward the dominant with a move between two of his modes of limited transposition, modes 3/1 and 2/1.

D'Indy's *Cours* repeatedly affirms that the *phrase-lied* of classical symphonic music is a direct descendant of plainchant and praises the supposedly innate vocal solemnity of the three-part form. Messiaen was likely receptive to these remarks, given his growing interest in plainchant during the early 30s. D'Indy also places special emphasis on the *phrase lied*'s thematic unity. According to him, the three periods of the *phrase lied* constitute, 'a single, long phrase', a vision that also corresponds to Messiaen's motivic analysis of his Theme.

In Messiaen's analysis of his own theme for *Technique de mon langage musical*, he labels the periods A1/A2, B, and C and points out the use of three motives, x, y, and z. B, the median period, is built entirely from iterations of motive y, repeated in rhythmic variants at different pitch levels; period C returns to motives x and z. Although Messiaen's definition of the *phrase lied* is based on d'Indy's writings, his vocabulary for describing the motivic development within that structure can be traced to the teachings of Marcel Dupré, notably his 1926 *Traité d'improvisation à l'orgue*. (Dupré's *Traité*, particularly its advice on thematic development, can be found throughout Messiaen's early sketches.) Messiaen's vision of his theme's opening period as a reservoir of elements for development; his separation of thematic variation by parameter into melodic, harmonic or rhythmic variations; and his definition of motivic development in terms of 'commentary' can all be traced to Dupré's teachings. Dupré also describes a practice he calls 'deduced commentary' that is used by Messiaen to develop his material: this is simply the process of dividing a theme into individual motives and then transposing those motives to different pitch levels with eventual rhythmic variations.

Messiaen's analysis of his theme in *Technique* gives the impression that it is composed from entirely original material that nevertheless conforms to a traditional phrase structure. Yet, later in the same chapter of *Technique*, Messiaen offers a similar analysis for a melody that we (Balmer *et al.* 2016) have since demonstrated results from the transformation of an existing model.

Given the implications of Messiaen's borrowings — seemingly omnipresent in his music but difficult to confirm without corroborating sources — it had become impossible to determine whether Messiaen's analysis of his theme described composition informed by techniques of development in the tradition of Bach and Beethoven received via Dupré and d'Indy, or rather, to the analysis of a pre-existing structure that Messiaen recomposed using his modes of limited transposition and other transformational tools. In turn, it was also impossible to know whether Messiaen's references to d'Indy and Dupré

were empty name-dropping or the citation of valid models for his compositional thought.

Methods

Messiaen's sketches for the *Thème et variations* offer precious context for understanding his sources, his compositional process, and his remarks in *Technique de mon langage musical*. His sketches for the *Thème et variations* occupy pages 12 to 15 of the 96-page *cahier vert*, a sketchbook containing material spanning from 1932 to 1944; the theme of the *Thème et variations* is entirely worked out in its final version on page 12. This page also includes Messiaen's plans in prose for the work as a whole, followed by a half-dozen cadential formulas drawn from the music of Mozart. The sketches for the theme show at least two layers of composition, with passages in the first version of the theme sometimes crossed out, erased, or rewritten.

Messiaen's pre-compositional notes in prose read, in part, 'Make a theme and variations à la Mozart (in modes) ending with a fugue. The theme should be rhythmically and melodically conceived à la Mozart. For the rhythm of the theme in general, see Mozart, but for the details use plainchant (see *Libera [me]*)'. Many of these ideas, including the neumes of *Libera me*, were not integrated in Messiaen's final project. Most intriguing are Messiaen's remarks referring to 'variations à la Mozart' and a theme 'rhythmically and melodically conceived à la Mozart'.

The first reference may relate to a well-known *phrase-lied* that Marcel Dupré includes in his *Traité d'improvisation* as an ideal model for improvising theme and variations, Mozart's theme for the first movement of the A major Piano Sonata. Messiaen knew and loved this music, which also crops up in other precompositional sketch materials now consultable in the Messiaen archive. By *variations à la Mozart* then, Messiaen might seem to indicate: upon a theme similar to and in the proportions of the Variations from the A Major sonata.

The deeper meaning of a theme rhythmically and melodically conceived 'à la Mozart' becomes clearer when an effort is made to transcribe an erased passage of music contiguous with the Mozartian cadential formulas at the top of page 12. The erased passage is an adaptation the second theme from the Finale of Mozart's Symphony No. 40 in G minor when that theme returns in the recapitulation. Messiaen's adaptation, an intermediary step in his borrowing process, condenses two measures into one and replaces the half cadence with the perfect cadence that occurs eight bars later, but the parallel is clear.

In turn, we can compare this source found in Mozart to the final version of the theme's opening period. In doing so, it becomes clear that Messiaen imitates Mozart's structure on the level of two phrases but that Messiaen closes *both* phrases A1 and A2 with the motive z whose model, in Mozart, is only found at the end of the second phrase. The fact that the pitch level of Messiaen's music is closer to Mozart's theme when it appears in B-flat Major, in the exposition of the Finale as well as the presence of a rising quarter note motive Mozart uses to link the half cadence at the end of the first phrase to the beginning of the second (present only in Mozart's exposition) both suggest Messiaen was looking at the whole of Mozart's 'Finale' when composing his theme. This is further corroborated in a primitive version of *Technique de mon langage musical* (see BnF mus. Res Vma 1580) in which Messiaen

demonstrates how Mozart's cadence in the exposition is the source for the cadence in his theme.

Implications

Messiaen's primary source for the theme of his *Thème et variations* is a piano reduction of a Mozart symphony that he in turn transformed into a texture for piano and violin. His deliberately moderate and lyrical theme in ternary form is built from a very binary double period in quick tempo. His process involves rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic adjustments that go well beyond the simple transposition of Mozart's music into mode 3/1. It is particularly interesting to consider how, in this very early work, the parameters of melody, rhythm and even texture are seemingly borrowed in block, in contrast to much of the borrowing we have identified in Messiaen's music of the late 1930s and 1940s, which tends to isolate single parameter: a sequence of pitches, rhythmic values or harmonies otherwise abstracted from their original context.

This is the case for Period A. But when we compare periods B and C of Messiaen's theme to his Mozartian model, there is no one-to-one correspondence in any extended passages. Period C is a plausible development of elements from Period A, making it possible to affirm that this theme as a whole is a site in which Messiaen's borrowing technique seems to meet more traditional forms of development. It is more complicated, however, to accept Period B a straightforward development of motive Y, when one is aware of the much longer primitive version of this passage found in Messiaen's sketches. In contrast to the pared-down development of motive Y in the contrasting mode 2 analyzed in *Technique*, the first version of what became Period B included movement back and forth between modes 2 and 3 as well as several new melodic contours not heard in the opening period of the theme. The first version of period B was not an example of 'deduced commentary', nor did it correspond to the proportions of the *phrase-lieds* and *ternary periods* proposed by d'Indy and Dupré. It may be that it was based on an entirely different pre-existing musical model altogether.

Indeed, the sketches suggest that Messiaen's motivic analysis occurred mid-composition and that it was only once he had decided to pare down period B into a development of motif y that he also decided to only recapitulate motives x and z in a new final period C. D'Indy and Dupré's remarks on the phrase-lied may have not have been the mold into which Messiaen poured his music, but rather, a model towards which he chose to shape it, mid-composition.

Keywords

Musical Modelling, Musical Language, Form, Texture, Analytical Theory.

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