Johan Tallgren

Lists, Reliquaries and Angels in Music and the Modern World

and

Tombeau pour New York for 19 players

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of Doctor of Musical Arts in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

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Umberto Eco states that the list is the origin of culture, a way of making infinity comprehensible. Lists and catalogues are a way of creating order though history. I am currently, as a composer, working on a piece for choir using a list of angels as its text. Lists of angels deal with infinity, the list as such converges the three different monotheistic religions under the same roof. In my research I have tried to create a short overview of the history of lists in music, along with the musical presentation of angels in music – a subject that has fascinated many composers.

Composers of last century such as Arnold Schoenberg, Oliver Messiaen and Karlheinz Stockhausen, to mention just a few, dealt with the representation of the angelic and divine in their music. Their different religious backgrounds suggested different strategies in their works dealing with angelic subjects.

Table of Contents

Introd	luction	
1.	Lists as devices for creating form and structure	1.
2.	Lists in music; reciting a catalogue, becoming a ritual	3.
3.	Angels in the monotheistic religions and literature, angelic hierarchies	3
4.	Spatial implications for the angelic	7.
5.	Angels in music, the sacred in music	7.
6.	Towards contemporary angels and rituals in music	9.
7.	Contemporary angels and rituals, modernism revisited	11.
8.	Messiaen and Schoenberg: two worlds , one question	14.
9.	Stockhausen's Global Village	21.
10.	Rituals today	27
11.	"The Anatomy of Angels: A", composing a catalogue in space, notes towards a strategy beyond religion	29
Refere	ences	35.
A.	Tombeau pour New York score	
A.1	Intrumentation list	38
A.2	Score	39.

1. Lists as devices for creating form and structure

Lists and catalogues have, throughout the ages, had an important function in all forms of literature, be they descriptive lists of the scents on the streets in Patrick Süskind's Perfume, the list of those encountered by Ulysses on entering Hades in Homer's Odyssey, or the genealogy of Jesus in the Gospel according to St. Matthew.

Very often the lists in literature have, however, had an aesthetic project: to make us readers perceive something infinite, something that is potentially endless, something beyond what we can embrace or imagine.

Visual equivalents may be found in Giovanni Paolo Pannini's famous *vedute* paintings of large picture galleries, their views of Rome creating the illusion that the painting in question is just highlighting a fragment of the enormous visual library. The spacing and lighting were not of primary importance in these paintings, as was the fashion at that time. What mattered was the impression of abundance, thus also demonstrating the patron's wealth. In the Netherlands, these gallery paintings, for which patrons commissioned painters to portray themselves with their personal collection, were likewise very popular. Another well-known visual equivalent of the technique in question would be The Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel.

Umberto Eco, in The Infinity of Lists, distinguishes between practical, pragmatic and poetic lists. ² A practical list qualifies as a shopping list, an inventory or a library or museum catalogue, its function being to provide the user with the information needed.

Rose-Marie and Rainer Hagen: What great paintings say, Vol I, p. 261.

² Umberto Eco: *Infinity of Lists*, p. 113.

Eco points out that pragmatic lists are not literary lists; they can be extended indefinitely

like a telephone directory, as they do not have to observe formal constraints in the way

that a sonnet or rhyme does. A poetic or literary list works with formal constraints. When

Homer was making his lists of the leaders of the Greeks, or of the dead Ulysses meets

upon entering Hades, his primary interest was probably not accuracy; he was working

with material in his own epic world. His lists deal not with the signified but with

signifiers with different sounds and phonic values.

The scriptures include many lists of genealogy, just as most of the litanies in the Catholic

Church were recited by the faithful in Latin until the Second Vatican Council, though

most of them did not in fact speak or understand the language. It could be said that the

list becomes part of a ritual in which comprehension, or who is present in or absent from

the list is of secondary importance to the sometimes even minimalistic sound qualities of

the recited list.

Dante is not able to name the different angels in the heavens in his Commedia, not

because of their names but because there are so many. Canto XXIX of the Paradiso thus

deals in a certain way with the topos of ineffability. Dante deals with a subject that

exceeds the possibilities of the human mind. ³

Umberto Eco: Inifinity of Lists, p. 50.

2. Lists in music; reciting a catalogue, becoming a ritual

The best-known list in Western music is undoubtedly Leporello's list of Don Giovanni's amorous encounters in the Catalogue Aria in Mozart's Don Giovanni. It matters that he had 2063 encounters, but we do not need to know them all by name. What matters is the fast tempo of the aria and Leporello's ability to articulate the exact numbers of women the famous libertine encountered in different countries. Equally amusing ramblings of lesser importance can be found in many scenes in the comic operas of Rossini. Drinking songs depicting drinking habits can be found at a later stage in Carl Orff's Carmina Burana in song no.14, In taberna quando sumus (When we are in the tavern).

3. Angels in the monotheistic religions and literature, angelic hierarchies

Angels, or messengers (Malak in Hebrew), are most often linked to the Judeo-Christian tradition, but most of the cultures and religions that predate them also had divine messengers who intermediated between the visible and invisible worlds, God and man, living and dead.

The ban on images in Judaism has meant that little early angelic iconography has survived, and nor is there a systematically organized Judaic angeology. ⁴ Post-Talmudic mysticism has in this respect been significant, but due to the diverse geographical placement of teachers and haggadists, the specific area has not received much systematic theological study or systematization. There are many examples in the Talmud

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⁴ Wojciech Stepien: Signifying Angels, p.44.

of angels added to a Biblical narrative. Jewish sources differentiate first and foremost between two categories of angels: messengers and praising angels that already existed before the Creation.

The medieval Sephardic philosopher Moshe ben Maimon ("Maimonides") from Spain enumerates ten ranks of angels;

Chayot ha Kodesh

Ophanim

Erelim

Hasmallim

Seraphim

Malakim

Elohim

Bene Elohim

Cherubim

Ishim

The non-canonical First Book of Enoch mentions seven archangels, of which Michael represents Israel in Heaven, the later Book of Kabbalah written during the 13th century takes up the seven Heavens, something that had a great influence on symbolism in European art, and later in occult trends in the 19th and 20th century New Age movements. The mystical book of Zohar states that each human being has two angels, one bad, one good, and that they can be either masculine or feminine. That the Hebrew word for angel is "messenger" further implies that the distinction between an angelic messenger and a human is open to interpretation.

Of the three major monotheistic religions, Christianity is the one most preoccupied with theories of angels and their internal hierarchy. It may be said that as Christian theology

⁵ Wojciech Stepien: Signifying Angels, p.45.

started to develop after the Emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of

the Roman Empire, the different tasks of angels became more and more defined. Their

primary function here is to praise God, the second to protect, often soldiers, guardians of

Paradise and messengers. They are often referred to as psychopomps, those that escort

the souls of the dead from Earth to Heaven. The apocryphal texts describe the Archangel

Michael as a psychopomp.

The book De Coelesti Hierarchia (On the Celestial Hierarchy) written by Pseudo-

Dionysius the Areopagite in Greek in the 5th century can said to be the first Christian

book dealing with angeology and mysticism and defining the Celestial Hierarchy. ⁶

In De angelis in his Summa Theologica 1, Thomas Aguinas follows the same hierarchy,

divided into three angelic choirs:

First Hierarchy: Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones

Second Hierarchy: Dominions, Virtues, and Powers

Third Hierarchy: Principalities, Archangels, and Angels

In the First Hierarchy the angels surrounded and praised God, the Second Hierarchy

governed the stars and the elements. The Powers were military figures that fought devils.

In the Third Hierarchy the angels maintained contact between Heaven and Earth; they

transmitted the word of God to humanity. Within each hierarchy there were three choirs,

the highest hierarchies burning brightly so that the angels are not perceptible to humans.

The Bible mentions Michael and Gabriel as Archangels.

⁶ Evelyn D. Oliver and James R. Lewis: *Angels A to Z*, p. 183.

Hildegard von Bingen describes and divides the hierarchy into nine angelic choirs in her Scivias based on her visions from 1152 (Book 1, chapter 6).

In Islam, the angels were created by Allah from light. They are neither male nor female. The word for angel is malak (Allah's messenger that conveys prophecies) and rasul (the light of inspiration). They may assume different shapes but they have no free will as their function is to serve Allah. Therefore there are and cannot be any fallen angels. In addition to angels, Islam has jinns that are spirits of a lower order.

The angels in Islam do, however, have an important function as the Koran was dictated by the angels to Muhammad, the last prophet. The hierarchy is close to the Christian one, but more mystical, as angels could come in winds and clouds. The angels also keep track of humans' deeds. Some angels are permanently next to Allah's throne and their function is to praise Him. The tawáf, when the pilgrims circumambulate the Kaaba seven times in a counterclockwise direction during Hajj, is paying homage to the angelic tawáf. Most of the names of the angels are the same as in Christianity and Judaism, but there are also angels such as the blue-eyed black angels Munki and Nakír that examine the recent dead to see if they are worthy of a place in Paradise.

4. Spatial implications for the angelic

Visual presentations of angels in late medieval Christian iconography usually relate to altarpieces, sometimes in many different sections. These altarpieces very often relate simultaneously to narratives from the Scriptures. The central panel in the triptych usually depicts the main focus or theme of the religious allegory; this was amplified in the secondary themes, the side panels that could narrate an earlier or later Biblical story in relation to the dramatis personae or legend of the altarpiece. The timeframes of the different panels in relation to each other illustrate an allegorical narrative that may otherwise seem chronologically illogical when viewed in relation to one another. The paintings depicting the Celestial Hierarchies allowed painters to work on perspective and to visualize large spaces.

5. Angels and music, the sacred in music

Angels seem always to have been associated with music in Christian iconography, might be that there has been periods of debate about the functions and presence of music in the different churches. It is quite common to hear music referred to as "the tongues of angels" in Western history. Western paintings of angels from the Renaissance and Baroque always seem to involve music, sound and even noise. Instruments like trumpets, zithers, harps, tambourines, cymbals and viols, sometimes even organs are present in the paintings, and the angels often carry swords, keys, crowns or canes.⁷

⁷ Edward Lucie-Smith: *The Glory of Angels*, p.54.

The visualization of the angel during this period often seems to take the form of a fit, scantily-dressed or armored young man. There are also symbolic fires and clouds, light and shining bodies and winged creatures clearly emitting loud sounds. During the Renaissance, female angels and infant angels called putti entered the Christian iconography.

In other words, the passages in the Bible and other scriptures illustrated in the paintings more often communicate a frightening experience for the Biblical human figures involved. It is important to note that many Renaissance paintings including angels and music do not only depict a harmonious or consonant world, for many exist with angels as warriors, indicating dissonance and cacophony. In the pictures depicting the Celestial Hierarchies and visualizing music, the seraphim ("the burning ones") and cherubim spend their time singing and praising the Lord. These angels were in charge of the music of the spheres that was not audible to the living. The seraphim singing "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isa.6:1-4) later entered the Jewish liturgy as the Kedushah and subsequently became the Sanctus in the Christian Mass. The harmony of the world was inaudible to the human ear and a substitute therefore had to be found: music.

That said, the Protestant Reformers thought seriously about banning organs in churches and the Council of Trent about banning music in church ceremonies. Trumpets (which from a modern perspective I take to include trombones) always seemed to fare best as they were very important in the standard account of the end of the world and the Last

Judgment. Hence, angels playing trumpets are not always associated with the heavenly choir; they are also summoning sinners and calling the dead from their graves. Mathias Grünewald's famous Nativity panel in Isenheim (1512–1518) has a Concert of Angels panel showing angels singing and playing stringed instruments, at a time when viols and stringed instruments had no place in religious services. Angels playing stringed instruments are usually shown bringing consolation to humans.

6. Towards contemporary angels and rituals in music

Most Western music involving angels from the 19th and early 20th centuries naturally takes the Romantic tradition as its reference, thus commenting on things from a Lutheran or Catholic perspective. That Eastern European Orthodox Christianity did not use instruments in services and liturgies implied that religious music had no place in the Eastern European concert hall. The exotic was, however, slowly entering the theatre and concert hall in Mozart's time already, though more in operas than in works with Biblical subjects involving or depicting angels. Haydn, in his oratorios II Ritorno di Tobia (1774–1775) and The Creation (1798) used archangels as narrators. In The Creation, Uriel (tenor), Gabriel (soprano) and Rafael (bass) sing in recitatives, arias and ensembles. In Mendelssohn's Elijah (1846) the Prophet is visited by an angel. Mendelssohn follows the same tradition as Bach and Handel, depicting angelic presence with dotted rhythms, as was customary at that time. ⁹ (Another noteworthy scene in the oratorio is the angelic trio "Lift thine eyes to the mountains", which is sung a cappella.)

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⁸ Rose-Marie and Rainer Hagen: What great paintings say, Vol 2, p. 127.

⁹ Wojciech Stepien: Signifying Angels, p.67.

During the 18th and 19th centuries it also became common to associate higher instruments, voices and registers with the angelic, the lower registers with the demonic. Great virtuosity was usually referred to as demonic.

The late 19th century saw the invention of the celesta by Auguste Mendel in 1886, a celestial (in French "céleste") instrument. The early 20th century (1928) witnessed the advent of the Ondes Martenot that Olivier Messiaen was to use in many of his major works, such as the Trois petites liturgies de la presence divine, the Turangalîla symphony and his opera Saint François d'Assise, with its strong angelic connotations.

The angelic seven trumpets encountered in the Last Judgment as St. John's announcement of the End of the World were occasionally interpreted as horns and trombones. The trombone part in the Tuba Mirum in Mozart's Requiem is well known.

What seems exciting, in retrospect, is that the 19th century, preoccupied with the romantic and national, developed the layers of the angelic and especially the demonic in opera, and the fantastic often found in tone poems as well as song. Composers like Liszt, Boito and Berlioz embellished the angelic and demonic, and Dante's angelic depictions more than served as inspiration. Satan or Samiel is, on the other hand, explicitly present in Weber's Der Freischütz. Verdi takes a pragmatic but effective approach in depicting angels in his Giovanna d'Arco (1845); the good angels sing "church music", the bad ones a variation of a Neapolitan bordello song. 10

Oliver, Lewis: *Angels A to Z*, p. 283.

The music of spheres, numerology and sacred geometry so often associated with the angelic and so significant in Medieval and Renaissance art had to wait to the early 20th century, the exotic non-Western layers even longer.

The vital question so often asked in Hindemith's Mathis der Mahler symphony (1934), and its first movement, Angelic Concert, is: why is the old German tune "Es sungen drei Engel" orchestrated with three trombones and not the three singing viol players of the famous picture?

7. Contemporary angels and rituals, modernism revisited

The young composers who went to Darmstadt for the first summer courses after World War II grew up in a different world from that of the previous generation. New concepts of harmony – twelve-tone music, sound and noise, advanced playing techniques, electronics and musique concrète became part of the grammar of creation to contemplate. Ideas were also borrowed from Eastern cultures and their religions, surrealist poetry, language, different concepts of improvisation and time.

Most of the Western concert music so far heard had nearly always involved a Judeo-Christian presentation of angels and related rituals. Turn-of-the-century Orientalism had played with pentatonic material in operas by Puccini, and sensualism in Ravel's Shéhérazade ,whereas Judeo-Islamic subjects had played with a decadent symbolistic notion of Orientalism. Strauss's Salome is the prime example. The focus was, however, on the sensuous and pictorial qualities.

The renewed and now much more profound structural interest in Oriental music,

ethnomusicology and practices by the Darmstadt composers aroused new curiosity in

alternative tunings, harmonic stasis and different spiritual states in music. Pierre Boulez

ponders these things in his article "Oriental Music: A Lost Paradise". 11 Many of his

writings and works of that period clearly display a fascination for these non-Western

cultures. Karlheinz Stockhausen began to dwell on metaphysical aspects and the

perception of time in his writings and music.

Boulez's teacher, the French Roman Catholic Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992), is perhaps

one of the 20th century composers who has dwelt most on theological ideas in his music

and is thus perhaps one of the most important composers of contemporary sacred music.

The components from which he created his musical language constitute a fascinating mix

of colorful Western and exotic influences.

Alex Ross speaks of Messiaen's early sacred works as a sort of Christian surrealism.

Messiaen favored the lavish, the opulent and unashamedly grand, very far from the

stereotypical picture of French music. Some liturgical texts are written into the early

Three Small Liturgies with their openly erotic texts creating a love letter to God. ¹² The

work in question created controversy in its own time and some critics commented that it

was like "an angel wearing lipstick".

¹¹ Pierre Boulez: *Orientations*, p. 421-426.

¹² Alex Ross: *The Rest is Noise*, p. 450.

Messiaen is well known for integrating birdsong into his music on a deeper structural level than anyone ever before. Composers throughout history have imitated birds, mainly nightingales (Jannequin, Couperin, Beethoven and Stravinsky, for example) in their music. It is, however, important to note that the earlier composers' uses of birdsong were essays in the picturesque, their prime intention being to communicate a mood. For Messiaen, they acquired a very different meaning.

The representation of the universe and nature, God's creation, is central to Messiaen's language. Musically, birds assume focal significance for him, for he did not wish to suggest pictorial elements like water, wind and the like in his music. He gladly left that to the composers adopting electronics and other modern techniques. Representing water or wind in music would, for a Frenchman, be like venturing into Debussy's most revered area of musical poetry. In this context, birds become musical messengers, singing of God's creation of the Earth with music not unlike that of angels. Messiaen often spoke of "God's musicians" when talking of birds. 13

It is exciting to observe Messiaen as an example of a creative artist, obsessed with lists and cataloging and explaining his own oeuvre. For Umberto Eco, he would be the ultimate Cabinet of Curiosities composer; an artist who gives each sonorous object he creates a symbolic significance in the imaginary library he builds. The reader of the excellent book of discussions with Claude Samuel is impressed by the amount of detail in Messiaen, later listing with exhausting exactitude his travels and performances of each work. And this was a composer of considerable international fame. Whether the reasons are humble gratitude towards the performers or wounded pride – both are understandable.

¹³ Daily Telegraph: *Yvonne Loriod* obituary.

The writings in which he explains his musical techniques are equally immense.

8. Messiaen and Schoenberg: two worlds, one question

Messiaen was 36 in 1944 when he wrote his Technique of My Musical Language and in this respect outdid Schoenberg, who was 37 when he wrote his Harmonielehre. (Rameau wrote his Treatise on Harmony at the age of 39.)

One characteristic quality and device in Messiaen's music is his suspension of the sense of time. Many of his works have titles or movements that refer to time. In the late 1930s and early 1940s he introduced a new attitude to music as non-beginning: unending, eternal and beyond time. This is very evident in the works with "Louange" (Praise) movements and is a means to depict the "eternal" place where time does not exist. His harmony often operates in a non-progressive state where neither tension nor relaxation exists. Many of his works have an explicit ritualistic quality that refers to Western theological ideas but could in fact be said to draw their primal inspiration from oriental concepts.

Messiaen's theological universe is, however, very different from Schoenberg's. His treatise has sometimes been considered a reaction to Schoenberg's publication. With regard to composition, their universes might seem far removed from one another on a technical level but they converge around one central poetical question to be solved in relation to faith: how to convey God's presence in music? For Schoenberg, God was unrepresentable, for the nature lover Messiaen present everywhere. Schoenberg was a skeptic who converted to Lutheranism and later back to Judaism, while Messiaen was

from childhood a firm Catholic believer and a French Mediaevalist who loved the colorful rose windows in cathedrals. Schoenberg's career seems like a skeptic's endless search for confirmation of faith and unity, whereas Messiaen's is a highly sensuous affirmation of his faith. Schoenberg the numerologist focuses in his magnum opus Moses und Aron on the philosophical conception of God, Moses's new radical vision of a "infinite.. omnipresent ... inconceivable God" that creates a clash with the Israelites' wish for a visible and material God to worship. Messiaen the catalogist, on the other hand, transcribes birds and searches for musical reliquaries and objects from diverse cultures to be placed next to one another in his tableaux vivants celebrating God's creation. With his Catalogue d'oiseaux of the 1950s Messiaen shows himself as a montage artist. Boulez talks about Messiaen as an eclectic reformer.

Moses und Aron can be seen as Schoenberg's own journey around the issue of whether twelve-tone serialism, as a technique, could sustain such a big concept as a full-length opera. In one way, the opera is a 20th century Gesamtkunstwerk that starts not very unlike Wagner's Tristan, presenting the musical nucleus of the work right at the beginning. In Wagner's case it is the Tristan motif, in Schonberg's, the row. The melodic shape of the row is first established when Aron enters. Schoenberg works with the idea of the "infinite" or unfathomable with the six unseen voices singing trichords that open the opera. When God reveals himself to Moses with the burning bush, he does so via the timbral representation of spoken female, male and children's voices. The abstract God is, in other words, presented as a timbrally diverse, multi-layered entity.

In Schoenberg's other large religious work focusing on rebirth, the other unfinished oratorio Die Jakobsleiter (displaying certain influences of Swedenborgian mysticism, Balzac and Strindberg) we encounter the Archangel Gabriel (baritone) and, to name just a few, dramatis personae leading the discussion with the chosen one, doubters and a monk. Moses und Aron does not have this concrete presence from the divine realm on stage, but it is important to note that Moses is an opera not an oratorio, though it may originally have started as an oratorio.

Messiaen's magnum opus is Saint Francois d'Assise, premiered in Paris in 1983. This four-hour opera is scored for an enormous cast: a choir of 150, an orchestra of 110 and 9 singers. When it became known that Messiaen was working on an opera in the late 1970s, this in itself already seemed impossible. Very few of his works had so far dealt concretely with earthly affairs, "sur place", so to say, or had a clear linear narrative. How would Messiaen's imagination work with earthly things and concrete scenic action?

Almost all the works by Messiaen with an explicit theological interest are instrumental: no words appear apart from in the title and prefaces. Of his 48 works, 24 have titles that refer to Biblical, theological or liturgical themes, and of these, four have settings of words. ¹⁴

It does not come as a surprise that Messiaen's original dream was, after receiving the commission, to write a scenical Passion or a Resurrection of Christ, but he was not certain that the subject could be represented on stage. The theme of Saint Francis was

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¹⁴ Peter Hill: *Messiaen Companion*, p.235.

therefore a natural choice for a lover of nature and birds who played the viol and was the most Christ-like of all humans.

The scenical action is minimal. The libretto, by Messiaen himself, is no longer than 12 pages, even though the opera consists of three acts and eight scenes and it could be described as a mystery play about "the progress of divine grace in a human soul". Saint Francis could be said to follow the tradition of the transformative Tristan-like inner development narrative. As a librettist, Messiaen focuses on giving himself a full opportunity for colorful orchestration. In Tableaux 5," the Sermon to the Birds", Saint Francis sings:

"Where the leaves are red, the pigeons green, the trees white, where the sea changes from green to blue and from violet to green like the reflections in an opal."

Opera was clearly a difficult genre for Messiaen. His colorful surreal techniques of working with themes, lists of musical objects and sharp juxtapositions now had to be structured around a linear dramatic narrative, whether it would happen on stage or poetically in the orchestra. He does not introduce many new elements into his musical language; Saint Francis is about converging all symbolistic signifiers and lists in his polystylistic universe, in a more grandiose way than ever before.

Angels have always been central players in Messiaen's musical iconography. The Quartet for the End of Time was written in homage of the Angel of the Apocalypse. It is also the work where birds start to acquire an important function in Messiaen's oeuvre. In Saint Francis, the only female solo voice is that of the Angel.

Messiaen's numerous birds and the presence of the angels, their symbolical significance, especially side by side, can sometimes be a little difficult to identify and trace, especially as informal commentaries exist by Messiaen and Yvonne Loriod talking around birds as "God's musicians and messengers". In Catholic iconography this could imply that Messiaen is depicting angels, as they are often associated with music and with being messengers. In the case of birds, the role of each one transcribed at each stated moment, its placement in a work is of central importance for Messiaen. The symbolism associated with them also changed at many stages during his career; sometimes they were Oriental, sometimes Christian, sometimes their function was to create a montage of birdsongs from dawn to day. At a later stage different works became musical libraries, or as Malraux would say "imaginary museums" of cataloging trips to different countries and continents. (Sometimes exoticism could, however, be handled locally; the birds in Oiseaux Exotiques were found in the Jardin de Plantes in Paris. 15) To gather material for Saint Francis, Messiaen nevertheless travelled as far as New Caledonia. 41 birds sing in Saint Francis, 83 different species in the Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ. In Et expecto resurrectionem mortuorum just one bird is heard, in the third movement. The Amazonian Uirapurú here represents the voice of Christ announcing the time of the Resurrection. (In Amazonia the Uirapurú is reputed to be heard at the moment of death.) In Saint Francis the Gerygone, a New Caledonian warbler, functions as the Angel's signature bird. In other words, the different actors have individual birds assigned to them in the opera (sometimes more than one), but they also have additional leitmotivs attached to them that

¹⁵ Peter Hill: Messiaen Companion, p. 250.

are not transcribed from birdsong.

Signification-wise the solo birds and their placement are always thought out in the utmost detail, and the same applies to the large choruses of birds in Messiaen's output. The famous concert of the birds in Tableaux 6 constitutes the technical virtuosic climax of his "style oiseaux". He creates in it a masterful sonic canvas of birds that otherwise would never geographically meet or sing together, becoming that ethereal global village choir the Saint comments on in his dream vision. Do these choirs, executing simultaneous complex polyphony in which the separate identities of the transcriptions become nearly impossible to recognize, become Messiaen's colorful sonic paintings of abundance? Do the birds transform symbolically into "angelic choirs"?

Saint Francis sings: "He allowed you to sing so wonderfully that you speak without words, like the locution of angels, by means of music."

(St. Francis in Tableau 6, The Sermon to the Birds)

Considering Messiaen's exactitude with birds, it is surprising how few statements there are about his angelic iconography. The Celestial Hierarchies, the angels and their functions would seem a perfect way of working with layers of signification in music. With time, Messiaen's treatment of birds as messengers and choirs does, however, seem to acquire angelic qualities beyond the possible accurate transcription. It is as if he has taken the whole structure of Celestial Hierarchies found in Aquinas and created an architectural construction where the different birds could rest and sing.

Messiaen himself stated that the marriage of the celestial and the terrestrial realms had a central function in his magnum opus. These hierarchies or layers of the different realms in the opera can be called ¹⁶:

The divine realm The Angel Birds Francis

The human realm

The divine and human realms are represented by the choir; when visible on stage, they are human, when humming or intended not to be seen, they represent the divine, its impact on human life and as Christ's word. Messiaen's solution for presenting the divine is in fact very much like Schoenberg's in Moses. The other friars in the opera do, of course, count as humans. Francis and the Angel, the main protagonists, are juxtaposed. The mortal Francis aspires to imitate God's Son, whereas the Angel represents the eternal realm but assumes human form. In the scene "Angel musician" the Angel plays celestial music on his viol to Francis, also known as a viol player. For this "angelic music" scene Messiaen creates some of his most lyrical and refined moments of orchestration: three Ondes Martenot playing in different places with the heavenly humming choir as resonance. As with Hindemith (in the overture to Mathis der Mahler depicting the angelic concert), the heavenly music played by the Angel on his viol is not realized with the actual instrument in question.

¹⁶ Siglind Bruhn: Messiaen's Interpretations of Holiness and Trinity, p. 175.

In the opera, the birds occupy a central intermediary position, and one third of the music is in one way or another assigned to them. Sublimated birdsong here symbolically represents *music as such*.¹⁷ Once Saint Francis has heard the Angel musician play and become initiated in the celestial mysteries, he is able to understand the language of the birds and thus to communicate with them in the scene "Sermon to the Birds".

The Angel could best be described as a polystylistic creature in Messiaen's universe. Messiaen wanted the Angel to be portrayed in the initial production like Fra Angelico's famous paintings, just as he wanted its body language to follow the traditions of a Japanese Noh actor. The Angel themes – the Gerygone with high winds and the sharp, fast glissando that announces the angels' arrival – are gesturally very Japanese.

Messiaen told Claude Samuel the following about the Angel:

All religious painting is based on symbolic conventions; the same goes for the stained glass of the Middle Ages. I myself had to conform to these symbolic conventions since I put an angel on the stage in my Saint François d'Assise. Pure spirits, angels, are invisible, but I adopted the customary iconographic system: I imagined a magnificent being, neither man nor woman, a winged being dressed in a long robe. That's a symbolic convention.¹⁸

9. Stockhausen's Global Village

Messiaen's religious universe, full of numerology, catalogues and cosmology, seems in the long run not to have influenced many of his pupils, with the exception of Karlheinz Stockhausen, who briefly studied with him in Paris in 1952–1953, a year when Messiaen extensively analyzed Mozart in his class. Messiaen had at that time just finished the

¹⁷ Siglind Bruhn: *Messiaen's Interpretations of Holiness and Trinity*, p. 175.

¹⁸ Claude Samuel: Conversations with Messiaen, p. 28.

"Mode de valeurs et d'intensités" Stockhausen had encountered in Darmstadt and the "Messe de la Pentecote". (The Turangalîla symphony had been premiered with Leonard Bernstein in Boston in December 1949.) In summer 1951 audiences at Darmstadt had a first time chance to hear music from Schoenberg's opera Moses und Aron, namely the large scene "Der Tanz um das goldene Kalb" in the second act. The young generation had an opinion on the premiere: "C'est du Verdi sériel" (It is serial Verdi). 19

Stockhausen's studies with Messiaen are not very often commented upon, as many of his French students have seemed like his natural torchbearers, continuing their teacher's colorful and sensuous universe. What is forgotten is that Messiaen and Stockhausen shared the same Catholic faith. Stockhausen was raised a devout Catholic, he however later renounced organized religion in the 1960s. The last page of his masterpiece Gruppen for three orchestras of 1957 carries the words Deo Gratias (Thanks be to God), which is a response that occurs three times in the Latin Mass and in the Breviary and in Catholic prayers. Stockhausen states his relation to religion later on:

" The content of my pieces has always been religious, not just in those works with religious texts. The transcendental character was and is always there." 20

Antiphonal and spatial strategies in music that seem to have been used earlier mostly in Renaissance liturgical music inspired by sacred geometry suddenly become a central theme for many composers to explore in 1950ies, with either ensembles or electronics.

One of the most eye-opening works in this context, from the mid-20th century and

¹⁹ Michael Kurtz: Stockhausen A Biography, p. 37.

²⁰ Gregg Wager: Symbolism as a Compositional Method in the works of Karlheinz Stockhausen, p.54.

bordering on the angelic, is Stockhausen's Gesang der Jünglinge (Song of Praise of the

Three Youths or Song of the Youths) of 1956, in which a young boy soprano is recorded

reciting and singing the story from the Third Book of Daniel. It is the same canticle as

that heading Messiaen's "Communion" from the Messe de la Pentecote of 1950, in which

birdsong occupies a central role.

In the story King Nebuchadnezzar II throws the young men Shadrach, Meshach, and

Abednego into a Fiery Furnace because they refuse to worship a golden idol. They

remain unharmed and continue to praise the Lord. In some interpretations of the story

they are joined by the Archangel Michael.

Stockhausen regarded his work as a sacred mass. He had intended it as a Mass for

electronic sounds to be premiered in Cologne Cathedral, but the Church authorities

deemed loudspeakers inappropriate for the church and he transformed his initial concept

into a non-liturgical religious work. Originally it was realized as a five channel tape piece

but later transferred to four channels. (Some interpretations claim that Stockhausen

included an explicit extra musical message in the Mass; the parable of the three young

men would/could in fact be understood as Boulez, Nono and himself dealing with public

incomprehension of their groundbreaking innovations.²¹)

The 13-minute musical parable about keeping the faith turns out to be anticipatory of

Stockhausen's later formal strategies and ambitions involving text and voice in

composition (and hence theatre, too) and ways of combining vocal- and electronically-

²¹ Robin Maconie: *Other planets*, p. 166.

produced sounds. In Gesang Stockhausen has chosen eleven Biblical verses and the crucial "Preiset den Herrn" ("Praise ye the Lord") segment functions here as a refrain to be repeated as if by the Catholic congregation, or not unlike a Hesychastic liturgical prayer in the Eastern Orthodox religion. The phrase also becomes an element that articulates different sections of the work, in between Stockhausen's synthetic electronic fire. The text is, of course, put through numerous articulations and permutations (telbju, lebtuj, jubelt, blujet, etc.) that work on such levels as word, syllable, phoneme and sequence, to name just a few. This also means that there are numerous fluid transitions from verbal to musical meaning, and vice versa.

Serialism and the structural organization of music reached their peak in the late 1950s, and Gesang is one of the decisive masterpieces from this era as regards the achievement of a layered polyphony of the different systems of generating pitch, time structure, timbres and spatialisation in one and the same piece.

With Gesang, Stockhausen took a leading position in the avant-garde, though not so evident at that stage was maybe that the same applied to him as a contemporary religious, spiritual and mystic composer. In the following decade, as stated earlier, Stockhausen abandoned the Catholic faith and started to investigate the global village of religions and musics from different parts of the world. He was at this period a forerunner of experimentalism, a researcher concerned with music's spiritual origins and social relevance, an intellectual and intuitive visionary, a practical musician who conjured up visions by poetry and dreams. Where Stockhausen went, the audience usually followed,

masterpieces were created and so were polemical intuitive works that divided audiences.

This period also witnessed Stockhausen's extensive travels in the East, including the

six-month stint in the spherical auditorium of the German Pavilion in Osaka during the

1970 World Fair, where nearly a million people had a chance to experience his cosmic

music.

Stockhausen had been to Japan for the first time in 1966, and as with Messiaen, Japanese

culture, Noh theatre, gagaku and shomyo temple music and the expanded Oriental time-

scale came to have a large impact on him.

There is something messianic about all the composers of Stockhausen's generation; they

are there to create a new world order with the potential of new technology. Turning

nostalgically back to the esthetic would associated with the World War II would not have

been an easy option for a young mid-European composer at that stage. Taking this into

account, it is exciting to try to trace their initial impulses.

The Stockhausen specialist Robert Maconie quotes Hermann Hesse's novel Das

Glasperlenspiel (The Glass Bead Game) and its main character Joseph Knecht as a

central influence for Stockhausen. According to Maconie, the book came as a spiritual

revelation and prophecy for the young Stockhausen about his own role as a composer and

innovator.²² In the book, Hesse imagines a future in which music has become the most

refined and universal expression of human thought. The game itself seems to be an

²² Robin Maconie: Other planets, p. 22.

amalgam of everything from plainchant, rosary, abacus, medieval disputation, astronomy, chess and I Ching, to name just a few.

Contemplating now, many decades later, the origins of the Licht cycle written between 1977 and 2003, Hesse's Magister Ludi and his world seem very far away, but Maconie certainly has a point.

In its entirety, the Licht cycle of operas comes across as a monumental Renaissance masque, liturgical drama or myths narrated in medieval altar panels with different scenes presenting and contemplating questions that Stockhausen has envisaged, traumatically experienced during World War II or reacted to in contemporary life. Some scenes, such as Lucifer's Dance in Samstag aus Licht (Saturday of Light) seems not far removed from a scene from Fritz Lang's famous Metropolis. Another scene, Jahreslauf, that originated for a gagaku orchestra and dancers in Tokyo but later became the first item in Licht, follows a ritualistic structure of four temptations and incitements preceded by entrance music. The first act of Donnerstag, about the youth of the main protagonist Michael, stands out as a self-referential tableau of Stockhausen's own troubled childhood.

Talking about Licht as an opera poses problems. The whole poetical form of Licht can be seen as a multi-layered installation and collage of symbolic meanings and theatrical traditions that draw inspiration from numerous religious and philosophical sources, placing events and processes at different stages of the cycle. If the cycle is ever performed in its entirety, it may begin with any day, and it will need several theatres as different acts are, even in one and the same opera, intended for performance in different

spaces. Thematically, Licht deals as a work explicitly with the otherworldly. It does not comply with the narrative processes usually found in literary operas with conventional librettos. For example, Stockhausen talks about Samstag as the opera preoccupied with the dramaturgy of death as a catastrophe. Another way to discuss the opera would be to talk about it as a prolonged Requiem. The text to the fourth and last scene, "Lucifer's farewell", is in fact St. Francis's Lodi delle virtù (Hymn to the Virtues).

Stockhausen had earlier used dancer mimes in his Inori. In Licht, the three main protagonists are presented in a threefold way: each as a singer, musician and dancer. The Archangel, psychopomp and creator Michael is represented by a trumpet, Eve by a basset horn and the fallen angel Lucifer by a trombone. The trumpet is Michael's means of leading humanity to God. That Stockhausen decided to name his whole cycle around light gives Licht a very strong symbolic connection to Islam, as Allah created his angels from light.

10. Rituals today

What is fascinating in contemporary works dealing with angels and rituals is more often than not their totemic, almost monumental qualities. Writing them seems, for their composers, to have been a significant and conscious undertaking. Placing the works earlier discussed side by side, starting with Schoenberg, Messiaen and Stockhausen, it is nevertheless possible to trace certain trends; the majority of those including voices or scenic action seem to use text and poetry for their own ritualistic purposes. Schoenberg's Moses und Aron is, in this light, the last opera in which the problems conveyed in the text and narrative are the key protagonist or agenda of the scenic action. (It is also important

to note that all three composers were their own librettists of the works mentioned.) With Stockhausen's Licht we have finally abandoned Judeo-Christian mythology and mysticism as the only spiritual referential network; Stockhausen's rituals and time concept belong to a spiritual agenda in which he sees all religions and their musics as different dialects, whereas Messiaen works within a strict Catholic referential framework of symbols in his magnum opus, and the music is in fact polystylistic mosaic of influences and sonic objects from different cultures. The libretto of Saint Francis builds a semiotic canvas full of lists, returning quests, numerological ratios and prayers to which Messiaen can react. In Mittwoch (Wednesday), Stockhausen goes further; he invents a whole new linguistic system, a new language with a grammar, syntax, rhetoric and dialects. For him, the formal processes related to worship and rituals assume primal significance. What is often complex and disturbing with Stockhausen is the way he combines high and low, and juxtaposes religious artifacts from different cultures.

Composers dealing with angelic themes as a source of inspiration from the 1960s onwards often seem very eclectic in their choice of religious heritage; their angels are often hybrids of many cultures. Composers like Rautavaara, Tavener and Harvey, to mention just a few, all seem to draw on the global musical heritage to which they have access, very often so that the presence of ritualistic percussion comes from non-Western cultures juxtaposed with Western plainchant; George Crumb's Black Angels plays with numerology and quotations, Rautavaara opts for Rilke's Islamic masculine angels, and Harvey is strongly inspired by Buddhism. Lists and prayers work as central structural devices, and even unbelievers like Boulez model their large works on religious rituals (Répons and Rituel).

Sir Harrison Birtwistle's opera The Mask of Orpheus of the 1980s works with invented language, ritual, circles of returning questions as well as different auras or soundscapes of electronic music depicting different time layers in the myth. It can be considered one of the central operas dealing with rituals as formal devices on stage. The main roles, Orpheus, the alchemist of music, and his muse Euridice are presented simultaneously on stage as singer, mime and puppet, not totally unlike the protagonists in Licht. For Birtwistle, the main criterion in choosing the dramatic subjects in all his operas has been the formal musico-dramatic structures they can generate, often so that he has sought the myth that best complies with the formal musical ambitions he wishes to accentuate. Over the past decade he has ventured strongly into Christian mythology, with works like The Angel Fighter and the Io Passion. Steve Reich and Mark Andre have, on the other hand, recorded and analysed acoustics and noise in sacred spaces for their compositions. (Mark Andre speaks of "acoustic photographs" of the Sultan Ahmet Mosque and Hagia Eirene in Istanbul in relation to his "üg".)

11. "The Anatomy of Angels: A", composing a catalogue in space, notes towards a strategy beyond religion

The name of my own work related to the research topic of the current paper can be derived from Damien Hirst's "Anatomy of an Angel" of 2008, a Carrara marble sculpture based on Alfred Boucher's sculpture L'Hirondelle (1920). In Hirst's version different sections of the sculpture show the anatomical structure of the angel beneath the skin, thus taking a strong stance in showing the angel as a feminine human being. Choosing the plural of the title as the name of the piece seems most logical as Hirst is, if anything, an

artist working with the Baroque thematicism of visual lists, catalogues and reliquaries, yet seen from a modern historical context and using modern materials. (Damien Hirst was raised Catholic.) Much of his art deals with building large art-pieces with existing artifacts, as his minimalistic Medical Cabinets, or dead animals in formaldehyde that end up as pieces with fantastical baroque-like titles. As a artist he is more of a collage artist arranging existing things in suprising ways instead of a inventor creating new. It is too interesting to note that at certain stage in his career he seriously considered becoming a curator instead of an artist. ²³

My choral work in progress lists 59 names of Christian, Islamic and Hebrew angels starting with A as the text for the piece found in Umberto Eco's book about lists. (A full list of all the angels in Eco's list would amount to around 440 names. The fallen angels constitute a different list.) The poetic material for the work is, in other words, extremely sparse but full of significations (Abdizuel, Abriel, Adan, Adnachiel, Adonael, Adriel, Ahayah, Aihel, Akaiah..., etc.) Each angel has, of course, a multitude of functions depending on the referential religion in question; sometimes there is even a multitude of interpretations to choose from within just one of the three religions. Cataloguing and trying to depict all their differing angelic history in music would be dramaturgically very difficult to articulate in a continuous piece, though they obviously present a multitude of possible solutions for creating textures, proportions, form and structure. It is, however, important to remember here that the hierarchy chosen for the list is alphabetical and does not correspond to any internal angelic hierarchy in any of the three religions. That said a poem, text or list can be composed though in a clear perceptible or disguised manner.

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Francesco Bonami: Damien Hirst Relics, p.21.

The work is scored for three vocal quartets (soprano,alto,tenor, bass) in space; one in the middle with the others on the left and right of the audience thus creating the potential for a multitude of antiphonal effects used in Catholic repetitive prayers and Islamic rotating rituals in space. To the left of the vocal quartet on the stage is one percussionist and a trumpet, to the right a trombone and a percussionist. The instruments all, as discussed earlier, have in music a strong ritualistic connotation. The singers are, furthermore, assigned different percussion instruments. These different groupings in space give opportunity to distribute evenly both high and low registers in space, equally create echo like situations reminiscent of the early renaissance Venetian cori spezzati, not to mention Luigi Nono's choral output and the late Prometeo, the ultimate masterpiece of spatial music.

The clarity of the narrative and the word painting of the text have seldom been important in the genre of spatial, polyphonic choral works, as other layers have often been of higher strategic importance. The freedom the material suggests here seems not far from the medieval motet during the thirteenth and early fourteenth century where different religious and amorous texts and plainchant collided on top of each other making the perceptible clarity of the text not an important factor. Focusing on the angels starting with A will provide vocally a clear dominant color in itself with regard to vowels and articulation, giving the whole work an open, resonant character. Most of the names include many vowels and the transitions to other vowels can be assigned a strong dramaturgical significance, as can the sonic quality of the more percussive consonants.

Restricting oneself only to angels starting with A means, dramaturgically, that the hierarchically important Archangels will not be included, though the Islamic angel of death Azrail is present in the list. Arael, on the other hand, is the patron of birds. A few of the names permit diverse interpretations of their functions, depending on which religion one wants to refer to. The angels have symbolic associations with various elements and materials (such as wind, fire and metal) and hence suggestive of sounds and repetitive gestures that lend themselves to possible layered textures not unlike the sonic auras that Birtwistle has in his Orphic opera. The associative and symbolic references of each given angel, where they are placed according to different Celestial Hierarchies, their lunar positions etc. gives numerous possibilities for building a structural, spatial grid of events to unfold with chords, and polyphonic, even colliding textures in space, not to forget allegorical quotations for a composer to work through in the slow unfolding procession in time presenting the names of the angels.

Choosing a list of names as a text for a vocal piece is to build the form of a piece with a succession of fragments as a list is not a prayer nor a poem that generates a linear dramaturgy with its emotional highs and lows. A list of names in music can be a succession of musical objects or sonic footnotes of non-linearly conceived events, that either flow smoothly into each other, or cut or collide with each other sharply.

Should these sonic footnotes and the actual recited or sung names of the angels unfold simultaneously or like rotating spheres in different speeds?

Jonathan Harvey's late masterpiece Messages (2007) for large choir and orchestra, including a cimbalom, is based on the names of 144 Jewish and Persian angels. It lasts 25

minutes, literally giving an average of 9 seconds per angel; this might, of course, be an estimate of the overall tempo and spacing. The harmonic rhythm is slow, with the choir creating a lush, slowly-breathing rhythm as it announces the names of the angels to be embellished by the orchestra, percussion and cimbalom. Harvey does not set out to accentuate the different angels and their mythology, but rather to create a unitary whole inspired by Eastern spirituality and stasis.

Writing, or even contemplating a piece consisting of names that have diverse significations in three major religions poses however for me a multi-perspectival challenge, not least because the role of music has, throughout its history, differed greatly in the three religions in question. Writing for choir and ensemble is already an obvious Western choice, from a Judeo-Islamic standpoint. In addition, a spatial choir piece will almost certainly get most performances in Christian churches or spaces.

There are, however, some common denominators for finding a strategy for the encounter of different religions and their angels: one is the sacred place, the temple. It is significant to note that many religious places of worship (Hagia Sofia in Istanbul, the Temple in Jerusalem) have for thousands years suited more than one of the monotheistic religions. Places and spaces of worship have often implied layered histories and, from a musical standpoint, long decays and drones – qualities that are important especially in Sephardic and Islamic music. (The time period referentially most interesting for a composer today in this context is the Islamic Iberia, Al Andalus with its Mozarabic liturgies and microtonal inflections.) When it comes to the rapid development of sacred European architecture we usually forget that it triggered daring spatial experiments, in music, and

often vocal for many centuries. It is in fact quite a new tendency that nearly everything in music performance happens solely on stage. During the last centuries, when music has mostly abandoned the spatial it is fascinating to see that so much of music contemplating these issues seem to have a strong relation to the subjects discussed.

It is very unlikely my piece in progress will be the last pondering all these questions.

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Johan Tallgren: Tombeau pour New York

Instrumentation:

Clar. in Bb

Flute /Fl. in G./ Piccolo Oboe/ English horn

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Clar. in Bb/ Bass Clar. in Bb
Bassoon
French horn
2 Trumpets in C
Trombone
2 percussion:
1.
Vibraphone
Marimba
Spring Coil
Triangle
Crotales
2 Log Drums (med/low)
Gran Cassa
2.
Tubular bells
2 tam-tams ( med/ low)
2 suspended cymbals ( med/low)
glass chimes
Chinese gong (high)
3 Temple Blocks
4 Thai-gongs (D3, E 3, Bb 3, B 3)
2 Bell plates (E 3, Eb 4)
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Score in C.

Harp

Piano / Celesta

2 ViolinsViola2 CellosDouble bass



Johan Tallgren: Tombeau pour New York













































