

TITLE

JONATHAN HARVEY'S *TOMBEAU DE MESSIAEN* – A FITTING TRIBUTE TO A GREAT COMPOSER

ABSTRACT

Philip Mead commissioned and first performed *Tombeau de Messiaen* in 1994. It has since come to be recognised as a classic of the medium, being performed by many pianists around the world. This paper explores the work's *raison d'être*; its relationship to the piano music of Messiaen and the nature of the piano writing; its relationship to his other works; and the many fascinating insights I learned about the work by working closely with the composer in preparation for its first performance.

In 1985 I had begun to perform Jonathan Harvey's then sole piano piece *Four Images After Yeats*. I worked with the composer on it and gave it a number of performances – according to the composer's note on the CD recording more than any other pianist.¹ Harvey also knew at first hand my performances with electronics. Even so my 'cold call' to see whether he would like to write a piece for piano and electronics was a shot in the dark. He himself was a cellist and seemed to have a preference for composing for strings and/or voice. It took a mere 10 days however between this phone call and his reply saying that he would like to write a piece; that it would be an elegy to Messiaen; and that he had the work already in his head. He had been searching for a way to express his deep feelings about the loss of this great composer who had died in 1992, but until my phone call had been unsure how to do it.

The title of the work, which was to be *Tombeau de Messiaen*, literally – 'at the tomb of...' – is in the tradition of memorial pieces going back as far as Froberger's *Tombeau fait a Paris sur la mort de Monsieur Blancheroche* – a Paris lutanist. (A well known twentieth century example is Ravel's *Tombeau de Couperin*.)

Harvey's titles are usually very meaningful and can often involve the juxtaposition of opposites. (We can cite *Madonna of Winter and Spring*, *Lightness and Weight*, *Death of Light*, *Light of Death* etc.) Although the title of this piece does not involve so obviously the use of opposites, there is a double meaning in this context for the word 'tombeau'. 'Tombeau' follows the venerable French tradition, but is also used in the sense of its close phonetic neighbour – the verb 'tomber' – to fall.

Harvey's programme note gives us a good insight into the nature of the piece;

' This work is a modest offering in response to the death of a great musical and spiritual presence. Messiaen was a proto spectralist, that is to say, he was fascinated by the colours of the harmonic series and its distortions, and found therein a prismatic play of light. The tape part of my work is composed of piano sounds entirely tuned to the harmonic series – twelve of them, one for each class of pitch. The 'tempered' piano sounds joins and distorts these series, never entirely belonging, never entirely separate. The associations with the word tombeau (tomber) suggested a falling motive for the work, at the end the piano extends the motive, flinging itself into a downwards vortex to the abyss.'²

¹ CD liner notes *Jonathan Harvey* Sargasso 1999 (SCD 28029)

² *Ibid*

We know from Yvonne Loriod that Messiaen suffered greatly in the last months of his life.³ Ideas of suffering are fundamental to Harvey's compositional process: 'People ask why; why more suffering? They believe that the depiction of evil itself causes suffering, and object to this. But the answer is that precisely the opposite is true: suffering encountered in art or ritual is *healing*. If we give ourselves to the experience of art, fully and fearlessly, we are journeying inward to our truth, from where we will find our new world.'⁴

Now let us look at the work in more detail:

On a macro level the structure of the work is achieved by a series of gradually quickening pedal points with both live instrument and electronic sounds. For instance, the first pedal point (A) lasts for four pages of printed score while on the penultimate page they change so fast as to be beyond human comprehension. When the pedal points reach a moderate speed they are transformed into bell sounds and create an aural link with the opening falling phrase on the piano – a powerful example of the composer's love of transformation and ambiguity. The piano writing falls mainly into two categories; the falling chords near the opening and monodic lines. The electronic part consists of some gong sounds but mainly piano sounds tuned to twelve harmonic series using the Yamaha SY77 harmonic series micro tuning.⁵

The opening low note A is as already mentioned the first pedal point, and this is followed by an upward motive on piano and electronics. The succeeding pause is deliberately longer than would normally be expected (19secs) to represent the shock and stillness of life being cut off by death. Harvey has acknowledged the influence of Rudolf Steiner in his thinking. Transcendent experiences have been very meaningful, particularly the value of silence and long held notes:

'In particular, silence began to become more prominent in my music, and near-silence, and also long sounds which were static, and rather empty – the concept of emptiness again.'⁶

Example 1, (0 – 40'')

One of the most revealing statements that the composer said about the work is that it moves 'in and out of exactitude' and does so on both a micro and a macro level. The composer has confirmed to me⁷ that this idea is present in the two tuning systems discussed below, the slowly moving pedal points already mentioned and in the falling piano phrase found at the bottom of page 1:

Example 2, (41'' – 1' 30'')

³ Ed. Peter Hill, *The Messiaen Companion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995) p.302

⁴ Jonathan Harvey, *Music and Inspiration* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999) p.74

⁵ Email from composer to the author March 2006. The electronic part was recorded in the composer's own studio

⁶ Arnold Whittall, *Jonathan Harvey* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999) p.15

⁷ Email from the composer to the author March 2006

The two hands of these descending chords have ‘cross over dynamics’ which the composer wanted emphasised. These chords, while clear at the top end of the piano gradually descend into obscurity because of the continued use of the sustaining pedal. Both the cross over dynamics and the gradual obscuring of the chords by the pedal are examples of ‘in and out of exactitude’.

These chords have an obvious kinship to the piano writing of Messiaen though Harvey does not quote or use specific chords from that composer:

(Messiaen *Vingt Regards sur l'enfant Jesus* Movement 11 Bars 17 – 19)

This is followed by the second type of piano writing – monody. The monodic passages play on two tuning systems, the tempered scale of the piano and the pure tuning of the electronic part. The composer has explained:

‘ Instead of the pianos on tape playing the normal tempered tuning, they play only in naturel harmonis series. And these micro-intervallic harmonic series are played at the same volume as the normally tuned live piano, so the live piano seems to belong to the harmonic series and it becomes part of a unified structure. But then it also has notes every now and again which are out of tune, or more often than that, and it completely leaves the membership of the harmonic series, si it becomes something in dialectic, in argument with the fused nature of the harmonic series.’⁸

In his article *The mirror of ambiguity*,⁹ the composer has explained this phenomenon ten years before this piece was composed:

‘The fusion of the two spectra into one magical spectrum does not mean we lose sight of the separate instruments, but that there exists a particularly intriguing combination of spectra as well as the original ones’:

Example 3 (1’31” – 2’18”)

We next find a section that seems to ‘develop’ some of the ideas already presented, starting with the descending chords but this time both on piano and electronics thus giving an out of tune feel due to the different tuning systems. This is followed by references to the opening upward phrase and the monodic section:

Example 4 (2’19” - 3’ 30”)

The falling chords are now developed extensively in what Harvey called a ‘waterfall’¹⁰. Pianistically the waves of chords appear approximately every eight chords shadowed by a monodic line on electronics which begins the contrapuntal texture.

Example 5 (3’31”-4’55’)

⁸ Arnold Whittall, *Jonathan Harvey* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999) p.28

⁹ Ed. Simon Emmerson, *The Language of Electroacoustic Music* (London, Macmillan Press, 1986)p.179

¹⁰ During rehearsals for the premiere 1994

The next section shows an interesting example of an afterthought by the composer. The series of upward arpeggios were originally left hanging (echoing the original upward motive at the opening) but the composer felt too little was happening, so the long held sounds now have a very quiet interweave of melody from the piano in its topmost register.

Example 6 (4'56-6'21")

At the last section we have the meeting of two salient features of the work. The section appears to be initiated by gong (bell) sounds, but these are also in reality the pedal notes now at an approximate speed of one per second. As they speed up the relationship to the original piano motive becomes obvious. They speed up to the limits of human comprehension and at this point the pianist is asked to improvise on certain given figures. Harvey has said that he does not generally use improvisation,¹¹ but at this stage in this work it becomes a pragmatic solution to the synchronising of the piano and electronic parts ready for the final descent, and also allows the pianist freedom to become more manic than would perhaps otherwise be the case. The juxtaposition of apparent chaos to the stark major chord near the end is the most extreme example for me of 'in and out of exactitude'.

Arnold Whittall¹² has written that the final musical descent of this piece represents the 'inescapable reality of death'. I have never been happy with this interpretation and asked the composer whether, since the piece starts with life being cut off by death, it is not therefore a resurrection piece? He gave no direct reply saying that if he did he feels it would limit the piece, but said that the idea was a 'sympathetic' one.¹³ This idea may also be reinforced by the fact that the piece is not only dedicated to me but also to Jake Harvey Turner, the composer's grandson, who was born ten hours before *Tombeau de Messiaen* was finished. However, his own programme note seems to confirm the idea of Whittall;

'The associations of the word 'tomber' seem to suggest a falling motive; at the end the piano extends this motive, flinging itself into a downwards vortex'¹⁴

Example 7 (6'21" to end)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Jonathan Harvey, *The Mirror of Ambiguity*, article in *The Language of Electroacoustic Music* Simon Emmerson Ed. (London: macmillan, 1986)

Jonathan Harvey, *Music and Inspiration* (London, New York, Faber and Faber 1999)

Arnold Whittall, *Jonathan Harvey*, (London:Faber and Faber, 1994)

¹¹ Talk given by the composer, King's Hall Place, 5th October 2009

¹² Arnold Whittall, *Jonathan Harvey* (London, Faber and Faber, 1999)p.74

¹³ Email from the composer to the author March 2006

¹⁴ CD liner notes *Jonathan Harvey* Sargasso1999 (SCD 28029)

MUSIC SCORE

Jonathan Harvey, *Tombeau de Messiaen*, (London: Faber Music, 1996)

DISCOGRAPHY

Jonathan Harvey, *Tombeau de Messiaen*, on Sargasso SCD 28029:1999

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