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Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death: Musico-Poetic Signification in the "Tristan Trilogy" and Three Related Song Cycles , and: Messiaen's Interpretations of Holiness and Trinity: Echoes of Medieval Theology in the Oratorio, Organ Meditations, and Opera (review)

Vincent Benitez

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BOOK REVIEWS

EDITED BY STEPHEN LUTTMANN



TWENTIETH CENTURY AND BEYOND

Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death: Musico-Poetic Signification in the "Tristan Trilogy" and Three Related Song Cycles. By Siglind Bruhn. (Dimension & Diversity, no. 9.) Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2008. [288 p. ISBN 9781576471364. \$36.] Music examples, illustrations, appendix, bibliography, index, author biography.

Messiaen's Interpretations of Holiness and Trinity: Echoes of Medieval Theology in the Oratorio, Organ Meditations, and Opera. By Siglind Bruhn. (Dimension & Diversity, no. 10.) Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2008. [229 p. ISBN 9781576471395. \$36.] Music examples, illustrations, appendices, bibliography, index, author biography.

In these two final volumes of a trilogy on Messiaen, Siglind Bruhn continues to decode those musical and textual signs she finds in his works in order to deepen an understanding of his compositional aesthetics. As set forth in the trilogy's first volume, *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2007), Bruhn synthesizes cultural, musical, and theological insights in order to paint a highly nuanced portrait of the composer. Consequently, there is much to recommend in these volumes. Through her sustained efforts over the years, Bruhn has uncovered fascinating literary and theological perspectives that have seemingly motivated many aspects of Messiaen's work as a composer. But the two books under review are not without their problems, particularly the last one in the trilogy, in which one finds analytical and editorial miscues that mar its overall quality.

In *Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death*, Bruhn examines six works by Messiaen dating from 1936–48 that address problems of human love and death, and their relationships to the love of God. In *Messiaen's Interpretations of Holiness and Trinity*, Bruhn takes a different tack by focusing on the impact of Saint Thomas Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* on Messiaen's compositional thought as seen through

three late works dating from 1965–83. Despite the different topics she covers, Bruhn organizes both books in a similar manner, providing shorter explanatory sections before engaging in detailed analyses of the works under consideration.

The first part of *Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death* provides a historical backdrop to the music in question by examining medieval concepts of love, especially as seen by early-twentieth-century French literary circles and society, and Messiaen's idiosyncratic musical language and how it comports symbolically with his view of human and divine love. The second and third parts of the book examine, as Bruhn puts it, the six pieces from "Messiaen's 'love-and-death' group": *Poèmes pour Mi* (1936), *Chants de terre et de ciel* (1938), *Trois petites liturgies de la présence divine* (1943–44), *Harawi, chant d'amour et de mort* (1945), *Turangalila-symphonie* (1946–48), and *Cinq rechants* (1948–49). In like manner, the first part of *Messiaen's Interpretations of Holiness and Trinity* supplies background information about Saint Thomas Aquinas's thoughts on music, an interpretation of Messiaen's paraphrases and quotations of Aquinas in the three works under discussion, and an examination of different aspects of Messiaen's musical language as relevant to the book's thesis. The volume's three main chapters

focus on analyses of the following three works: *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité* (1969), *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ* (1965–69), and *Saint François d'Assise* (1975–83).

Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death is the stronger of the two books under review. Bruhn prefaces her examination of each piece in this volume by first looking at the cultural and historical issues that inform their genesis in order to lay out the interpretative challenges she intends to meet through musical analysis. She then explores the poetic, sonic, and theological qualities of each piece, attempting to understand how these compositions link the wonder of this world with that of the next. Particularly enlightening is her understanding of how Messiaen's passion for symmetry drives his aesthetics, a theme that she has written about in her previous publications. Throughout this book and *Messiaen's Interpretations of Holiness and Trinity*, Bruhn persuasively argues how symmetry motivates different aspects of Messiaen's work as a composer, from the layout of chords on the piano to the organization of both text and music.

Although her discussions of the six pieces from "Messiaen's 'love-and-death' group" are all worthwhile, Bruhn's analysis of *Trois petites liturgies de la présence divine* deserves particular mention (pp. 117–51). This is a challenging work to talk about, for its genesis and reception are shrouded in myth, and the relationship between the work's theology and musical language and structure are complicated. Building upon recent scholarship, especially by Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone (*Messiaen* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005]), Bruhn discusses the controversy in the French press known as "Le cas Messiaen" surrounding the premiere of *Trois petites liturgies* on 21 April 1945. Critics took particular relish in lambasting the commentaries Messiaen included in the concert's program notes. As Bruhn notes, for various reasons, he did not include a preface consisting of musical and theological explanations, as was his custom, when Durand published *Trois petites liturgies* in 1952. But as she points out, these commentaries can be found in Brigitte Massin's book on the composer (*Olivier Messiaen: Une poésie du merveilleux* [Aix-en-Provence: Alinéa, 1989], 159–65

[facsimile of the handwritten notes, followed by a printed text]). And in the first paragraph, Messiaen mentions how love governs the three poems associated with the work, an all-encompassing type of love that brings human beings closer to God.

While Bruhn's reading of *Trois petites liturgies* may border on a "roadmap tour" of the work, it is nonetheless convincing, although more from poetic, symbolic, and theological vantage points than musical-analytical ones. She discusses the work in relation to the various religious texts that inspired it, showing how Messiaen, through the use of coloristic modes, vibrant musical layers, number symbolism involving juxtapositions of three versus four (representing heavenly and earthly realms), and rhythms, conveyed his concept of a theological rainbow, which morphs dazzling colors with the gift of divine love as manifested by the Incarnate Word of God.

Although laudable in many respects, especially concerning how Aquinas's writings shape the content and meaning of Messiaen's oratorio, organ meditations, and opera, *Messiaen's Interpretations of Holiness and Trinity* suffers from analytical interpretations and editorial problems that weaken its arguments. Bruhn's analysis of the ninth movement of *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ*, "Perfecte conscius illius perfectae generationis," is a case in point. In the second chapter, "Messiaen's Avian, Numerical, and Rhythmic Signifiers," Bruhn discusses how Messiaen permutes what she calls his "rhythmic signature" of seventeen note values in two different ways in order to set up the three rhythmic ostinatos of "Perfecte" (p. 51). She does this in order to set up a more detailed examination of the passage in chapter 3, *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ* (pp. 81–84).

In "Perfecte," Messiaen creates a three-part polyphonic web in which the rhythmic series in question is retrograded and augmented by fifty percent in the bottom strand. According to Bruhn, in the middle strand, Messiaen permutes the series by moving from the periphery to the center (1 17, 2 16, 3 15, etc.), and in the top strand, permutes the middle strand by moving "backwards in zigzag" (10 9, 11 8, 12 7, etc.). In the third chapter, she discusses these permutational techniques in more

detail, providing a diagram of the three-part polyphony of the passage and the three altered versions of Messiaen's "rhythmic signature" in illustration 2 (see pp. 82–83). Bruhn's analysis, however, is flawed, with editorial errors compounding the problems.

While her analysis of the bottom strand is correct, her reading of the other two is not. Instead of moving from the periphery to the center, the middle strand actually moves from the center to the periphery, in what Messiaen called an *open fan*. It begins in the middle (although off by one spot, beginning with the tenth duration) and moves to the extremes (ending with the first duration): 10 9, 11 8, 12 7, etc. The top strand is a permutation that Messiaen called a *closed fan*. It begins at the extremes and moves to the center (ending with the ninth duration): 1 17, 2 16, 3 15, etc. This reading is verified by not only the music but also Bruhn's illustration 2 (p. 83). Finally, in this volume, as well as in *Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death*, Bruhn should have acknowledged Robert Sherlaw Johnson's "Tâla 1" as the source for her idea of Messiaen's "rhythmic signature." In his book on Messiaen (*Messiaen* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989], 36–37), Johnson observes that composite rhythmic patterns or *tâlas* occur throughout the composer's oeuvre. Johnson's "Tâla 1," synonymous with Bruhn's "rhythmic signature," consists of three Indian *deçî-tâlas*—*râgavardhana*, *candrakalâ*, and *lackskmiça*—and, as he notes later in the book (p. 62), is used as the rhythmic pedal in the piano part of the "Liturgie de cristal" from the *Quatuor pour le fin du temps*.

Bruhn's lack of acknowledgement of the Messiaen literature does not stop with Johnson. In her discussion of "Configuratum corpori claritatis suae" from *La Transfiguration* in chapter 3 (pp. 66–70), Bruhn mentions how Messiaen structures the movement like the triad of a Pindaric ode consisting of a strophe, antistrophe, and epode, but does not acknowledge what others—Harry Halbreich, Camille Crunelle Hill, and I myself—have written on the subject. Furthermore, there is no mention of Andrew Shenton's essay or dissertation (both from 1998) on Messiaen's *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité* in Bruhn's discussion of that work in chapter 4.

Since *Messiaen's Interpretations of Holiness and Trinity* examines three late works by Messiaen, it is surprising Bruhn does not provide a detailed exposition of Messiaen's later harmonic vocabulary, given the importance of color in the composer's theology and music of this time. There are references to Messiaen's special chords, such as the *chords of contracted resonance* (p. 72), but Bruhn curiously does not point the reader to chapter 3 of the seventh volume of Messiaen's *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d'ornithologie* (1949–1992) (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1994–2002) for an explanation, preferring instead to cite chapter 14 of the *Technique de mon langage musical* (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1944) for a more dated account of the chords. This lack of engagement with Messiaen's more recent harmonic vocabulary, for instance, has Bruhn not mentioning that the five chords involved in the three-part polyphony of "Perfecte" from *La Transfiguration* (pp. 81–82) are different transpositions of *turning chords*, *chords of contracted resonance*, and *chords of transposed inversions on the same bass note* (I deal with this matter in a forthcoming article in *Music Analysis*). Moreover, it leads her to analyze the chords of transposed inversions as a fanciful two-cluster mode (pp. 170–72), which bears little resemblance to the coloristic or harmonic origins of these chords as articulated by Messiaen in his *Traité*, or for that matter, in recent work by Wai-ling Cheong and by me.

Finally, *Messiaen's Interpretations of Holiness and Trinity*, as well as *Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death*, could have benefited from both a conclusion and an index that included musical terms and compositional techniques associated with Messiaen (in addition to the names already listed). Instead of tying the different themes of each book together into a coherent whole in a concluding chapter, Bruhn allows each volume to end abruptly, suggesting that she has written a collection of essays rather than a unified book. As for each index, one has to thumb through each book's pages in order to look up different aspects of her analyses, which can be very frustrating.

Despite the criticisms voiced in this review, we should applaud Bruhn for her many valuable insights regarding Messiaen's music. Scholars writing about Messiaen must deal with a highly challenging, complicated, and multi-faceted music in order

to give him his full due. In her work on Messiaen, Bruhn has assumed the interdisciplinary roles necessary to tackle his music in a successful way. Accordingly, for people interested in Messiaen, as well as French culture and music of the twentieth century, these two books are must readings.

VINCENT BENITEZ
Pennsylvania State University

Sándor Veress: Komponist—Lehrer—Forscher. Edited by Doris Lanz and Anselm Gerhard. (Schweizer Beiträge zur Musikforschung, Bd. 11.) Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2008. [294 p. ISBN 9783761819333. €39.95.] Music examples, illustrations, facsimiles, bibliography, index.

While the life and work of Sándor Veress (1907–1992) is virtually unknown outside Hungary and Switzerland, the back cover blurb makes a good case why we should all care more about him: “student of Kodály, and assistant of Bartók; teacher of Ligeti, Kurtág, and Holliger.” Unsurprisingly, one major thread in the present volume is precisely the exploration of these important relationships, and Veress’s role as mediator between two great generations of Hungarian composers. Simone Hohmaier’s essay poses the audacious question of whether apparent stylistic parallels between the works of Ligeti, Kurtág, and their common teacher should be viewed as signs of direct influence (as Heinz Holliger had suggested). Hohmaier responds in the negative, since most of these musical features could rather be interpreted as signs of collective Bartók reception, traces of which are obvious in the oeuvre of all three composers. Nonetheless, Veress may still have been important to both of his students in terms of ethics: Ligeti called him “a role model, but no good teacher,” adding that he was “a hundred-percent downright person with an unbelievable ethos” (p. 143). Friedemann Salis focuses on a more specific issue—the possible connection between Veress’s pedagogic collection *Billegetőmuzika* (Fingerlarks) and Kurtág’s *Játékok* (Games)—but reaches a rather similar conclusion: even if the stylistic relationship appears difficult to substantiate, the way both series teach the piano student freedom in

the first place does relate the two works on a moral—or even political—level. Michael Kunkel’s interview with composer Heinz Holliger finely rounds off this topic by suggesting, among other things, that Veress’s pedagogical talent is reflected precisely in the above lack of direct influence: “He has not brought up little ‘Veresses’—that is the sign of a good teacher” (p. 176). The last contribution to this thread is Melinda Berlász’s edition of the correspondence between Zoltán Kodály and his ever humble student Veress, which is supposed to shed light on the above *Granitfundament* of the latter’s creative life—that is, “the totality of Veress’s spiritual roots tying him to Hungary” (p. 223). While the German term comes from Veress himself, the rather less intriguing content of most of these letters suggests that such a *Granitfundament* in essence resembles an iceberg, insofar as its true size and weight cannot be reckoned from the superficial evidence such correspondence can provide us with.

The Kodály letters in fact appear in a quasi-appendix to the collection together with two other groups of primary sources. Doris Lanz presents the documents concerning Veress’s naturalization in Switzerland—the true story of a two-decade-long wrangling that the Swiss Holliger calls “an unbelievable disgrace to our country” (p. 180). If these official documents are no easy read, Claudio Veress’s and Andreas Traub’s edition of the letters written by the composer during his 1947 England trip to his wife present one of the highlights of the volume. Veress openly describes his growing anxiety regarding his professional future in Hungary, considers emigration ever more seriously, reports about his diverse plans and hopes that vanish from one day to the next, and bashes his local rivals—Britten in particular—for the comfortable position he himself should better have deserved. This series of personal confessions is deeply moving to read, and may help many to understand better the mindset of not only Veress himself, but of all twentieth-century émigrés in general.

Indeed, it is precisely this kind of exemplariness that Rachel Beckles Willson’s opening essay describes as our strongest reason to study in depth Veress’s life and works. As she points out, his career is paradigmatic for the twentieth century not merely because of the crucial role of displacement