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### "Transforming Light": Technique and Narrative in Messiaen's "Action de grâces"

Messiaen's music is so lucid that it might seem to analyze itself. One need only study his *Technique de mon langage musical*,<sup>1</sup> which introduces a specific and reasonably comprehensive technical language to describe the music of his early maturity, and then point out each instance of the different components of his style: the non-retrogradable rhythms, the modes of limited transposition, the rhythmic pedals and isorhythmic canons, and so forth. This sort of analysis accounts for all of the local events, but it doesn't necessarily provide insight into what they might mean. The terminology Messiaen proposes is just that: a terminology, a vocabulary. It implies a certain degree of grammar, as any vocabulary will; but it gives scant information on the semantics and symbolism of his style.

Messiaen illuminates some of the broad outlines of his intended meanings and his symbolic language in his scores; see, for instance, the long and often florid prose introductions to the *Visions de l'Amen*, the *Vingt regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*, and the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*. The song cycles aren't accompanied by such a commentary; but it would be unnecessary, as Messiaen himself was always the author of the poems he set (with one early exception, in the *Trois Mélodies* of 1930). But these descriptive texts by Messiaen himself are incomplete, and do not give a full account of the correspondences between the local musical rhetoric and the grand arch of his concepts. What is left to be discovered, then, is this middle ground analysis: an analysis that accounts for more than just the local features of his music, but one that also doesn't resort to the abstractions that are such a typical part of Messiaen's prose introductions.

One of the problems the analyst faces in confronting this middle ground is the seemingly naive and even garish quality of some of Messiaen's poetic content. In prior analyses of the *Poèmes pour Mi*, the topic of this paper, there is a tendency to move quickly away from the content of the poems, perhaps out of embarrassment. It need not be said that Messiaen the poet is no Mallarmé. However, in *Poèmes pour Mi*, he is working in the tradition of those who set Mallarmé, Verlaine and Baudelaire. In his writings, he may talk much more about other musical traditions (such as Gregorian chant, the rhythms of Hindu music, and so forth); but we must not forget that he grew up in a milieu saturated with the works of the classic *mélodie* composers: Duparc, Fauré, Debussy, Ravel. Like them, his engagement with text is deep and multifaceted. As a composer, he takes his poetry seriously; therefore, as analysts, so must we.

In "Action de grâces," the first of the nine songs in *Poèmes pour Mi*, the musical structure mirrors the shape of the poem on several levels. The poem is a prayer, and so it is formally static; this much many writers have noted. However, in terms of content, it is a narrative of a

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<sup>1</sup> Messiaen, Olivier, trans. John Satterfield. *The Technique of My Musical Language*. Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1956. Hereafter referred to as *Technique*.

journey towards a spiritual unity between the individual soul and God. The poem not only describes that journey in the life of a particular person at prayer; it also compares it to the long journey of mankind towards God since creation. This narrative is reflected in the poetics of the relationship between voice and accompaniment; in the harmonic scheme of the piece; and in the large-scale shape of the vocal line.

### The Poem

#### *Action de grâces*

Le ciel,  
Et l'eau qui suit les variations des nuages,  
Et la terre, et les montagnes qui attendent  
toujours,  
Et la lumière qui transforme.

Et un œil près de mon œil, une pensée près  
de ma pensée,  
Et un visage qui sourit et pleure avec le mien,  
Et deux pieds derrière mes pieds,  
Comme la vague à la vague est unie.

Et une âme,  
Invisible, pleine d'amour et d'immortalité,  
Et un vêtement de chair et d'os qui germera  
pour la résurrection,  
Et la Vérité, et l'Esprit, et la grâce avec son  
héritage de lumière.

Tout cela, vous me l'avez donné.  
Et vous vous êtes encore donné vous-même  
Dans l'obéissance et dans le sang de votre  
Croix,  
Et dans un Pain plus doux que la fraîcheur  
des étoiles,  
Mon Dieu. Alleluia.

#### *Saying Grace*

The sky,  
And the water that follows the variations of  
the clouds,  
And the earth, and the mountains that wait  
forever,  
And the transforming light.

And an eye close to my eye, a thought close  
to my thought,  
And a face that smiles and weeps with mine,  
And two feet behind my feet,  
As wave is united to wave.

And a soul,  
Invisible, full of love and immortality,  
And a garment of flesh and bones that will  
germinate for the resurrection,  
And Truth, and Spirit, and grace with its  
heritage of light.

All this you have given me.  
And in addition you have given yourself,  
In the obedience and the blood of your Cross,  
And in a Bread, sweeter than the freshness of  
the stars,  
My God. Alleluia.

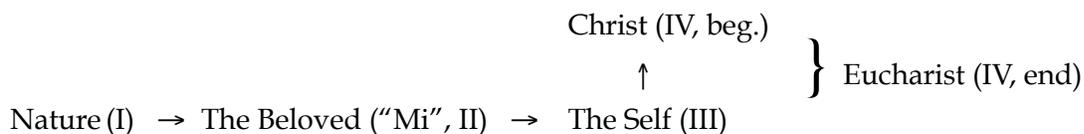
*Translation by Siglind Bruhn<sup>2</sup>*

The poem begins in a state of suspension, and at a point far from where it will end up. In the first stanza, there is no verb; just images, and these images are impersonal descriptions of nature. The poet does not mention himself until the second stanza; and there is no predicate, no

<sup>2</sup> Bruhn, Siglind. *Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death: Musico-Poetic Signification in the "Tristan Trilogy" and Three Related Song Cycles*. Hillsdale: Pendragon Press, 2008. Page 63.

consequent, until the first line of the last stanza, “Tout cela, vous me l’avez donné.” In the second stanza, we glimpse human companionship, a tender depiction of the joyful rapport between two people united in marriage. In the third stanza, we move from outside the self (nature, the beloved) to *within* the self: thanksgiving for the body, for the soul, and for spiritual gifts like Truth, Spirit and Grace. Finally, we move out of the self, but this time vertically, towards Christ and contemplation of his self-sacrifice; the poem culminates in a vision of the Eucharist, which Catholic doctrine considers the wellspring of the Christian life and the believer’s closest earthly approach to God.

The second stanza may appear to be about God’s relationship with the soul and not about the relationship between two earthly companions; this is the interpretation favored by some other writers on the cycle.<sup>3</sup> Of course, both meanings are possible; indeed, we will find that there is reason to believe that both meanings are intended.<sup>4</sup> But God’s companionship with mankind is a later topic of the poem, in stanza four; so its mention already in stanza two would be redundant. Also, thanks for human companionship fits better in the pattern of approach and intensification in the poem, as summarized by this image (the parenthetical Roman numerals denote the stanzas):



The “Mi” of the title is the nickname Messiaen gave to his first wife, Claire Delbos, to whom this cycle was dedicated. If we regard this second stanza as illustrating man’s relationship with God rather than the poet’s relationship with his wife, then there is no reference to marriage whatsoever in this song. This would be strange, given both the dedicatee of these songs and the rest of the cycle’s emphasis on conjugal love. See, for instance, the middle song in the cycle’s arch form, “L’épouse” (“The Wife”).

The narrative of the poem also mirrors the creation process. First nature is created, beginning with the heavens (“le ciel”), just as in Genesis 1:1: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”<sup>5</sup> The second stanza corresponds to the creation of man and woman,

<sup>3</sup> This is the opinion of Janice E. Rogers Reeves; also, of Jane Manning in Peter Hill’s *The Messiaen Companion*.

Reeves, Janice E. Rogers. *Theological Symbolism in Messiaen’s Poèmes Pour Mi: An Interpretive and Set Theoretic Analysis*. Diss., University of Missouri–Kansas City, 1997. Page 18.

Hill, Peter, ed. *The Messiaen Companion*. Portland: Amadeus Press, 1994. Page 117.

<sup>4</sup> Yun Lee also points out the ambiguity of this section of the text. See Lee, Yun. *Symmetry and Symbolic Language in Messiaen’s Poèmes Pour Mi: a Musical Reflection on Divine and Conjugal Love*. Diss., Boston University, 2009. Page 4.

<sup>5</sup> All Biblical quotations are taken from the Revised Standard Version.

Adam and Eve. The break between the second and third stanza is the halfway point of the poem; it is fitting, then, that stanzas one and two correspond to the creation in the Old Testament, while the third and fourth stanzas correspond to the “re-creation” that occurs through Christ in the New Testament. The third stanza deals with specifically Catholic doctrines such as the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body, and with spiritual gifts that are traditionally credited to Jesus. These include Truth (John 14:6: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life”), the Spirit (suggesting the Holy Spirit, mentioned in Acts), and grace.

The repetition of “lumière” at the end of the third stanza hearkens back to the end of the first stanza—suggesting that, earlier in the poem, light is not just another nature image. It is also a symbol of God’s grace and of Jesus himself (John 8:12: “I am the light of the world”). These multiple meanings are underlined in Messiaen’s setting. The first stanza is sung almost entirely on a single pitch, a reciting tone; but the words “lumière qui transforme” are ornamented by a melodic development in the vocal line: the introduction of the melodic contour that Messiaen scholars call the “Boris motif” (following Messiaen himself, who, in his *Technique*, demonstrated its derivation from Mussorgsky’s *Boris Godunov* [31]). (Example 1)



Example 1. *mm. 4-5: The setting of “lumière qui transforme”, with “Boris motif” bracketed.*

This phrase, “transforming light,” has both a non-transitive and a transitive meaning. In other words, it can either mean “the light which itself transforms and changes,” or “the light which transforms some object(s).” The non-transitive sense creates a contrast with the mountains in line 3: the mountains are eternally waiting, always the same, whereas the light is constantly changing. The transitive sense, on the other hand, creates a parallelism with an image earlier in the stanza: “l’eau qui suit les variations des nuages”; “la lumière qui transforme.” (“The water which reflects the variations of the clouds”; “the light which transforms [some object].”) Messiaen’s awareness of this ambiguity is shown by the way he musically emphasizes the word “transforme.” While the non-transitive meaning may seem the more obvious one, the transitive meaning is not only prepared earlier in the stanza; it also ties into imagery surrounding light later in the poem that Messiaen again carefully emphasizes in his setting. (For example, there is the “Boris motif” melisma at the end of stanza three on the word “lumière”; and also a gigantic, climactic melisma on the word “étoiles” just before the end of the poem.) The light as an agent of transformation is, at once, both the light at the beginning of Genesis and “the light of the world” that is Christ.

This is not the only time in the song that the "Boris motif" is used as a kind of musical gateway to mediate between two ambiguous meanings. At the end of stanza two, the word "unie" is decorated with a melisma on the "Boris motif," elongating the verb that most clearly parallels the narrator's "union" with his wife and the soul's union with God. But there is another ambiguity here – a more subtle one. The phrase "as wave is united to wave" could indicate a *state* of union; or it could indicate an *act* of union by some other, unnamed agent. In other words, it could mean "a wave existing in a state of union with another wave"; or "a wave being joined [by some force] to another wave." If "unie" denotes an action, then it implies an actor. In this instance, the actor would be God, uniting the poet with his beloved – a description of the sacrament of marriage. So this is the more symbolically rich of the two shades of meaning; but it is the less obvious one, because the foregoing text in the stanza has been describing a state, not an action. Both these examples demonstrate how the "Boris motif" is more than simply a decorative cadential pattern rounding out the recitation of each stanza: it also serves the purpose of highlighting semantic ambiguities and enriching the metaphorical significance of certain words.

### Relationship between Voice and Piano

The poetics of the relationship between the voice and the accompaniment<sup>6</sup> carefully mirrors the shape of the poem. The changing relationship is unusually subtle and varied across the melodie. The extreme points are the opening, where the piano and voice are treated as entirely discrete entities, and the climactic melisma on "étoiles," where the piano and voice double each other exactly for the first and only time in the song. Since this mirrors the poem's trajectory – its narrative of the relationship between the individual soul and God – so precisely, the piano part may be seen as a musical representation of the divine presence throughout the setting.

The first piano music is *pianissimo*, distant – signifying, perhaps, God seen dimly through his works. The opening is a strict rhythmic canon, sticking precisely to two of Messiaen's modes of limited transposition – Mode II in the right hand and Mode III in the left. This "rationality" is symbolic of divine perfection. Each of the subsequent returns of this music is louder and more developed: *mezzo forte* in measures 5 and 6, and *forte* in measure 15-19. Yun Lee points out that the rhythmic figure which is treated canonically here is nearly

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<sup>6</sup> This cycle may be accompanied by piano or by orchestra; the orchestral score will be quoted once, but the main point of reference here will be the piano version. Hereafter, "piano" will be used to identify the accompanying part. Bar numbers will refer to the piano score. (Barring is different in the orchestral version; Messiaen pragmatically breaks many of the longer bars in the piano version into more manageable units for the ensemble.)

palindromic – or, to use Messiaen’s terminology, “non-retrogradable.”<sup>7</sup> This is another metaphor for divine perfection and timelessness. In his *Technique*, Messiaen is explicit about the metaphorical intentions of these aspects of his language: “In spite of himself, [the hearer] will submit to the strange charm of impossibilities: a certain effect of tonal ubiquity in the non-transpositions, a certain unity of movement (where beginning and end are confused because identical) in the nonretrogradation, all things which will lead him progressively to that sort of *theological rainbow* which the musical language, of which we seek edification and theory, attempts to be.”<sup>8</sup>

Until the end of the third stanza at ms. 28, the piano and voice do not share much material. At first, they are also completely temporally separate: the piano finishes its phrase in m. 3 before the voice starts, and the sonorities only overlap for a fraction of a second. The end of the first stanza overlaps with the first piano interlude, but only for one eighth note (the downbeat of m. 5). In the second and third stanzas, the parts become more intertwined: in ms. 8, the piano begins to periodically interrupt the voice, and these interruptions are more frequent and more forceful in mm. 20-27. The two parts finally begin to motivically identify with one another in mm. 24-27: the falling figure in the top voice of the piano contracts from a nearly chromatic cell, [013] (see ms. 8), to an entirely chromatic cell, [012], which precisely echoes the descending cell in the voice. (Example 2)

The image shows a musical score for measures 23-26. It consists of a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff). The vocal line has lyrics: "ment de chair et d'os qui germera pour la résurrection, Et la Vérité, et l'Esprit, et la". The piano accompaniment features a falling chromatic cell [012] in the right hand, which is bracketed in the original image.

Example 2. mm. 23-26, with falling chromatic cell [012] bracketed.

The effect between the two parts is quasi-canonic; the petitioner’s prayer of the thanksgiving is drawing God closer, towards a point of total identification.

The piano interlude that links the third and fourth stanzas is different; for the first time, the piano and the voice exchange material in a completely literal way. The piano takes up the “Boris motif,” at the same pitch level at which it occurred in the foregoing melisma on “lumière.”

<sup>7</sup> Lee, 96.

<sup>8</sup> *Technique*, 21.

This suggests God hearing, accepting, and "redeeming" the "act of grace" of the narrator; or it suggests the petitioner's prayer ascending to God, a culmination and extension of the long process of ascent that has stretched across the music so far (and which continues beyond this point – this will be a topic in the section of this paper entitled "The Structure of the Vocal Line"). This interlude is also dramatic link between the three stanzas of subject on the way to, finally, the predicate: "All this you have given me." (Example 3)

Example 3. m. 34.

This moment is the first time the voice and piano are treated as a unit, rather than in opposition. Yet even here the voice retains its independent rhythmic contour; it is still not the exact doubling that occurs at the word "étoiles." This austere descent is far plainer than any of the piano music that has come before, both in pitch – bare octaves – and in rhythmic profile – straight quarter notes. The pitch pattern is also regular: tritone, fourth, tritone, fourth, etc. It breaks off at *g*; the next note in the pattern would be *c*<sup>#</sup>, which arrives a bar late in m. 36.

Measure 34 acts as a dramatic foil to the long ascent that has dominated so far. Yes, there have been descending gestures before this: for instance, arching melismas closed each of the first three stanzas. But these closing shapes were local events illustrating the ends of the stanzas: they were cadential – *literally*, given the etymology of the word "cadence" (Latin: *cadere*, "to fall"). The descent in measure 34 is rhetorical, both on a grammatical and musical level. On one hand, it is an explosion, across a huge stretch of music, of the typical shape of a sentence:



"The sky, and the water, and the earth. . . all this you have given me."

On the other hand, the goal of this descent is harmonically structural: a dominant pedal on *c*<sup>#</sup>, which arrives at m. 36 and lasts virtually until end of the song. (While there is a move from dominant harmony to tonic at the beginning of the "Alleluia" section, the *c*<sup>#</sup> remains the lowest sounding pitch.) This pedal disappears for a few measures, mm. 41-44, during the "étoiles"

melisma. However, it remains in the ear – none of the intervening music competes with it registrally, so it remains the lowest voice both conceptually and acoustically.

The unity between piano and voice in mm. 42-45 is symbolic of the ecstatic unity between the individual soul and God during the sacrament of the Eucharist. (Example 4)

The image shows a musical score for Example 4, mm. 40-45, including the melisma on "étoiles." The score is written for voice and piano. It consists of three systems of staves. The first system shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment for measures 40-42. The second system shows measures 43-45, including the melisma on "étoiles." The third system shows the continuation of the melisma. The score includes tempo markings: "Presque lent" (pp), "Pressez" (p), and "Modéré" (ff). It also includes dynamic markings: "pp", "p", "ff", and "dim." (diminuendo). The key signature is one flat (B-flat major/D minor).

Example 4. mm. 40-45, including the melisma on "étoiles."

The lush, sensuous beauty of these bars is not accidental – just as it is not accidental that the Eucharist is also known to Catholics as Communion, a word that echoes both "union" and "consummation." Erotic love as a metaphor and symbol of the love between God and humanity is a central theme of *Poèmes pour Mi*, and a theme Messiaen returns to and develops throughout his career. Siglind Bruhn's book *Messiaen's Explorations of Love and Death: Musico-Poetic Signification in the "Tristan Trilogy" and Three Related Song Cycles* traces this development.

Bruhn writes:

Messiaen believes that the soul of every Christian is drawn by an unspeakable love to the union with God in the Holy Spirit. This love can be metaphorically couched in the language of eroticism, because Eros is the most intense form of desire and fulfillment experienced by humans. Eros can therefore be understood as a foretaste of what awaits the soul at the end of time in its union with God. (17)

Bruhn's points out that this is a perennial theme of Catholic art, a theme that can be traced back to the Song of Songs in the pre-Christian Old Testament. Messiaen inherits this tradition, much as he appropriates ancient music. These historically far-reaching allusions enrich the resonance of Messiaen's symbolism. The narrative towards and away from a point of erotic unity in "Action de grâces" corresponds precisely to the other musical and poetic narratives Messiaen creates. Furthermore, it joins the occasional purpose of the set – Messiaen's marriage to "Mi" – with Messiaen's stated purpose as composer:

It is a glistening music we seek, giving to the aural sense voluptuously refined pleasures. At the same time, this music should be able to express some noble sentiments (and especially the most noble of all, the religious sentiments exalted by the theology and the truths of our Catholic Faith). (*Technique*, 13)

The long "Alleluia" which closes "Action de grâces" does not continue the literal doubling of parts in the "étoiles" passage; instead, it depicts a different type of unity. The voice now seems to wander freely and euphorically *within* the texture created by the piano. The Eucharist may have been a moment of consummation; but, once the climax has died away, it has led to a peaceful suspension wherein the unity is less exact, but the parts are in perfect harmony, all enveloped in a sort of post-coital haze.

### Harmonic Planning of the Song

The end of the "étoiles," when the voice finally comes to rest on c#, also represents a first crucial unity of pitch (see Example 4, m. 45). c# has been the most important pitch in the piano part throughout the song. At the beginning, it is the common tone between the opposed chords, D-flat major and A major. Messiaen's awareness of this is proved by his orchestration, in which a solo violin harmonic sustains a c#, quietly gliding above the texture. (Example 5)

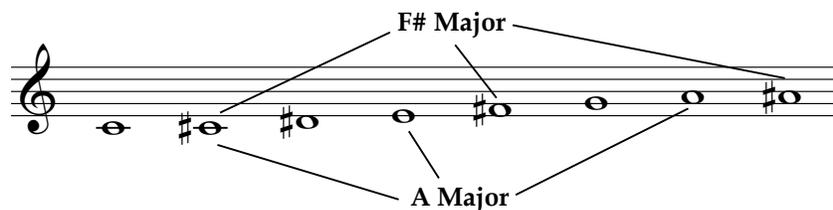
Example 5. mm. 1-4 of the orchestral score. The arrow points out the violin harmonic on c#.

This opening carefully establishes two tonalities: the tonality of this song, and the larger tonality of the cycle. This song’s goal is F# major (over a c# pedal), whereas the cycle’s goal is A major. The first sonority we hear is the song’s dominant sounded against the cycle’s tonic, which share the common tone c#. The first point of rest is an inverted dominant ninth chord, the dominant ninth of the key of A major. The voice picks the ninth out of this chord as its first reciting tone—this pitch happens to be f#, the eventual tonic of the song. (Example 6)

Example 6. The opening of the song, with two different levels of Roman numeral and scale degree analysis demonstrating the development of the tonalities of F# Major and A major in tandem.

This parallel development of two harmonic threads – the local shape of the song, and the long shape of the cycle – continues at least as far as m. 34, the dramatic descent on the words “Tout cela, vous me l’avez donné.” The piano part peaks with an *e*, the dominant of the cycle and the highest pitch in this song, and descends to a *c#*, the dominant of the song and its lowest pitch.

Both the tonic triad of the cycle and the tonic triad of the song are included in Messiaen’s Mode II – in other words, the octatonic scale – in its first transposition, beginning with *c-c#*.



This accounts for the frequent use of this mode in this particular transposition in “Action de grâces” and elsewhere in the cycle. Other writers have developed theories about the specific symbolic meaning Messiaen assigned to this mode at this transposition level. Janice E. Rogers Reeves proposes an elaborate allegorical analysis of the cycle, in which she interprets each discrete transposition of each of Messiaen’s mode as a separate character in a sacred play; for instance, according to her scheme, Mode II in its *c-c#* transposition is “God the Father.”<sup>9</sup> Certainly it is more than just coincidence that many of Messiaen’s earlier masterpieces are in one of the tonalities implied by this mode. Examples include A major in *Visions de l’Amen*; F# major in the *Vingt regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus*; and F# major again in the *Turangalîla Symphony*.

<sup>9</sup> Reeves, 82. Her resulting analysis can tend towards the tortuous and over-fussy; see, for instance, her description of this song on page 100: “The Soul of Man [the phrase “Et une âme” with 9-12T<sub>0</sub> in mm. 19, 20, 22 (Fig. 4)] experiences God’s Understanding [8-25 in mm. 24-27 (Fig. 40)] and the provision of the Holy Spirit [the phrase “et l’Esprit”; 8-28T<sub>2</sub> in mm. 29-30 (Fig. 6)].”

### Structure of the Vocal Line

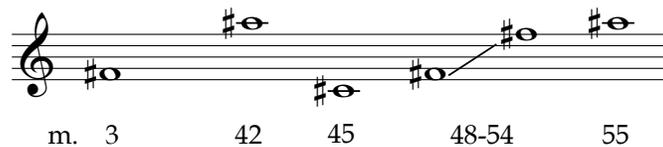
Given the central role that  $c\sharp$  plays in the harmonic scheme of the song, it is conspicuous that the vocal line avoids  $c\sharp$  anywhere except once: at the end of the melisma on “*étoiles*.” Here is a list of the pitches emphasized in the voice part until that point:

m.	pitch emphasized	description
3	$f_4\sharp$	reciting tone
4	$g_4\sharp$	pitch center of the melisma
5	$f_4$	point of cadence
7	$a_4\flat$	reciting tone
14	$b_4\flat$	pitch center of the melisma
15	$f_4$	point of cadence
20	$c_5$	reciting tone
28	$d_5$	pitch center of the melisma
29	$d_5$	point of cadence
34	$f_5, b_4, c_5, g_4$	emphatic descent
36	$d_5$	reciting tone
38	$e_5$	reciting tone
40	$a_4$	reciting tone (brief)
42	$g_5$	sustained pitch at the beginning of the melisma on “ <i>étoiles</i> ”

Most of the other pitches of the chromatic scale are emphasized in the voice part before  $c\sharp$  arrives in m. 45 – an exception being  $d\sharp$ , which is only emphasized just before the  $c\sharp$  in m. 45, where it appears as an insistant upper neighbor to the  $c\sharp$  five times in a row (Example 4).<sup>10</sup> The chromatic space between  $c\sharp$  and  $d\sharp$  is filled in – a reminiscence of the [012] cell illustrated in Example 2. This “saving” of the  $c\sharp$  in the vocal line until the blissful moment of the Eucharist is clearly by design. The voice doesn’t return to this pitch after this point; the mode of the closing vocal “*Alleluia*” doesn’t include  $c\sharp$ .

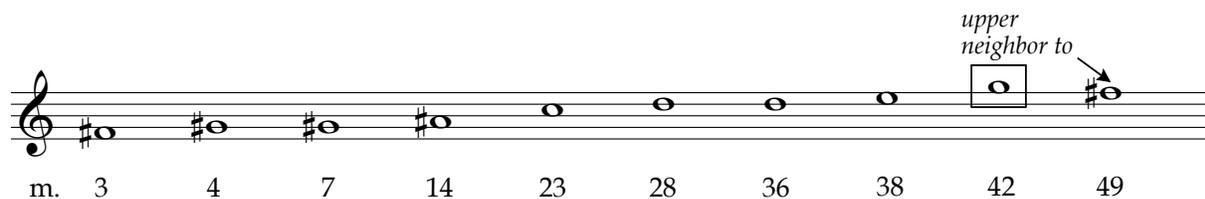
<sup>10</sup> Of the other chromatic pitches,  $b$  is only glancingly touched upon – it is part of the descending pattern in m. 34, but not emphasized elsewhere.

This  $c\sharp$  of these measures is the lowest pitch in the vocal line anywhere in the song. The highest pitch is the  $b_5\flat$  in the “étoiles” melisma, which returns at the end (as  $a\sharp$ ) to conclude the “Alleluia” section. The range of the tessitura, then, extends between two notes of the  $F\sharp$  major triad –  $c_4\sharp$  and  $a_5\sharp$  – with an emphasis on the octave space between  $f_4\sharp$  and  $f_5\sharp$ .



This elegant outlining of the song’s tonality by means of vocal tessitura and boundaries is a compelling and unique method of harmonic unification.

The broad shape of the vocal line is continual ascent. This pattern becomes clear if we take just the reciting tones and the starting-points of the melismas from the foregoing table:



(This figure leaves out the last reciting tone –  $a_4$ , in m. 40. This falls outside the pitch pattern established by the others; but it also differs in character, being atypically short-lived and not decorated by neighbor tones.)

Until the  $g$  on “étoiles,” the vocal line ascends through a whole-tone scale built on  $f\sharp$ . This is Messiaen’s Mode I, a mode he was wary of; he wrote in *Technique*: “We shall carefully avoid making use of it, unless it is concealed in a superimposition of modes which renders it unrecognizable.”<sup>11</sup> He uses this strategy in this song; but he also distends it over such a broad swath of music that it becomes almost untraceable. I cannot find another writer who mentions this use of Mode I in this song. However, Paul Griffiths, in *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, points out that the tonal centers of the first eight of the nine songs in *Poèmes* are part of this same whole tone collection – these centers being, according to Griffiths,  $f\sharp$ ,  $a\sharp$ ,  $e$ ,  $c$ ,  $a\sharp$ ,  $f\sharp$ ,  $c$ ,

<sup>11</sup> *Technique*, 59.

and  $b\sharp$ .<sup>12</sup> This sequence is not arranged in the strict ascending order of the reciting tones in "Action de grâces"; however, the vocal line's thorough exposition of this collection in the first song prepares this playing-out of the whole tone collection across the keys of the next seven songs.

The unexpected  $g$  on "étoiles" is one of the most expressive, surprising and inspired moments in the entire song. This upper neighbor is resolved repeatedly and definitively in the closing "Alleluia," which, for five lengthy measures, decoratively outlines the  $f_4\sharp$ - $f_5\sharp$  space. The song ends with a brilliant ascent to  $a\sharp$ , which was the highest pitch in the "étoiles" melisma. The word "Alleluia" is sung seven times, and each measure in the section has seven beats. Similarly, the motion of the vocal part across the entire song – from  $f_4\sharp$  through a whole-tone scale to  $f_5\sharp$  – ascends through seven pitches. These features mirror the seven days of creation; this song of thanksgiving, then, is a song of praise to God for his creative power, which Messiaen, with the greatest care and compositional finesse, strives to emulate in his own way.

In *A French Song Companion*, Graham Johnson writes: "[Messiaen] has a place in this book because he wrote important songs for voice and piano in the French language, but they have little to do with the *mélodie* tradition. Messiaen's vocal music does not represent the meeting of the musical world with the literary, but the creation of a world apart, strange and wonderful certainly, but an acquired taste."<sup>13</sup> Given the introductory nature of Johnson's study, this is an appropriate and helpful characterization of Messiaen's work; after all, Messiaen is such a unique figure that even a relatively early work does not offer an immediate point of entry to the novice listener. Furthermore, Johnson is right to point out that Messiaen, as a unitary composer/poet figure, cuts against the tradition of art song – in all languages, in fact, and not only the *mélodie* tradition. In *Poèmes pour Mi*, there is no trace of that dualistic friction – part inspiration and sympathy, part tension and appropriation – so characteristic of Schubert/Goethe, Schumann/Heine, Wolf/Mörike, or Debussy/Verlaine.

In other words, the creative persona of Messiaen's music is simpler; and, as listeners of Messiaen's music, we would perhaps feel this simplicity as a loss if it weren't for the many other riches and felicities he offers us. These riches include his expanded palette of harmonic, rhythmic, timbral and melodic means; Messiaen was one of those prodigious composers who revolutionized every fundamental component of music at once. But the real mark of his genius

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<sup>12</sup> Griffiths, Paul. *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985. Pages 82-83. It should be mentioned that Griffiths's analysis of the songs' tonal centers is not indisputable; for instance, E major might be seen as the fundamental harmony of the second song, "Paysage," despite the vocal line's insistence on  $b\flat$ .

<sup>13</sup> Johnson, Graham and Richard Stokes. *A French Song Companion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Page 313.

is the way that he immediately uses these new tools to create a text-music discourse that matches the technique of his forebears in its sophistication and expressive range. In "Action de grâces," the architecture of the vocal line, the movement of the harmony, the way the tonal center comes more into focus as the song progresses, and the poetics of the relationship between the piano and voice all serve to illustrate and support the shape of the poem: they are all different narratives of motion towards a point of unity, a blissful instant of contact with the divine. The world of this song may indeed be "a world apart"; but, ultimately, every great innovator in music has given us a world in which new and old vocabularies and grammars are intermingled, displaced and transformed. Messiaen's creativity is a "transforming light," casting new colors onto the staid mountains of tradition and revealing new furrows and fractures in its rock face.