

Liturgical Transcription in
Messiaen's
*Et Expecto Resurrectionem
Mortuorum*
and *Couleurs de la Cité Céleste*

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The use of plainchant forms in the works of Olivier Messiaen is documented in his treatise *The Technique of My Musical Language*, however the manner of its explicit expression is absent. The fact that he was an organist in Paris is especially noteworthy in that it was there in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that the use of modal rhythm and true contrapuntal textures and techniques was born in the works of Perotin and his school. Messiaen's connection with his city's unique Medieval musical history becomes apparent in a number of his compositions.

The fourth movement from his orchestral work *Et Expecto Resurrectionem Mortuorum* from 1964 plays on still earlier constructs, namely compound parallel organum which was first described in the *Musica Enchiriades* (circa 900). In this type of organum the voice that is given the chant pitches (the *vox principalis*) is often used as an internal voice with the freely composed (*organal*) voices surrounding it. An earlier work of Messiaen, *Couleurs de la Cité Céleste* from 1962, always places the *vox principalis* as an external element. It is these two works, with similar roots and orchestrational layout, that will be compared in their use of plainchant and organal techniques.

The two quotes of plainchant in *Et Expecto* are specified as being the *Introit* and *Alleluia* from the Paschal (or Easter) Mass. Although a variety of Pentecost Alleluias are employed in *Couleurs*, we will only examine settings of one in particular, for the eighth Sunday, and only those places that are relevant for a comparison with *Et Expecto*. Before delving into his sources and uses of these chants, an explanation of their individual liturgical structure is needed.

An Introit, which is used at the beginning of Mass, is an antiphon sung entirely by the choir followed by a psalm verse. The antiphon is repeated followed by the lesser

Doxology, and finally a second repetition of the antiphon completes this portion of the Mass. This form can be extended by the insertion of more psalm verses. The melodic range, or *ambitus*, of an Introit is narrow, distinct from the Alleluia, which has a greater compass (this distinction I believe to be the reason for such a juxtaposition by Messiaen). An Alleluia is as well very different from an Introit formally: it is a responsorial chant in which a *soloist* intones the opening portion of the chant on the word 'Alleluia' followed by a choral response which is an exact repetition of this opening melody. Next the choir sings the *jubilus*: an elongated melisma without text. The soloist returns with a through composed psalm chant in which the choir joins with him in the last phrase. A repetition of the opening Alleluia without the solo intonation completes the structure.

An important concept related to responsorial chants is the use of *repetendas* in which following the psalm, a recapitulation of an *internal* portion of the response is sung: in effect, a stepping back in the chant.

The text source Messiaen used to acquire these ancient melodies can be found through a rigorous examination of the rhythmic design he imposes on the individual pitches of the chant. In original manuscripts all the neumes would appear without variance while in the *Liber Usualis*, an edition made by the Solesmes Monks in the late nineteenth century, agogic accents are added by the dotting of what they believe to be the cadential neumes. In the *Introit*, Messiaen transcribes these durational extensions in two ways based primarily on the neume shape: the two notes of the elongated *clivis* figure are given the duration of three sixteenth notes while all other dotted neumes are given the duration of two sixteenths. This is supported by the disregard Messiaen seems to have for the original cadential structure of the chant: notice that equally strong cadences as

those found in the second system's first dotted neume (see *Et Expecto* Chart), for instance the third system's first dotted neume, are not given the same rhythmic elongation, while a relatively lesser important cadence (e.g. third system, second dotted neume on "est") with the clivis figure *is*. This indicates that the integrity of the chant as a *closed form* is put to question. To separate the *Alleluia* from the *Introit* in the usage of rhythmic extension, Messiaen gives the dotted neumes *only* at the final cadence of the former chant the equivalent of three sixteenth notes.

Messiaen assumes the neume figures as well to dictate the changes in metrical structure. In *Et Expecto*, the *Introit*'s metrical integrity is taken over by the *Alleluia*'s neumatic arrangement when the latter is juxtaposed on top of it. In *Couleurs*, there is never more than one chant statement occurring at any given moment and therefore its neume shapes can dictate without interference the metrical patterns.

The Solesmes also added vertical lines in their editions of the chants at strong structural points, denoting a breath or short pause the length of which is prescribed by the vertical length of the line. Messiaen clearly adheres to these divisions in both works, but in different ways. In *Et Expecto*, the two overlaid chants are frequently interrupted. The points at which he decides to cut off usually center around one of the chants' breath lines while the other abruptly stops in accordance. In *Couleurs*, the divisions of the chant serve as points where he can change its *mode* or its transposition (this will be examined more closely later).

In addition, the antiphonal solo vs. choir aspects of the *Alleluia*s are dealt with differently between the two works. In *Et Expecto* the first trumpet plays the part of the cantor (soloist) at conducting mark (henceforth CM) 3 to be responded to by the second

and third trumpets (the choir) three measures later. They join together at the appropriate liturgical place at CM 4 (beginning of the *jubilus*). In *Couleurs* Messiaen more clearly divides the two groups by timbre: at CM 8 the trumpet and cencerro play the soloist's passage responded by the choir, here played by all the pitched percussion (the cencerro here acts as the shared timbral element). At the *jubilus*, however, the trumpet never rejoins the ensemble (which is truer to actual liturgical practice). The interruptive gestures of *Et Expecto* as well distant it from *Couleurs*, the latter of which always clearly completes a portion of the chant before moving on to another texture. These interruptive bird call episodes have no chant derivation, although, based on their liturgical location, however imprecise, they may replace the psalm tone.¹

However, it is Messiaen's settings into *his own* modes of the chant and the types of organum he employs which is of greatest intricacy. First let us deal exclusively with *Et Expecto*. As can be seen from the accompanying chart, the Introit vox principalis is entirely set according to Messiaen's first mode (whole tone)- his simplest mode, with the organal voices set in differing fractions of other modes (two and seven). When dealing with organum, the harmonic hierarchy is clear: the intervals of greatest importance are those between the organal voices and the vox principalis with less regard to the interval between themselves. What is noticeable are the numerous occurrences of tritones and perfect fifths/fourths which are present in the upper organal voices, lesser so in the lowest. Between the organal voices, it is evident that the major seventh is an important 'consonance' and that when it is not appearing between the vox principalis and an organal voice, it is found *between* the upper two organal voices. Pitch-wise, the entire aggregate

¹ Based on Catholic artistic/theological history, birds are often represented as the incarnation of the Holy

is present compositely in the four voices with the exception of F. The parallel organum in the Introit is strictly adhered to throughout so that the same four note chords with no repeating pitches between voices are always present.

The importance given to the tritone can be as well seen in the Alleluia statement of *Et Expecto*: not only does the ambitus of the trumpet version of the chant span a tritone (plus an octave) from low D (after CM 28) to high G#, but the climax of the melody is high D to high G# (after CM 4). While the chant setting of the Introit into the vox principalis 2nd cencerro is precise, it is not in the Alleluia. Here the source chant is in the ecclesiastical seventh mode (mixolydian). Messiaen parallels this with setting it into his own seventh mode where all pitches are present except Bb (the root of this mode in this transposition is C, making its presentation in this piece an example of a *hypo-mode* [meaning that the mode's root pitch is preceded by notes above and below it]). This creates a problem: there are only seven pitches in the ecclesiastical mode while he needs eleven to fit his. Messiaen's solution is to replace the same chant pitches with different pitches from his own mode, which is here articulated by a trumpet (see chart). This gives Messiaen some elasticity in creating high and low points in his troped melody. Notice the newly invented climax in the *jubilus* which strays vastly from an exact chant transcription and the exaggerated low point near the final of the chant (going to low D thus completing the tritone based ambitus).

Orchestrationally at CM 28 this is further emphasized by the suddenly low C#'s in the bassoons. In his interpretation of the Alleluia organum, Messiaen takes on a freer form (as in the free or developed parallel organum of the 10th century) by placing the

Spirit. The dubious absence of a psalm setting points to this symbolization.

trumpets amidst a pre-designed chordal arrangement wherein the melodic shape of the organal voices is not held within the grasp of a particular mode. Only the flutes, for the most part, play a strict parallel line at the octave to further elevate the chant (another element of early parallel organum).

In *Couleurs* Messiaen handles chant setting and organum implementation somewhat differently. Beginning at CM 8 (portion A of the chant), we notice that the soloist part of the Alleluia chant is doubled by the piccolo trumpet and the cencerro *above* the other voices which are not in accordance with the chant. We immediately notice some similar usage of chant motifs : here being juxtaposed upon an independent texture not unlike the collage of the Alleluia and Introit in *Et Expecto*. Modally, here they are both derived from the *same scale*, parallel to one another throughout a minor seventh apart. Again Messiaen uses his first mode in his transcriptional setting of the source chant. The choral respond and opening sections of the *jubilus* (**A** repetition, **B** and **C**) pit the percussion in similar relationships emphasizing tritonic motion. Notice the subtle additions that occur as the sections progress: in **A** the interval between the vox principalis (chimes) and the highest voice is steadily at a perfect fourth outlining two complementary transpositions of Messiaen's first mode. The cencerro joins the parallel motion with the vox using the same transposition of the first mode as the xylophone beginning two degrees apart (creating minor ninths with the vox). The xylorimba and marimba interlock with minor ninths and major sevenths emphasizing similar vocabulary as the other voices.

The intervals between the vox and the xylorimba expand and contract from perfect fifths, minor sixths, and tritones. The ambitus of each voice here is a tritone. At

B (*jubilus*), Messiaen expands the pitch palette showing more of the first mode components of the vox principalis and xylophone. The relationship between the xylophone and the cencerro changes: they are still derived from the same scale, however now only one degree apart. The opening note of the chimes is altered here to an A only to return in section **C** (CM 19) as a G even though it should be an exact repetition according to the chant source. The cencerro, despite its modal connections with the xylophone mimics the chimes in this regard. The idea of slight alteration is extended in this section by the xylophone as it alters its first pitch to A# returning to C in the next chant section (**D**). The xylorimba and marimba, although mocking the melodic motion of the other voices, are clearly thought of as a subsidiary internal pair as their opening pitches in each section are different, related mostly to one another. The salient factor to take into consideration is that at the beginning of the chant transcription, each voice shows a portion of its modal makeup making it seem somewhat simple. As the sections of the chant progress, more components are revealed exposing more complex modes when viewed as a composite. At section **D** of the chant, the remaining pitches in each voice are displayed, deviating much more from the source pitches, and completing each voice's scalar complement (see *Couleurs* chart). In the end, all these modes seem to be interrelated sharing many of the same pitches and interval content.

At CM 76, the notion of paralleling the chant within the same mode (as in previous occurrences) culminates with a compound statement. By piecing together the voices' pitch content, we are faced with another of Messiaen's modes built upon two tetrachordal symmetries (each consisting of a root, augmented second/minor third, followed by two minor seconds).

The last occurrence of this particular Alleluia melody occurs as a single, unadorned, monophonic statement in the chimes once again (at CM 81). Instead of being the *hauptstimme*, it acts more as an a priori element, separate and untouched by the remaining activity. Messiaen makes this distinction by placing it in a different tempo-stratum than the others (eighth note quintuplets over the entire measure) making it the only absolutely steadily moving voice in the prevailing texture. Its pianissimo marking supports its universal shadow/halo character (a divine presence- less heard than felt). An examination of the chart will show its linear development which uses similar devices as the previous polyphonic statement- here stretched out in transparent monophony. The pauses between each of its statements reflects the different sections of the chant. The first fragment (**A**) begins on Bb outlining a first mode derivation. At CM 83, the first statement of the *jubilus*, Messiaen as well sets into a first mode scale but at a minor second below forming a transpositional complement as he did before between the chimes and xylophone *simultaneously*. At the **D** section of the chant Messiaen again begins with a minor second descent with the opening melodic setting in the same transposition as seen at CM 81 just beginning one degree apart (not unlike the trumpet/cencerro simultaneous statement), but then evolving into a complex mode. The **D** section of the chant, which is the longest and has the largest ambitus, is used to chromatically develop the setting, just as before at CM 20. At CM 85, Messiaen returns to a simple mode one setting using the same transposition as at CM 83, again a complement to the opening portion.

A final question that must be put is Messiaen's reasoning behind these constructs: if he was using liturgical form why wasn't he consistent and complete? Why do the

repetendas in *Et Expecto* not occur precisely where needed liturgically? The answer I believe lies in the borrowing Messiaen does in many of his works, such as the frequent implementation of Hindu rhythm, serial techniques, word symbols (in *Meditations on the Mysteries of the Holy Trinity* he gives the letters of the alphabet pitch and duration so that he can inscribe names and words of religious significance into the texture), and of course Roman Catholic liturgical practice: his mysticism draws on many strands without the need for imitation of any of them. In so doing, he creates something entirely new.

Couleurs Charts

Pitch material sources

The image displays a musical score for 'Couleurs Charts' under the heading 'Pitch material sources'. The score is organized into seven horizontal staves, each representing a different instrument or instrument group. The instruments listed on the left are Cencerro, Pte. Trumpet, Xylophone, Xylorimba, Marimba, Cencerro, and Cloches. The Cencerro instrument is listed twice. The notation is as follows:

- Cencerro (top):** A single treble clef staff with a sequence of notes: G4, A4, B4, C#5, D#5, E5b.
- Pte. Trumpet:** A single treble clef staff with notes: G4, A4, B4, C#5, D#5.
- Xylophone and Xylorimba:** A grand staff consisting of two staves (treble and bass clefs) bracketed together. Both staves contain a sequence of notes: G4, A4, B4, C#5, D#5, E5, F#5, G#5.
- Marimba:** A single treble clef staff with notes: G4, A4, B4, C#5, D#5, E5, F#5, G#5.
- Cencerro (middle):** A single treble clef staff with notes: G4, A4, B4, C#5, D#5, E5, F#5, G#5.
- Cloches:** A single treble clef staff with notes: G4, A4, B4, C#5, D#5, E5, F#5, G#5.

Alleluia: mode and chant source

81 Messiaen Mode 1 (whole tone)

Cloches

Alleluia

* Arrows indicate pitch incongruities (same source note, different Messiaen Mode pitch)

83 Messiaen Mode 1 (whole tone): chromatic compliment to the previous fragment

Clo.

jubilus

Allel.

84 Messiaen Mode 7 (or intersection of previous Mode 1 transpositions)

Note: 3 different interpolations of chant source pitch 'A'.

Clo.

Allel.

85 Messiaen Mode 1 (whole tone): in original transposition

Clo.

Allel.

Et expecto Charts

Introit: modes and chant source

8va Messiaen Mode 7 (upper hexachord fragment)

1st. Cencerro

Interval w/Vox Principalis: 6 5 6 11 2

Interval between upper voices: 11 11 11 4 8

Messiaen Mode 2 (octatonic)

Cloches

Interval w/Vox Principalis: 7 6 7 7 6

Messiaen Mode 1 (whole tone)

2nd. Cencerro
(Vox principalis)

Messiaen Mode 7 (lower hexachord fragment T7)

3rd. Cencerro

Interval w/Vox Principalis: 7 8 9 10 11

Mode: Hypophrygian (Mode IV)

Chant source

Alleluia: mode and chant source

Trumpets

Alleluia

* Arrows indicate pitch incongruities (same source note, different Messiaen Mode pitch)

Tpts.

Allel.

jubilus

Messiaen creates a climax where none exists in the chant source

Tpts.

Allel.

Messiaen creates an exaggerated nadir.

Tpts.

Allel.

Mode hexachord root/axis

Messiaen Mode 7 (complete)

Tpts.

Allel.

Mode: Mixolydian (Mode VII)

ossia