

# Scriabin, Messiaen, Zorn

by Robert Holliston

Russian composer Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915) began his career as a virtuoso pianist and composer often compared to Chopin, but in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century began to immerse himself in theosophy, a mystical doctrine dedicated to the reconciliation of Christianity with the transcendental religions of South Asia, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism. He then consciously evolved his own style so his music could serve his spiritual beliefs. Central to this style was a radical, non-tonal approach to harmony encapsulated in the “Mystic Chord,” so-called by an early biography, and intended to reveal to the human mind what was beyond rational conceptualization.

This is a link to the shortest YouTube video demonstration of this chord, and the only one that doesn't include significant analysis with a lot of technical terminology:

[The Mystic Chord Scriabin](#)

The piano poem *Vers la flamme*, Op. 72, dates from the last full year of the composer's life by which time any reference to major-minor tonality has been virtually eliminated. In place of melody is a repeated semitone motive announced at the beginning and heard throughout the work. Scriabin's harmony by this stage in his evolution ensures for such an abundance of tritones – conventionally perceived as a dissonance – that they emerge to the ear as consonances.

The young Vladimir Horowitz played for Scriabin and remained an ardent champion of his music. Later in life he discussed *Vers la flamme* as reflecting the composer's conviction that the world as a whole was edging “towards the flame,” and would gradually heat up until it erupted into a fiery cosmic conflagration.

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Scriabin composed poems for his late works beginning with Op. 61 – this is his contribution for *Vers la flamme*:

*In the dark and dark depths of matter*

*Time in heavy chains languished.*

*Pyramid Mountain*

*In a slow dream turned.*

*Magic signs*

*The power was dozing in the underground*

*Mysterious crypts.*

*But anxiety arose in the mysterious abysses,*

*Hidden joy radiance woke her*

*Sleeping matter clumps.*

*Consciousness and will*

*Born again and burning aspirations flows*

*From the depths rushed to the radiant light*

*What flared above the ground.*

*Inspiredly*

*In the dance circled the disembodied children of the universe.*

*Fire thoughts avalanche and sharp flashes*

*Lightning will pierce the planet through and through.*

*Stormy joy embraced the last Race –*

*God became an immortal earthly man!*

*In the bright light shone triumphantly*

*Disappearances and the origin of chords.*

*And embraces the universe clean flame*

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*Transfiguration of the sacred – the new world*

*The image of the mysterious in eternity gently shines ...*

Recording (with score) of Vladimir Horowitz: [Scriabin \*Verse la Flamme\*, Op. 72](#)

Throughout his musical life – indeed, from his childhood – French composer Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) was profoundly receptive to an almost bewildering variety of influences. When he entered the Paris Conservatoire at age eleven, Messiaen had already studied and absorbed Debussy's opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* – receiving that score as a tenth birthday gift was, he later recalled, probably the “most decisive influence I received.” Messiaen acknowledged his composition teacher Paul Dukas as an influence and, while he owned and studied the scores of Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire* and Stravinsky's *Le sacre du printemps*, the young composer remained faithful to his childhood loves: Debussy, Mozart, Berlioz, Wagner.

But the most decisive, fundamental influences on Messiaen's evolution as a composer came from outside the Conservatoire curriculum.

During his student years Messiaen took a year-long course in Greek metre, which encouraged him to visit libraries in search of further information from which he developed his own understanding of that subject. He wrote: “Greek metres rely on a simple and essential principle: they are composed of shorts and longs; the shorts are all equal and a long equals two shorts ... Metre is quite simply the grouping of two feet, the foot being a rhythm composed of a certain number of short and long values each having a precise name.” Messiaen's study of Greek metre was not the only catalyst for this stylistic development, for he had also made a study of classical

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Indian rhythms through a chance encounter with the *Sangitaratnakara* ("The Ocean of Music"), a thirteenth-century treatise. From these studies he developed his principle of "non-retrogradable rhythm" – i.e., a succession of note values that is the same backwards as it is forwards – another kind of palindrome. Thus are the *Chants de Terre et de Ciel* liberated from the sometimes confining tyranny of the time signature and barline.

Central to Messiaen's compositional style were two life-long obsessions: his devout Catholic faith, and his love of birdsong, which he considered the closest we earthlings get to the celestial sound of heaven.

*La mort du nombre* was composed in 1929-30 and first performed in March 1931. In the words of Messiaen's most recent biographer, Robert Sholl, it is a cantata for soprano, tenor, violin and piano "in which two souls sing to each other, the female soul (perhaps a metaphor for Messiaen's mother) calming the male and reassuring him of the gloriousness of eternal life in the radiant coda of the work which is for violin and piano alone."

The cycle *Chants de terre et de ciel* (1938) contains six songs with texts by the composer himself. The vocal writing often reflects aspects of Catholic psalmody and plainchant. In terms of narrational structure, the first two songs chart the hopes and anxieties of marriage, then two which depict with astonishing clarity and candour the joys of parenthood – the cycle reflects Messiaen's joy at the birth of his son, Pascal, in 1938. But the last two movements make a radical shift in tone to confront the inevitability of death, and also – for believers – the terrifying grandeur of rebirth into eternal life: of resurrection.

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[Barbara Hannigan explores a Messiaen melody](#)

John Zorn (b. 1953) has throughout his career deliberately avoided categorization. Maybe even identification: if this is the same John Zorn, his position in the world of music was thus summarized: “although Zorn has operated almost entirely outside the mainstream, he’s gradually asserted himself as one of the most influential musicians of our time.” This not from BBC or Gramophone but Rolling Stone!

According to a NY Times article, Zorn’s *Jumalatteret* is virtually impossible (“unsingable,” as they put it) – breathless vocalise, abrupt transitions from head-spinning complexity to folk-song simplicity, and – within the span of a single measure – whispering, squeaking, and throat singing.

The cycle is made up of nine sections, with an opening invocation and a postlude. The score draws from a variety of genres, moods, and techniques, as well as, in Zorn’s words, “the quality of ritual and extremes of experience.” Zorn, who identifies as an admirer of the female warrior spirit, has named each section after a Sami goddess.

For the performers – individually and as a collaborative unit – the challenges are extreme. “Most of my work involves pushing the envelope of technical mastery,” Zorn said. “For me, challenges are opportunities. You must believe enough in what you are doing to put yourself in harm’s way – because only through discipline and extremes of experience is one able to transcend the trivial and mundane. As a sacred piece, *Jumalatteret* needed very much to capture those sacred tones.”

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At a certain point during the process of preparing this colossal work for its premiere, Barbara Hannigan sent a message to John Zorn whose subtext suggested a lack of confidence that she'd be ready in time. The composer responded:

One cannot transcend anything by staying on safe ground  
and it is in these intense moments that we can find deeper truths,  
bring mind and heart together – and begin to understand the soul and its workings  
in that courageous moment of letting go and going for it,  
the music will come alive in a special and heroic way – a way that is beyond just the  
notes on paper.

For Ms. Hannigan, that message meant everything: it now worked. “When a piece clicks,” she said, “you feel the flow, can almost taste it coming.”

“It has changed everything,” Barbara Hannigan said. “It’s one of those pieces that was life-changing.”

[Working with John Zorn on his chef d’oeuvre, Jumalattaret](#)

[Stars descend on Earth – Excerpt of Barbara Hannigan’s performance of Jumalattaret](#)