Messiaen’s Transcendent Angels and the Ten Duino Elegies of Rilke

Angels transcend every religion, every philosophy, every creed. In fact Angels have no religion as we know it...Their existence precedes every religious system that has ever existed on Earth . . . (St. Thomas Aquinas)

Characterised by plainchant, birdsong, and his langage communicable,¹ the music of Olivier Messiaen functioned within, and was generated by, a wider interest in Catholic mysticism and cannot be meaningfully understood without reference to that interest. Fundamental to Messiaen’s religious expression is the archetype of the angel and, no fewer than seven of his major works include movements that are named for angels.² Most of these works also feature birdsong although Messiaen’s reason for associating angels with birds is not immediately apparent. Certainly, both angels and birds are recurrent symbols in Catholic mysticism, but Messiaen’s theology was not confined by narrow doctrine and his Christian angels bear striking resemblance to their Islamic counterparts described by Rilke in his ten Duino Elegies.

Messiaen made no secret of his affection for Rilke’s poetry,³ especially the Duino Elegies from which he quotes in a number of his writings, including a very late essay on Mozart⁴ and in his notes to the score of Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité. It would appear that the primary influence on Messiaen’s

¹ Messiaen’s Langage communicable was developed to translate phrases from St Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologiae into sound. The technique involves the use of a musical alphabet, which assigns a combination of pitch and duration to each letter of the Roman alphabet. The system also involves Latin grammar and leitmotif. For more information on Messiaen’s Langage communicable see: Shenton, (1998), pp. 225-246 and Messiaen, Preface to Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité. Paris: Leduc, 1969.
² Shenton lists Messiaen’s compositions about Angels in ibid., pp. 244-245 fn 32.
³ As Robin Freeman has observed, “The uncompromisingly French character of Messiaen’s cultural profile, something he had in common with Saint-Saens and d’Indy, cannot be over stressed. Thus, even though his love of Rilke is something he spoke of in public I thought it essential to find a further sanction for it in an essay by a militant French Catholic writer, Daniel-Rops, published in a book by another French catholic writer, Patrice de la Tour du Pin, and which ties Rilke in no uncertain terms to St. Francis.” Freeman, (1996).
⁴ “Beauty’s nothing but the start of terror, and we adore it because of the serene scorn it could kill us with’. These lines by Rainer Maria Rilke apply very well to Mozart's music. It is a music of purity and perfection, as befits this most musical of musicians. No flaw can be found in it. Messiaen (1991).
conception of angels, was the *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas⁵ - the angelological treatise most favoured by the Catholic church. Messiaen’s *La Transfiguration de notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ* is structured around the *Summa Theologiae*, which also forms the basis of his *langage communicable*. Rilke’s angels, however, were not drawn from Catholicism, but from the Islamic tradition where beauty and awe are inextricably linked and the communication of angels is portrayed as terrifying.⁶ Campbell has argued that Rilke’s *Duino* angels were modeled on the archangel Gabriel as described in the Koran.⁷ Here, Mohammed is shocked from sleep by a blinding light and sees an angel standing before him, whose form spans the distance between earth and heaven. This angel, Gabriel, lifts Mohammed into the sky by his hair and addresses him in a voice that fills him with terror.⁸ According to the fifty-third surah in the Koran, Gabriel has “1600 wings, hair of saffron, with the sun between his eyes and hair as bright as the moon and stars.”⁹

Quoting the Book of Revelation, Messiaen paints a strikingly similar picture of an angel in the preface to his *Quatuor Pour la Fin du Temps*, which reads:

> And I saw another mighty angel come down from heaven, clothed with a cloud: and a rainbow was upon his head, and his face was as it were the sun, and his feet as pillars of fire... and he set his right foot upon the sea, and his left foot on the earth... And the angel which I saw stand upon the sea and upon the earth lifted up his hand to heaven, and sware by him that liveth for ever and ever... that there should be time no longer: But in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, the mystery of God should be finished...¹⁰

Rilke’s published works contain only a few references to Islamic or oriental mysticism, rather, his frequent discussions of religion allude to Judeo-Christian beliefs or classical mythology. It seems likely that Rilke’s adoption of Islam was not due to theological disagreement – in fact, much Christian doctrine is also present in Islam – but, rather, to a sense of disappointment in Christians themselves whom he believed espoused a sanitized and lethargic approach to biblical ideas.

---

⁶ During his studies in Paris with Rodin in 1902, Rilke read *The Thousand and One Nights* at the sculptor’s suggestion. Immediately before beginning the elegies, he had traveled in Spain and had been reading the Qur’an and a book about Mohammed. His friend Lou Andreas-Salomé’s husband, Friedrich Carl Andreas, was a leading scholar of Islamic culture, particularly the Naqshibandiyya – the influence is clear. In a letter to Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis written in Spain on December 17, 1912, Rilke wrote: “By the way, you must know, Princess, that I’ve been consumed since Cordoba with an almost rabid anti-Christian feeling, I’m reading the Quran, in places it takes on a voice for me, in which I’m immersed with all my strength, like the wind in the organ.” Quoted in Campbell, (2003) p. 196.
⁷ Campbell. (2003)
⁸ See Boulainvilliers, (1971) and Dermenghem, (1980)
⁹ Wilson, (1994) p. 27.
¹⁰ Messiaen, Notes to *Quatuor Pour la Fin du Temps*, Paris: Durand, 1941.
Elegy no. 10, begins:

X: O, how an Angel would utterly trample their market of solace, bounded by the Church, bought ready for use: untouched, disenchanted and shut like the post-office on Sunday. Beyond though, the outskirts are always alive with the fair. \[1\]

Messiaen apparently shared Rilke’s view to some extent, as evidenced by his words to Claude Samuel:

“…the truths I express, the Truths of the Faith, are startling; they are fairy-tales, in turn mysterious, harrowing, glorious and sometimes terrifying, always based on a luminous, unchanging Reality… [parishioners] don’t always know the texts they hear, either because they don’t understand Latin or because they understand nothing at all…” \[12\]

It is clear, then, that the angelology of Messiaen and Rilke, although largely drawn from Catholic mysticism, shares an expanded horizon which reaches beyond the confines of any Christian doctrine – or, in other words, their object was not to communicate the paradigmatic Christian angel – but to fully investigate for themselves the ontological implications of the existence of angels.

While Islamic descriptions of angels tend to be somewhat more dramatic than those of the Christian bible, an obvious difference between the two conceptions – or, if you like, between the angels of Rilke and the angels of St Thomas Aquinas, is concerned with the subject of angelic communication.

The *Duino Elegies* begin with the words:

\[
I: \text{Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the Angelic Orders? And even if one were to suddenly take me to its heart, I would vanish into its stronger existence. For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, that we are still able to bear, and we revere it so, because it calmly disdains to destroy us. Every Angel is terror.}^{13}
\]

Although Messiaen does not paint such a terrifying picture of angels he agrees with Rilke that the language of angels is dangerous to Human beings because of its greater intensity. In *Saint François d’Assise*, he writes:

If the Angel had played one more note-if, after down-bowing it had made an up-bow-from unbearable sweetness my soul would have left my body. \[14\]

---

\[1\] Rilke (1975)
\[13\] Rilke, (1975)
Medieval literature and the western hermetic tradition postulates the existence of a perfect, magical language used by birds to communicate with the initiated. A mystical language of birds, appears in diverse religious writings, most notably in Sufism where the language of birds is equated with the language of angels. This association of birds and angels, also occurs in Rilke’s elegies, although without reference to language:

II: Every Angel is terror. And yet, ah, knowing you, I invoke you, almost deadly birds of the soul.16

The 12th century Persian poet Farid ud-Din Attar, adopted the iconography of birds as human spirits in his book of verses Mantiq at tayr, ‘Language of the Birds”, often mistranslated as ‘Conference of the Birds’.17 Here each bird represents the spirit of a human being, who sets out on a mystical journey to find the Simorgh – the Divine bird. The Simorgh’s name itself includes those that seek, ‘Si’ meaning 30 in Persian, and ‘Morgh’ meaning birds.

The Talmud relates that Solomon’s wisdom was due to God granting him fluency in the language of the birds. Hieroglyphic writing is called medu-netjer, or ‘the alphabet of the birds’ in Egyptian Arabic. In medieval France, ‘the language of the birds’ referred to a secret troubadour language connected with the study of the tarot. And, of course, St Francis of Assisi reputedly spoke with birds.

René Guénon explains the iconography of bird language thus:

…the language of the birds”, which can also be called "angelic language", and which is symbolized in the human world by rhythmic language, for the science of rhythm, which has many applications, is in fact ultimately the basis of all the means which can be brought into action in order to enter into communication with the higher states of being. This is why it is said in an Islamic tradition that Adam, whilst in the Earthly Paradise, spoke in verse, that is, in rhythmic language.18

Within the western hermetic tradition, examples of angelic language – or, language of the birds – are presented as palindromic formulae, such as those found in the grimoires of high magic. Messiaen was very interested in palindromic magic languages and magic squares,19 explaining to Claude Samuel that there were:

---

15 For more information see Guénon, (1969)
16 ibid.
17 Attar, (1954)
18 Guénon, op. Cit. (1969)
19 Rössler, (1986) p. 113
“Ancient magical formulae included words which had, it appears, an occult power. It was impossible to read those words from left to right, without meeting exactly the same sound and the same order of letters...

Given Messiaen’s interest in palindromes, and the fact that palindromic formulae has its origins in the so-call secret language of birds, one may reasonably speculate that Messiaen’s interest in bird calls and his interest in non-retrogradeable rhythms share a philosophical connection. That is, that the language of the birds uses nonretrogradeable rhythms. This may seem at first to be at odds with Messiaen’s devout Catholicism, but it needn’t be so. The common goal of all mystical systems, religious or esoteric, is the liberation of the soul through the transcendence of linear time. Messiaen explains the relationship between non-retrogradeable rhythms and the perspective of linear time:

A final symbol: this moment which I live, this thought which crosses my mind, this movement which I accomplish, this time which I beat: before and after it lies eternity: it’s a non-retrogradeable rhythm.

As William Blake has reminded us, eternity lies only in the timeless present – only there is anything truly alive, and there in the eternal present moment resides God. Rilke also sets out this idea in his seventh elegy, saying:

VII: Since an hour was given – perhaps not so much as an hour, one that was scarcely measurable by time’s measure, between two moments, where you had a being. Everything. Veins filled with being.

Messiaen’s experimentation with nonretrogradeable rhythms was inextricably connected with his conception of God as outside linear time. The preface to Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité, says:

..in order to impress that God is boundless just as he is eternal, without beginning or end, in space as in time, I have given two forms to my themes: one forward, one retrograde, as two extremities which face each other and which can fall back on each other indefinitely.

Perhaps the most obvious place to look for elucidation concerning Messiaen’s symbolic fusion of birdsong, angelology, divinity and time, is his Quatuor Pour la Fin du Temps. Dedicated to the angel of the apocalypse who announces the end of time, this work utilizes very slow tempi, ostinati and nonretrogradable rhythms to distort the sensation of time. In Liturgie de cristal, the cello and piano play non-retrogradeable rhythms whilst surrounded by the birdsong in the violin and clarinet parts. Note the high

---

20 Samuel, p. 44
21 loc. cit.
22 Rilke, (1975)
tessitura and fast movement of the birdsong in comparison to the cello and piano parts.

*Abîme des oiseaux*, is prefaced with Messiaen’s explanation:

> The abyss is Time with its sadness, its weariness. The birds are the opposite to Time; they are our desire for light, for stars, for rainbows, and for jubilant songs.\(^{24}\)

The abyss of Time is characterised by nonretrogradeable rhythms, followed by freer birdsongs. Clearly Messiaen is using the juxtaposition of birdsong and nonretrogradeable rhythms to illustrate his conception of birds as the opposite of time, as unbound by the sadness and weariness of time. A further example of this can be found in scene 6 of *Saint François d’Assise*, where Messiaen uses the superimposition of unrelated tempi and ondes martenot glissandi to depict St Francois preaching to the birds.

The idea that birds are somehow free from the sadness and weariness of linear time, is echoed by Rilke whose fourth elegy laments:

> We are not unified. We have no instincts like those of migratory birds. Useless, and late, we force ourselves, suddenly, onto the wind, and fall down to an indifferent lake.\(^{25}\)

For Messiaen, it appears that birds are something like avatars of angels, and yet, he nevertheless insists on a distinction. For while birds may enjoy great freedom from time when compared to humans, they are still corporeal beings, and cannot therefore exist completely outside of time. In *Saint François d’Assise*, Messiaen’s angel is always accompanied by a specific birdsong, and by ondes martenot glissandi. The ondes martenot, too, is used to simulate the very high registers of angelic choirs. So while the angel is closely associated with birdsong, she also represents freedom, in the form of the ondes martenot, from the limitations of instrumental range and equally tempered tuning.\(^{26}\) It seems that Messiaen is telling us that nothing bound within linear time can have anything of the divine about it. In a festival program booklet from 1968, Messiaen praises Christ, saying “you are the only bird of eternity”.\(^{27}\)

In *Saint François d’Assise*, Messiaen assigns an individual bird-song to every soloist in the opera. This idea bears a striking resemblance to Attar’s, ‘Language of the Birds’, which expounds an extended metaphor for the journey of the

---

\(^{24}\) Messiaen, Notes to *Quatuor Pour la Fin du Temps*, Paris: Durand, 1941.

\(^{25}\) ibid.

\(^{26}\) “The angel’s pace, however, remains slow the whole time, while the other characters’ movements are performed more quickly.” Rößler, op. cit. p. 128

\(^{27}\) From the program booklet for the Messiaen Festival, Düsseldorf 1968. Rößler, op. cit. p. 55 and fn 14.
soul towards divinity, each bird representing the soul of a human being. So is it, then, that Messiaen understands birds to be the intermediaries between humans and angels? Or, perhaps as positions along a scale leading from human beings to music, to birds, to angels and finally, to God – becoming less and less corporeal, less and less time-bound as the scale approaches divinity?

Certainly Rilke shared the view that birds were closer to God than humans, and yet were sufficiently rooted in the corporeal world to function almost as the lower rungs on a ladder that climbed toward divinity. In his Seventh elegy, he writes:

VII: wooing will not be the form of your
cry, voice that's outgrown it: truly you cried as pure as a bird,
when the season lifts him, the ascending one, almost forgetting
that he is a suffering creature, and not just a solitary heart
that it flings into brightness, to intimate heavens.

According to St Thomas Aquinas, angels can be in several places at once and is capable of non-continuous movement (one place in an instant and another place in the next instant). Aquinas holds that angels were created by God from eternity itself - they are outside of Time and, therefore, immortal. While corporeal nature is bound in time and divine nature is eternal, the angel, has neither of those natures, and was therefore created before Time and after eternity.

---

29 “The bird is a creature that has a very special feeling of trust in the external world, as if she knew that she is one with its deepest mystery. That is why she sings in it as if she were singing within her own depths; that is why we so easily receive a birdcall into our own depths; we seem to be translating it without residue into our emotion; indeed, it can for a moment turn the whole world into inner space, because we feel that the bird does not distinguish between her heart and the world’s.” Letter to Lou Andreas-Salome, February 20, 1914, trans. Stephen Mitchell.
30 Rilke, (1975)
31 It would seem that an angel can be in several places at once. For an angel is not less endowed with power than the soul. But the soul is in several places at once, for it is entirely in every part of the body, as Augustine says (De Trin. vi). Therefore an angel can be in several places at once. … the same time of an angel's movement can be non-continuous. So an angel can be in one place in one instant, and in another place in the next instant, without any time intervening. If the time of the angel's movement be continuous, he is changed through infinite places throughout the whole time which precedes the last 'now'. … It would seem that the angel was produced by God from eternity. For God is the cause of the angel by His being: for He does not act through something besides His essence. But His being is eternal. Therefore He produced the angels from eternity. … Further, everything which exists at one period and not at another, is subject to time. But the angel is above time, as is laid down in the book De Causis. Therefore the angel is not at one time existing and at another non-existing, but exists always. …Further, the angelic nature stands midway between the Divine and the corporeal natures. But the Divine nature is from eternity; while corporeal nature is from time. Therefore the angelic nature was produced ere time was made, and after eternity. Aquinas, (1981)
Messiaen clearly shares this view with Aquinas, saying:

There’s one thing which is very difficult to explain to most people: the matter of time. Many people are content to live in time without asking any questions. For them, time runs by as a matter of course. In fact, space and time were the first of God’s creations, I think, even before the angels, before light, before everything, and they are such amazing creations because their nature is so much opposed to God: God is infinite, He doesn’t exist in space and knows neither beginning nor end.\(^\text{32}\)

Rilke too, positions angels in an intermediary position between humans and God, and yet outside of time. In his first elegy, he states:

I: Angels (they say) would often not know whether they moved among living or dead. The eternal current sweeps all the ages, within it, through both the spheres, forever, and resounds above them in both.\(^\text{33}\)

The idea that angels occupy the spaces in between humans and the divine does not necessarily imply perfect goodwill, in fact – there is much in religious doctrine to contradict that view. Certainly biblical angels were fairly underwhelmed by God’s preference for human beings, and it is said that Satan’s fall was not unconnected with this issue. In certain religious traditions outside of the Judeo-Christian, such as some forms of Sufism, it is held that humans can be food for angels, mush as plankton is food for whales. This view, represents the divergence of Rilke and Messiaen’s angelology.

In the second elegy, Rilke describes human beings as breathing themselves out and away, diminishing in strength as they are dispersed, whereas angels are like mirrors who radiate emanations from God which are then reflected back into themselves and reabsorbed. Rilke asks if the angels perhaps breathe in parts of our dispersed being in the process of reabsorbing their own radiation. If so, then perhaps human beings could be resurrected in the larger essence of angels – but they are too preoccupied with their own swirling movement towards self-realisation, and we are simply too insignificant to attract the notice or the affection of angels.

II: Does the cosmic space, we dissolve into, taste of us then? Do the Angels really only take back what is theirs, what has streamed out of them, or is there sometimes, as if by an oversight, something of our being, as well? Are we as mingled with their features, as there is vagueness in the faces of pregnant women? They do not see it in the swirling return to themselves. (How should they see it?)

\(^{32}\) Rößler, op. cit. pp. 123-124

\(^{33}\) Rilke, (1975)
Rilke does not seriously entertain the possibility of communing with angels, that much is clear, but can the same be said of Messiaen? Andrew Shenton has postulated a genuine attempt by Messiaen to compose music, which functions as communication with angels. It is apparent from his writings that Messiaen considered music the most appropriate artform with which to express religious ideas, due to its incorporeality. If Messiaen had, in fact, wished to compose angelic communication, one might reasonably expect the resultant music to challenge our understanding of linear time, to include the songs of birds – as intermediaries between humans and angels, to adopt electronic instruments with which to transcend the limitations of range and tuning and, perhaps even, to adopt a specific *langage communicable*, based on angelic texts. Shenton speculates:

First, Messiaen could be trying to communicate with the angels, writing a piece that can be comprehended in all its aspects by them, because if angels can communicate with a sophisticated system that has no heed of time or space, they can surely interpret the various semiotic systems in the *Méditations*.  

And while Messiaen wisely chooses to avoid the subject of angelic language in his written prefaces and interviews, it is possible to find the traces of this idea, outlined within his broader discussions about the role music plays in more orthodox mysticism.

…the one sole reality is of a different order: it is to be found in the realm of Faith. Only by encountering another Being can we understand it. But to do that, we have to pass through death and resurrection, and that implies a leap out of temporal things…music is a perpetual dialogue between space and time, between sound and colour, a dialogue which leads into a unification: Time is a space, sound is a colour, space is a complex of superimposed times, sound-complexes exist at the same time as complexes of colour. The musician who thinks, sees, hears, speaks, is able, by means of these fundamental ideas, to come closer to the next world to a certain extent...

Music is a wholly incorporeal artform whose canvas is time and space. In music we routinely engage in dialogues with the dead – every time we play a piece, begin a transcription, conduct musicological research, we enter into communion with the unseen. And this act is not restricted by the usual boundaries of linear time – every time we hear a piece of Liszt, or Busoni or Messiaen, it is as if it were the first time – music does not fade with age although a given piece may become more or less fashionable. And, while the theologically- loaded term ‘angel’ may cause us to resist associating Messiaen with such an embarrassing goal, if we are honest, we will admit that the very act of manifesting music in vibrating space, is in itself a step towards a ‘language of the birds’.

---

35 Rößler, op. cit. p. iv
References


Boulainvilliers, Henri de. La vie de Mohamed Westmead: Gregg Int., 1971


