

The Influence of Plainchant in the Organ Works of
Olivier Messiaen, with Specific Reference to
Messe de la pentecôte

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

I have always found plainchant¹ to have an other-worldly quality. The sound of modal, unison singing in a historic building, indistinct due to reverberation, and supported by modal organ accompaniment, has a charm beyond the tension and release cycles of tonality.

Roger Kamien (2018:75) defines plainchant as the unaccompanied, unison singing of Latin liturgical text set to modal melodies. He explains that it is non-metrical, and the sense of pulse or beat is similar to that of speech. It was the official music of the Catholic church since the early centuries up to 1965 when the Church decreed that Holy Mass could subsequently be performed in the vernacular languages of the various countries (Kamien, 2018:76). As a result, plainchant, which is deeply rooted in the Latin language, has since largely fallen into disuse in Catholic liturgy.

Despite this fact, its influence is still present in the works of prominent contemporary composers. It is remarkable that, although several style periods have come and gone through the ages, the influence of plainchant on organ music is still prevalent more than a thousand years later. According to Annette Kreutziger-Herr (1998:191), one of the features of postmodernist art of the late 20th century is the coexistence of past and present. In his book on plainchant in French organ music, David Connolly states that “chant remained a vibrant element in music of the twentieth century” (Connolly, 2013:275), and that it is an important element in Olivier Messiaen’s (1908-1992) organ music.

There was a surge in French organ music after the development of the organ in the 19th century by the designer and builder Aristide Cavaillé-Coll (1811-1899). During the same period, plainchant was alive and well in France as that country had been a stronghold of the Catholic church for centuries. The organist-composers in the many churches and cathedrals in and around Paris had regular exposure to the liturgical music of the Catholic church, and the influence of plainchant on their music was inevitable and profound.

¹ The terms ‘Gregorian chant’, ‘chant’, ‘plainchant’ and ‘plainsong’ are used interchangeably.

According to Richard Taruskin, Messiaen is “without question the most important organist-composer of the twentieth century” (2010:230). The abstract of Jens Korndörfer’s article on the influence of Gregorian chant on Messiaen’s organ works states that Gregorian chant “informed Messiaen’s musical language in ways that go beyond direct quotations and/or textual references” (Korndörfer, 2014).

1.2 Research Objectives

The research objectives are:

1. to study the influence of plainchant in Messiaen’s organ music, and
2. to identify examples of such influence in the *Messe de la pentecôte*.

1.3 Literary Review

Large amounts of research material exist in the areas of plainchant, its influence on Western art music, and about Messiaen’s music generally. Two papers are entirely devoted to Messiaen’s *Messe de la pentecôte* organ work. The first, a doctoral dissertation by Shi-Ae Park (2013) explains its programmatic elements, form, and use of Greek and Hindu rhythms. The second, an article by Robert Fallon from the *Journal of Musicology* (2009), discusses the presence of birdsong and the influence of social issues of the time including the nuclear anxiety that prevailed. However, I have not found a single paper that focusses on the influence of plainchant on the *Messe*² specifically. This research paper addresses that need.

There are various books, articles and theses that cover various aspects of Gregorian chant. Richard Crocker (2000) devotes his entire book to the history of Gregorian chant, most of which is beyond the scope of this paper. More relevant is the brief summary of the development of Gregorian chant from the early middle ages by Roger Kamien (2018:75-76). Dom Daniel Saulnier (2010) presents a detailed history from the perspective of the Catholic church. Cheong Wai-Ling (2008) introduces the concept of *neumes*, an early form of plainchant notation that is described under 4.2.1.

² From this point onwards, the *Messe de la pentecôte* will also be referred to as the *Messe*.

Several papers provide biographical content of Messiaen. As mentioned earlier, Taruskin (2010:230) explains Messiaen's prominence as 20th century composer. Christopher Dingle and Robert Fallon (2013b) provide a detailed discussion of the reception of Messiaen's music, his influence on other composers, and his synaesthesia³. Messiaen's musical language is described briefly by Connolly (2013:270-272) and in detail by Dingle & Fallon (2013a). Shenton (2016:6) describes Messiaen's 'language of signs' using his organ composition *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité* as a case study. His use of signs and religious symbolism is explained by Andrew Shenton (2016) and Siglind Bruhn (2013). Wai-Ling (2008) describes Messiaen's use of birdsong in his organ compositions. Messiaen's book (1944), although dated, describes, in the composer's own words, his 'modes of limited transposition'.

Connolly (2013:288-289) covers the influence of plainchant on French organ music since the French Revolution. Robert Sherlaw-Johnson (2012) explains Messiaen's rhythmic technique and symbolism in rhythm. According to Paul Griffiths (2009:viii), Messiaen's music, like plainchant, disregards the forward movement of time. Griffiths therefore implies that such treatment of time is probably a consequence of plainchant influence. Griffiths also describes Messiaen's technique of using a very slow tempo in organ works such as *Le banquet céleste* to a point where any sense of movement or harmonic progression is destroyed. Messiaen (Messiaen, 1944) explains how he destroys regular beat patterns with the use of his 'added value' technique. He also explains the concept of 'nonretrogradable rhythms'.

Shi-Ae Park (2013) discusses plainchant influence on the melodies and harmony of the *Messe* in detail, and this paper draws extensively on his dissertation. Richard Porterfield (2014) provides a detailed description of chant analysis and compares his method with that of Heinrich Schenker (1868-1935). Vincent Benitez (2004:188) explains the significance of Messiaen's synaesthesia and the importance of 'sound-colour' relationship in Messiaen's compositions.

1.4 Research Design and Method

This study takes the form of an empirical study of literature on plainchant, biographical content

³ For someone with synaesthesia, stimuli to one sensory input will also trigger sensations in one or more other sensory modes ("Oxford Music Online", 2019). In the case of Messiaen, it refers to 'sound-colour'.

on Messiaen, and existing papers on his organ work, the *Messe de la pentecôte*.

A historical study of plainchant is performed to develop insight into the many aspects of plainchant that could conceivably exert influence on contemporary organ composers. Such aspects range from symbolic influence from the religious context of plainchant, to structural influence of the rhythms, melodic contours and musical form of plainchant. The study of the 19th and 20th centuries focuses on the influence of the French church and the rapid development of the organ in France.

This is followed by a biographic study of Messiaen, to gain insight into his life of faith and love of nature, and into the way his music reflected his social awareness, his synaesthesia and his sign language.

Existing literature on the *Messe* is analysed and understanding of its style and form, and for references to plainchant. Finally, the sheet music is traversed in search of the various types of plainchant influence that were discovered during the study.

2 Plainchant

2.1 A Brief History

In order to understand the influence of plainchant on Messiaen's organ music, it is essential to have some insight into its history. There is some uncertainty about the origins of plainchant. The view was held by some that its melodies were composed by Pope Gregory I (590-604) (Connolly, 2013:2). More recent research revealed that, although its development may have started in the early centuries, plainchant is essentially the fusion of elements from the *Old Roman chant* and *Frankish chant* in the 8th and 9th centuries (Connolly, 2013:2-3). The earliest surviving chant manuscripts date from about the 9th century (Kamien, 2004:84).

There are hundreds of chants known today that originated from between the 7th and 14th centuries (Kamien, 2018:76). Their composers are almost completely unknown. The melodies were originally used for various parts of the religious service, and they created a prayerful atmosphere. These melodies have featured in many compositions over many centuries, either as direct quotations or in the form of rhythmic, melodic, harmonic or structural influence (Karmien, 2018:75).

2.1.1 Alternatim and the earliest organ compositions

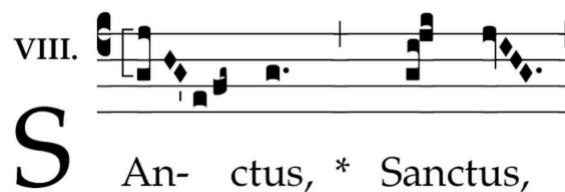
Plainchant became the standard music in the Catholic liturgy during the 12th and 13th centuries. Entire liturgical *rites*⁴ were chanted, and this became quite monotonous and tiring for the singers (Connolly, 2013:16). In an attempt to introduce some variation and to alleviate fatigue, the practice of *alternatim* was introduced, where solo and choral sections of the text were alternatively performed. Psalm singing had a verse and a refrain section, where a soloist would sing the verse and the choir would sing the refrain. This is referred to as *antiphonal* or *responsorial* psalm singing (Connolly, 2013:14). This practice evolved into polyphonic singing of the solo section by a small group. Over time, the *positive organ* took over the decorative role of the higher polyphony voices against the sung chant in the lower voice. The earliest organ compositions originated in this way (Connolly, 2013:15).

⁴ A *rite* is a prescribed form of service or order of worship ("OED Online", 2019).

The *alternatim* became common in the 15th century. Singers would sing the *cantus firmus* with organ accompaniment. When skilled singers were not available, the organ *verset*⁵ would be played alone, and it was expected of the organist to select and play the musical material in a way that reflects the meaning of the text being replaced (Connolly, 2013:17). Unfortunately, these 15th century manuscripts did not survive, as organists were very capable improvisors and were less dependent on notated music, and the music was seen as utilitarian and monotonous rather than artistic. The earliest surviving French organ volumes contain *versets* for the mass and were published in 1531 by the publisher Pierre Attaignant (1494-1552) (Connolly, 2013:18).

The *verset* for organ from the *Sanctus* of the *Missa Cunctipotens*, published in 1531, is a good example of *alternatim* practice in the 16th century. The first two phrases of the *Sanctus* chant is shown in Gregorian chant notation in Fig. 1. The C-clef indicates where C is, and the short vertical lines show the phrase boundaries. Where notes are vertically aligned, the bottom note is sung first. The first phrase is for the soloist, and the ‘*’ before the second phrase indicates that all sing together.

Fig. 1: *Missa Cunctipotens*, III



The first 8 measures of the *verset* for organ contain the first phrase of the chant in its middle voice as shown in Fig. 2. The first note of the chant appears an octave higher.

⁵ A *verset* is a short verse from the Bible or a similar book (“OED Online”, 2019). In this context, the term refers to a short organ solo from a Renaissance Mass.

Fig. 2: *Missa Cunctipotens*, III *Verset for Organ*, mm. 1-8



One hundred years later, Jehan Titelouze (1562-1633), a French organist-composer, published his collection of organ music (Connolly, 2013:18). Titelouze was one of the first French early Baroque church composers (“Jehan Titelouze”, 2018).

2.1.2 Deterioration and restoration of plainchant

During the 16th century, directives by the *Roman Council of Trent*, also known as the *Counter-Reformation Council*, resulted in the compilation of new chant books known as the *Anerio-Soriano Medicean Edition* in 1614-1615. The objective was to improve the sacred music of the church, but the result was quite the opposite. The prevailing music style of the 16th century was applied, and notes and accentuations were changed to be more attractive to the church membership and conform to the tonality of the time. This influenced the character of chant, and it became known as “corrupt plainchant” (Connolly, 2013:4).

The early 19th century was a time of turbulence in France in the aftermath of the French Revolution. The Enlightenment movement was gaining momentum and the bourgeoisie was less interested in religion. As a result, plainchant was deteriorating in Europe towards the mid 19th century, and there were efforts in some camps to prevent its decline (Connolly, 2013:7-12).

The Catholic church in France also experienced turbulence. The French Church was traditionally independent, and the 19th century was no exception. French bishops wanted to retain control over religious matters. Roman control was resisted, and the resolutions of the

Roman Council of Trent were rejected. Around the middle of the 19th century some church factions encouraged the use of polyphony or ‘classicism’. France rejected this trend and wanted the original ancient music re-instated. This was easier said than done, and Connolly states that "plainchant, in its purest form, was much more difficult to perform than the work of Mozart and Haydn" (Connolly, 2013:10). The more popular option was to promote church music that was more entertaining. Such ‘semi-secular’ music was eventually banned by the Congregation of Sacred Rites in 1884 (Connolly, 2013:10).

Danjou, a mid 19th century organist at several parishes, and organ teacher at the *Maîtrise Notre Dame*, a music school in Paris, was a proponent of ‘authentic’ chant. He discovered the tonary of Saint-Bénigne de Dijon of the 11th century and endeavoured to return chant melodies to their original form. He trained organists accordingly in an effort to undo the damage caused by ‘corrupt’ chant. The most important work in the area of chant restoration was done by the Benedictine monks of the Abbey of Solesmes, resulting in the creation of ‘Solesmes chant’. This type of chant is sung non-metrically, and the rhythm is dictated by that of speech. The notes had no fixed, predefined time value. Dom Joseph Polthier was the author of seminal books on Solesmes chant including the *Mélodies grégoriennes* (1880), the *Liber Gradualis* (1883), and the *Liber Usualis* (1903). This is the version of plainchant that Messiaen would most probably have been exposed to (Connolly, 2013:2-12).

The 20th century saw significant events in the history of plainchant. As part of a drive by the Church to rid itself from secular sounds, Pope Pius X issued an edict known as the *motu proprio of 1903*⁶ that regulated the performance of music in the Catholic Church (Connolly, 2013:291). If there was any positive effect on plainchant, it was soon to be negated. The Second Vatican Council of 1962-1965 ruled that Catholic services should not be held in Latin anymore but could henceforth be held in the native languages of each country (Crocker, 2000:16). The Latin language, integral part of plainchant, was no longer in common use, and this had a negative effect on the popularity of plainchant. Although plainchant is not heard in most Catholic churches anymore, it retains its allure for many Catholics and musicians due to its improvisatory character. The Gregorian modes, flexible rhythm, and absence of beat and metre all contribute to its other-worldly character.

⁶ A *motu proprio* is an edict or other document issued by the Pope on his own initiative and addressed to the Roman Catholic Church, or to some part of it (“OED Online”, 2019).

2.2 The styles of plainchant

Jason Hardink (2007:52) identifies four styles of plainchant, defined by the amount of music associated with each word or syllable. Some chants are made up of only one such style, but most have multiple styles. The following style descriptions draw on Hardink's dissertation (2007:54) and appear in order from the simplest to the most ornate and artistic:

- *Recitational style* is the simplest. Each syllable of text is associated with only one note. Chants with scriptural text such as psalms and canticles employ this style. Most of the chant is sung on the same pitch, referred to as the 'reciting pitch'. It is performed with rhythmic freedom to combat the monotony of single-note syllables.
- *Syllabic style* also has one note per syllable, but the pitches vary with each note, resulting in an effect similar to that of speech.
- *Neumatic style* has one or more neumes associated with each syllable. Each syllable is embellished artistically with between 1 and 8 pitches.
- *Melismatic style* is the most florid, and is most often associated with the singing of the *Alleluia*, where the last syllable is sung with an elaborate series of pitches.