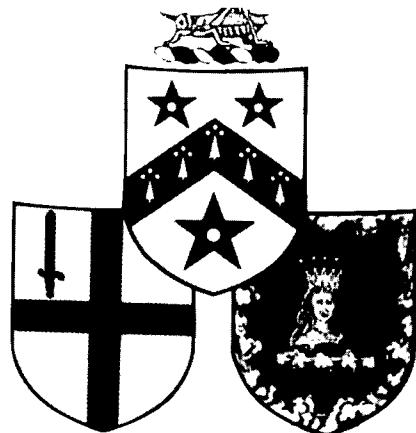


G R E S H A M
C O L L E G E



LE TOMBEAU DE MESSIAEN

Lecture 3

**JONATHAN HARVEY'S
*LE TOMBEAU DE MESSIAEN***

by

**PROFESSOR STEPHEN PRATT BA BMus
and
PROFESSOR JOANNA MacGREGOR BA
Gresham Professors of Music**

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GRESHAM COLLEGE

Policy & Objectives

An independently funded educational institution, Gresham College exists

- to continue the free public lectures which have been given for 400 years, and to reinterpret the ‘new learning’ of Sir Thomas Gresham’s day in contemporary terms;
- to engage in study, teaching and research, particularly in those disciplines represented by the Gresham Professors;
- to foster academic consideration of contemporary problems;
- to challenge those who live or work in the City of London to engage in intellectual debate on those subjects in which the City has a proper concern; and to provide a window on the City for learned societies, both national and international.

TOMBÉAU DE MESSIAEN

Professor Joanna MacGregor and Professor Stephen Pratt

SP: In the last lecture, I talked about the impact of Stockhausen's *Mantra*, a piece for two pianos, percussion and live electronics. I am not alone in my admiration for *Mantra*. The simple but highly effective idea of integrating the electronic transformations of the live piano sound with the harmonic structure of the piece, and the projection of a single melodic idea across the thirteen sections which make up the hour long work has influenced a significant number of composers. Inspired by Messiaen in the early 1950s, Stockhausen had sought a compositional method by which he could achieve a common organisational principle for pitch, rhythm, articulation and even timbre. Total serialism, as it became known, had a brief but important role to play in European music; though it ultimately failed, the experience was to prove liberating rather than restricting for composers such as Stockhausen and Boulez.

Jonathan Harvey was born in Sutton Coldfield in 1939. Early composition teaching with Erwin Stein and Hans Keller gave him a thorough training in 'classical' serial technique. Later, in 1969, he went to Princeton and studied with Milton Babbitt. For Harvey, this provided him with an experience not dissimilar to that of Stockhausen in the early fifties. Babbitt had been a leader in continuing developments in total serial thinking beyond the early 1950s. His writings provided composers and theorists with a clarity and purity of thought, even if the language often invited mixed responses:

Any consideration of the operations of the system must proceed from an awareness of their permutable nature. As a simple example: transposition, excepting the identity transposition, in a combinational system results in the adjoining of pitches which are not present in the original collection, and thus establishes a new sub-collection; transposition of a set results only in a permutation of the elements.¹

So, Harvey passed through a period of study in which he would have been working alongside composers and theorists continuing to work through the implications of post war serial developments. Like Stockhausen, this appears to have been a liberating rather than restricting experience. His first major work, the orchestral *Persephone Dream*, received several significant performances in the early 1970s. At the same time, he was completing a study of Stockhausen's music, and the last piece to be discussed in the book is *Mantra*, which just makes it into the appendix. Harvey's admiration of Stockhausen is clear, and I'd like to start by focussing on a piece from 1982 which I believe to be significantly influenced by *Mantra*. In the early 1980s, Harvey was one of the first British composers to be invited to work at IRCAM, the electronic music research centre set up by Pierre Boulez in the mid 70s. There were to be

¹ Babbitt, M: Twelve-tone invariants as compositional determinants (reprinted in Problems of Modern Music, ed P.H. Lang, Norton 1962)

two products of this collaboration with the IRCAM staff; a tape piece, *Mortuos Plangos*, *Vivos Voco*, and *Bhakti*, a piece for ensemble and tape. In both works, Harvey was able to make use of new digital sampling techniques to sculpt the sounds on the tapes.

Digital sound technology is based on the ability to create artificial sound waves. With a sampler, it is possible to record sound and then recreate the sound waves digitally. Once stored in this form, it is possible to alter certain aspects of the sound without changing others. To give a simple example - prior to digital technology, if you wanted to make a piece of recorded music go faster, you had to accept that the pitch would rise, unless you went to very elaborate lengths to compensate. With digital technology, it is a simple operation to change those aspects of the sound waves which are concerned with the rate of events without affecting the pitch.

For *Bhakti*, Harvey recorded the sounds of the instruments that he had selected to make up the ensemble that would be playing live. These recordings formed the raw material for the tape part of *Bhakti*. Using the most up to date sampling software available at IRCAM at the time, he created a tape part which is based on the transformed sounds of the instruments; we hear them in their alter egos, so to speak.

In practice there are sections in which the tape part is heard on its own, and at others complex passages in which the live players and the tape have to combine precisely. Here's a passage in which we hear the tape alone:

Extract 1 (CD, *Bhakti*, mvt II)

Bhakti is in 12 sections, and Harvey's compositional technique owes something to Mantra in the way in which the sectional construction of the work relates to a single 'formula' expressed at the outset. Like *Mantra*, we hear live and transformed sound in performance. *Mantra*, is a classic of the analogue age, and *Bhakti* one of the first of the digital age. As we have observed on a few occasions, there haven't been many great serious classics using digital technology, despite the advances made in hard- and software.

Bhakti is a Sanskrit word which means devotion. At the end of each of the sections there is a quotation from the *Rig Veda*. Harvey sees the piece as a response to the texts

at a transcendental level of consciousness rather than at an intellectual one²

The links with Mantra are clear.

² from the composer's programme note to the piece

But there are also links with Messiaen, and this will lead us to the central piece in today's lecture. Here's *The Birds of Karuizawa*, from Messiaen's *Sept Haikai* of 1962:

Extract Messiaen Sept Haikai (tape)

And now the sixth movement from *Bhakti*. The associated text from the *Rig Veda* begins:

the celestial coursers, revelling in their strength, fly in a line like wild geese

Extract (CD) Bhakti VIth movement

The central theme of our lectures, *Tombeau de Messiaen*, has been the extension of the sound of the piano - starting with Messiaen's epic *Vingt Regards*. In the work which gives us the title of this group of lectures, we come around in a circle. Harvey's *Tombeau de Messiaen* was composed as an elegy to Messiaen after his death in 1992. This is a work for piano and tape, although today's technology enables us to put the tape part onto CD (which is extremely convenient for performance today in our beautiful but modest hall at Gresham). Like *Bhakti*, *Tombeau de Messiaen* employs sampled sound from the live instrument in the tape part.

JMcG: But before we hear *Tombeau de Messiaen*, I'd like to play you an extract from a recent piece by Jonathan Harvey which made a huge impact upon me when I heard it at last year's Huddersfield Festival. It's called *Ashes Dance Back*, and it's written for choir and electronics. The text is from fragments of poems by the thirteenth century Sufi poet Rumi, which deal with the total dissolution of the self in passionate divine love, reflected in metaphors of nature: being blown asunder by wind, consumed by fire or drowned in the ocean, for instance. The electronic part is mostly played from a sampler keyboard, expanding the choir outwards into elements of wind, fire and water.... as the composer tells us, the humans become wind, fire and water:

Extract on tape: Ashes dance back

Now to *Tombeau de Messiaen*. We've already heard a debt to Messiaen in *Bhakti*, and here there are piano textures reminiscent of Messiaen. The

tape part retunes the piano, so that there are microtonal tensions between the live piano and the tape; and, additionally, there's a tight contrapuntal relationship between the two which is reminiscent of the work of Nancarrow.

Joanna plays Tombeau de Messiaen (complete)

Finally, to a very new piece by Jonathan Harvey which also brings together live piano and prerecorded tape. This is *Homage to Cage, a Chopin (und Ligeti ist auch dabei- and Ligeti is in the background)* and its featured on the new *Perilous Night* CD which has been funded by Gresham College. The last movement of Chopin's Bb minor piano sonata is heard through the filter of John Cage's world of prepared piano. In addition, the tape supplies a 'computer-music' dimension which gradually decomposes the piano sonority. The reference to Ligeti is through the title of his own identity-questioning work, *Self-Portrait with Reich and Riley (with Chopin in the background)*. Here's a bit of the tape part:

Extract, tape part

And here's part of the Chopin which inspired it:

Joanna plays

SP: We hope you will share our admiration of Jonathan Harvey from this brief introduction to his work. His is an important voice in British contemporary music; his work draws on the post-war European avant-garde, and synthesises this with deeply-felt spiritual beliefs and an imaginative use of the raw elements of music.