

Messiaen: *Visions de l'Amen*, "Amen de la Création"  
A Structural Analysis

Messiaen's *Visions de l'Amen* for two pianos, first premiered in 1943, is quite similar in its musical language and form to pieces like *Quatour pour la fin du temps*, premiered only a few years prior in 1941, and other pieces from Messiaen's mid-20<sup>th</sup> century output. In these works, Messiaen makes extensive use of isorhythmic sequences paired with quartal harmonic/melodic pitch collections to give his music formal unity. Juxtaposed to these dissonant quartal harmonies and complex isorhythms, Messiaen uses lyrical diatonic collections to create accessible and progressive melodies, which guide the listener through the dramatic arch of the music. The use of ostinato, repetition, and slight variation is highly prevalent during this compositional period, and naturally finds its way into the musical language of *Vision de l'Amen*. In this piece, Messiaen uses all these musical devices (isorhythm, ostinato, fixed pitch collections, and melodic progression), deriving much of his material from a few simple ideas, to create harmonically and rhythmically complex yet formally comprehensible music.

In *Visions de l'Amen* Messiaen sets up a system in his first movement that he carries through the entire work. This system utilizes the two pianos to highlight the primary contrasting musical elements in the piece: form and progression. Piano I, often confined to the upper register of the instrument, functions for many of the movements, and particularly in the first movement, "Amen de la Création," as the formal organizer of the music. In this instrument Messiaen places his overlapping and repetitive isorhythms, which use sequences of non-retrogradable rhythms with repetitive descending quartal harmonies. In Piano II, which is mostly confined to the lower register of the instrument, Messiaen frequently, and exclusively in the first movement, places the melodic materials, which give the music forward momentum. While the isorhythms in Piano I provide a skeleton upon which to develop musical materials, the melodic content of Piano II provides the dramatic plane upon which the music may be developed.

The role of Piano II is as a double rhythmic and melodic ostinato. Each hand has a very independent rhythmic structure, but each line is derived from the same basic rhythmic and harmonic material. Refer to Figure 1 and notice the four basic rhythmic ideas a, b, c, and d that Messiaen is using. Each rhythmic cell consists of a long tone followed by a tone that is half its value followed then by the original duration. Simply put, long-short-long. Rhythmic cells a, b, and c are all directly related to this idea. Cell d is not a direct correlation to a, b, or c but is an additive derivation of them. The added rhythmic values (in brackets) are  $\frac{1}{4}$  additions from the values of c that have simply not all been tied into their derived notes, creating a new yet similar rhythmic flavor. Rhythmic cell "e" is a freely composed non-retrogradable rhythm which Messiaen employs to add some variation to the overlapping isorhythms.

Once establishing these rhythmic cells, Messiaen given them a specified registral position and order in which they are to be played. While the right hand of Piano I uses only rhythmic cells a and b, the left hand only uses cells c, d, and e. The continual and fixed sequence of these cells in each hand creates a varied and rhythmically rich ostinato upon which Messiaen may develop his melodic materials.

**Figure 1: “Amen de la Creation” – Messiaen’s Rhythmic Pedals**

Isorhythm "a" (non-retrogradable)

Upper Rhythmic Pedal {

Isorhythm "b" (2/3 of "a")

Isorhythm "c" (non-retrogradable)

Lower Rhythmic Pedal {

Isorhythm "d" (modified "c" with rhythmic additions equal to 1/4 the value of "c")

Isorhythm "e" (additional unrelated non-retrogradable rhythm)

As with any isorhythm, Messiaen also employs a non-coinciding sequence of pitch materials over the rhythmic materials. His melodic/harmonic sequence consists of three descending quartal chords in each hand, each chord a transposition of pitch class (016). Please refer to Figure 2. Messiaen derives each of these trichords from the previous through a transpositional process. Furthermore, he derives one set of three trichords from the other by a tritone transposition, a common melodic, harmonic, and structural element throughout Messiaen's oeuvre. Both the relation between the trichord sets and the

itches within the trichords themselves demonstrate Messiaen's heavy use of the tritone as a foundational musical element. The overlapping of the melodic/harmonic dimension of this isorhythm (color) and the rhythmic sequencing (talea) provide “Amen de la Creation” with its formal skeleton. When one traces the sequences, the form of this piece becomes very clear.

**Figure 2: “Amen de la Creation” – Messiaen’s Ostinato Collections**

Upper Melodic Ostinato Pitch Collection (right hand)

(016) --- T10 --- T10

8va

(01234568T) ambitus: m7

(016) - T9 - (016)

Upper Melodic Ostinato Pitch Collection (left hand)

(016) --- T10 --- T10

(01234567T) ambitus: m7

(016) - T6 - (016)

T6

The rhythmic cell sequence for the right and left hand of Piano I is as follows (Note: Messiaen provides some free rhythmic material in this sequence which allows further rhythmic interest, eliding our expectations. This material is simply the respective trichords in even eighth note descents. All three-chord groups of free material are labeled as “f” with its corresponding number of iterations)

#### Right Hand:

ab-f(x3 & 1/3) ab-f(x3 & 1/3) ab-f(x14 & 2/3) ab (pause)	29 & 1/3 cycles of trichord groups
ab-f(x3 & 1/3) ab-f(x3 & 1/3) ab-f(x14 & 2/3) ab (pause)	29 & 1/3 cycles of trichord groups
ab-f(x3 & 1/3) ab-f(x3 & 1/3) ab-f(x14 & 2/3) ab (end)	29 & 1/3 cycles of trichord groups
Total of three compound talea cycles	Total of 78 cycles of color

Notice that the talea and color of the right hand groups do coincide in their ends until the end of the piece. The first section ends on the first trichord of the color; the second section ends on the second trichord of the color; and the third section ends on the final trichord of the color, completing the isorhythmic cycle after 38.5 measures of 4/4 time.

#### Left Hand:

cdcde cdcde cdcde cdcde cdcde cd (end)	10 & 1/3 trichords groups each talea
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Thus, in the left hand, for every three cycles of the rhythmic talea, we have a coinciding end with the color. It takes three cycles of talea to make and even 33 cycles of the color in the left hand. The consequence of this is that the isorhythm in the left hand is left incomplete at the end of the piece. While the right hand has completed its cycle by its final measure, we are left on the first trichord of the group in the left hand. This allows the piece to remain open ended, propelling the work into the next movement. In fact, the last sonority by any of the piano voices in this movement is the “hanging” trichord of the left hand. A figurative leap into the air without resolution. Perhaps in Messiaen’s language, this is a half cadence, requiring further resolution later in the work.

While Piano I provides the piece with rhythmic momentum and form, Piano II, supposedly played by Messiaen himself at the piece’s premiere, provides the listener with an accessible and dramatic melody, giving the music emotive motion. Without Piano II, the piece might sound like an exercise in rhythmic dexterity and harmonic confusion. However, with the addition of the low and sonorous tones of the second piano, which pass through the light and airy textures of the first piano, the piece gains melodic dynamism.

The melody expounded by Piano II, in contrast to Piano I’s material, is highly diatonic and harmonious, utilizing almost exclusively major and minor triads in various inversions as harmonic foundations to a mostly mixolydian melody (see Figure 4). If one refers to Figure 3, the phrase and pitch skeleton of this melody is given. Messiaen utilizes familiar variation processes to give aural coherence to his idea. While the isorhythm of Piano I acts as a background element, which needs little development and which is at the periphery of most listener’s ears, the melody of Piano II is the essential core of this music. It is what will grab listeners and will be more readily remembered. Thus the necessity for development and expansion of this idea is clear.

**Figure 2: “Amen de la Creation” – Theme of Creation (Outline)**

2nd Piano Melody:

Descending sequence... ..

repeat x3 (mm. 1-8; 9-16; 17-24)

mm. 25-26  
Melodic Cell

mm. 27-28  
Melodic Cell  
(ambitus extension)

mm. 29-30  
Melodic Cell  
(elaboration/extension)

mm. 31-32  
Melodic Cell  
(fragmentation)

mm. 33-34  
Melodic Cell  
(fragment resolution and coda)

mm. 34-36  
(sustain to end at m. 39)

**Figure 4: “Amen de la Creation” – Messiaen’s Melodic Mode****Theme of Creation Pitch Collection:** (0123568T)(E mixolydian with added B $\flat$ )

Note: B $\flat$  only occurs once in the entire melody

W      W      H      (H) - W - (H)      W      H

Messiaen first allows the melody to repeat three times, each time building the drama of the music by raising the register of the tune by an octave and providing it with more harmonic support. First, the melody is heard as a low rumble with its theme notes an octave below the bass staff. The second time it is heard in measure 9, the melody is transposed and now resides on the bottom of the bass staff. The third time it is heard, it climbs its way onto the middle of the treble staff. After the third iteration of the beginning of this melody, now that it has blossomed into musical fullness, Messiaen departs from it and introduces the second melodic idea in measure 25. At this point, Messiaen moves us from an A-E centered tonality to an E-B centered tonality – probably a clear reference to a tonic-dominant shift that will ultimately remain unresolved at the end of this movement, and which will not find resolution until the final movement, which returns to and ends on A.

As one can see in Figure 3, the second half of the melody utilizes various processes familiar to Messiaen in his rhythmic language, such as addition, subtraction, and fragmentation. Messiaen begins with a small melodic cell and bases each following melodic fragment on this first. Yet again, Messiaen uses generative processes to not only provide musical coherence but also musical material itself.

*Visions de l'Amen* along with many of Messiaen's works concern themselves with generative processes. The use of small rhythmic or melodic ideas in various and perhaps endless combinations is a hallmark of Messiaen. Perhaps it is because of these generative process that

Messiaen is able to create music of such novel complexity both rhythmically and harmonically while still being able to reach a wide audience of listeners. The coherence his music offers through its formal organization allows Messiaen to be adventurous in other musical realms, such as harmony and rhythm. Perhaps his music would not be as successful if it seemed to lack logic, but whether one is deeply aware of it or not, the fact that the music has logic seems clear. The large and small form repetitions create a musical language that allows the listener to learn the language as they listen. Maybe this is why composers like Schoenberg, who adamantly campaigned against repetition in music, did not find as much long lasting success and popularity as Messiaen. A listener confronted with Schoenberg and no knowledge of the 12-tone system has little to grasp hold of. The music constantly ungulates and develops in drastic manners, one moment hardly ever returning to the previous. Messiaen seeks to do the opposite in his music. He creates a complex language out of very simple and individually understandable materials, and then he presents his language in a reinforcing form of reutterance and return, allowing one to reflect on what has past and what will probably come again in time, absorbing the essence of the discourse as it happens.