

Displacement as Potential: The Spiritual Power of Space and Sound in the Works of Olivier Messiaen

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Summary statement

At the intersection of architecture (the most materially dependent discipline) and music (one of the least material disciplines) humans can experience one kind of displacement that can usher in new insights into both disciplines.

Topics

Displacement, containment, prisoner of war camp, music, architecture, space, sound, pipe organ music, atemporality, non-linear time.

Scope

We are helpless in the face of natural catastrophes, and that helplessness is often the result of being forced to leave what we call home, be it through acts of war (Syria comes to mind), the threat of flooding (who remembers Houston?), mud slides and all-consuming wild fires (in California), or any other events out of our control that displace us from places we used to call home. Being helpless, having no agency, is even evident in the way we describe what follows these events: the verb of the word *displacement*, in its non-nautical meaning, suggests a passiveness on the part of those who are *being* displaced. The displaced have only a passive voice. They are apparently without power to change the outcome of their situation.

Losing everything material in one's possession and being physically displaced to parts unknown, or at least initially unfamiliar, represents, perhaps, a larger threat than losing the memory of what one associates with photographs or personal objects that are now lost. Or does it? The reified memory is just that, a physical object that stands in for our immaterial thoughts as we imagine that we need the physical artifacts to recall our past life. But what if the truly important memories, those that we deeply care about, are not activated and maintained by physical objects but by something quite immaterial that, paradoxically, relies on *matter* for its ephemeral existence? Right after the 9-11 attacks in New York in 2001, we continued to hear on the radio Yo-Yo Ma playing Bach's *Prelude from Suite 1* for solo cello, and for us the emotional loneliness of that sad cello sound took the place of the World Trade Center towers that no longer existed as buildings but had been transformed into smoldering piles of debris.

For us this memory foregrounded the relations between music and architecture, two disciplines and practices that could not be further apart, at least according to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, for whom architecture is the first art, not because it is—in his philosophy—the most important but because it depends most on the material world for its existence. Diametrically opposite, poetry is for Hegel the last and highest art because the voice reciting a poem completely transcends the material dimension. Music is second to poetry but still quite distant from architecture in Hegel's world view. If architecture is tied to the material, and music to the immaterial and therefore to the spiritual realm, does music have the power to displace us with the help of architecture into a new space of pure immateriality? And here we have to stop for a moment and make the argument that

architecture, for *acoustic* music to be heard, is always necessary. Yes, we can amplify music artificially and project sound with the help of massive speakers into a crowd outside, but the laws of physics tell us that sound propagation *without* material is difficult, if not impossible. We can therefore state that architecture, in its widest possible sense, is always necessary—in a material, acoustic sense—to transfer music from its origin/instrument to our ears effectively.

But what about those musicians who consciously connect both architecture and music in their art? As an example for the intersection of displacement, space, and sound we can briefly explore the work of the French composer, organist, and ornithologist Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) who, in May 1940, became a prisoner of war—another unnatural form of displacement—and was held at the prisoner of war camp Stalag VIII-A across the river from the south-east German town of Görlitz, in what is now Polish territory. As a prisoner of war at Stalag VIII-A Messiaen defied the passivity implied by the term “being displaced” and transformed hopelessness into a powerful piece of music, the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (“Quartet for the End of Time”) that he, playing piano, performed with three other prisoners, Étienne Pasquier (cello), Henri Akoka (clarinet), and Jean Le Boulaire (violin) on 15 January 1941 in one of the camp’s barracks. In the composition Messiaen has the instruments confront in eight movements (I. Liturgy of Crystals, II. Vocalize, for the Angel who Announces the End of Time, III. Abyss of Birds, IV. Interlude, V. Praise to the Eternity of Jesus, VI. Dance of Fury, for the Seven Trumpets, VII. Tangle of Rainbows, for the Angel who Announces the End of Time, VIII. Praise to the Immortality of Jesus) the natural/physical world in the camp with the immaterial world of thoughts and ideas through an immaterial medium—music—that is only made possible within and through the material of our bodies and instruments in a space of performance that transcends the physical world of that cold winter night in Stalag VIII-A.

But Messiaen’s ability to effectively displace his listeners goes beyond this single piece of music. While he is known in the world of many musicians mostly for his *Quartet for the End of Time*, the bulk of his work involves his long tenure at the cathedral of Sainte-Trinité in Paris where he was *organiste titulaire* from 1931 to 1992. There, his radical experimentation with time/rhythm, melody, form, harmony, birdsong, and unconventional modes of composition can be read to represent his desire to reconcile the opposites of space and sound, and transcend both with a spirituality grounded in his beliefs about the power of religion to transform and remake the world. Rather than a source of despair and hopelessness, Messiaen transformed with his work the manifestation of displacement into a starting point for a new way of conjuring the presence of the spiritual in a physical world. Anyone who has experienced as a musical performer the sensation of viewing oneself perform from outside one’s own body or who remembers, as a listener of music, that moment when one becomes one with the soundscape that surrounds him or her, understands the spiritual dimension and power of music. It is a marriage between the physical and the metaphysical in which Messiaen remains a prime protagonist. For Messiaen, music was a spiritual discipline, an art concerned with human and eternal time, where time can be both static and circular rather than merely linearly progressive.

One such piece by Messiaen that precedes the *Quartet for the End of Time* is a piece for pipe organ *Les Corps Glorieux*, a composition he finished on 25 August 1939, a week before WWII broke out, but which he did not perform until just before the end of the war on 15 April 1945. We can speculate that *Les Corps Glorieux* prepared him for experiences of timelessness/eternity that he would need to survive the harsh conditions in Stalag VIII-A. Messiaen composed *Les Corps Glorieux* for solo organ, an immaterial sound source often heard but not seen (the organist is often physically invisible to the audience), capable of long changeless durations in a reverberant room. As any organist knows, a pipe organ is its own orchestra, and complex pieces of music, especially those composed by Messiaen, stretch the performer’s abilities to the maximum as she or he tries to come to terms with unconventional means of composition. These include modes of limited transpositions, plainsong, Hindu and Greek rhythms, non-retrogradable rhythms, birdsong,

synesthesia, new tone color combinations, and messages including subtitles, chant, numerology, and musical alphabet. For example, *Les Corps Glorieux* consists of seven short visions of the life of the resurrected, each with a sacred subtitle, organized symmetrically with the last movement circularly looping to be quietly similar to the first, challenging the Western developmental notion of events progressing over time:

- I. Subtlety of the Glorious Bodies
- II. The Waters of Grace
- III. The Angel with Perfumes
- IV. Combat of Death and of Life
- V. Strength and Agility of the Glorious Bodies
- VI. Joy and Clarity of the Glorious Bodies
- VII. Mystery of the Holy Trinity

Conclusions

Music is a door to spirituality used in meditation to take a soul to peace by musicians through whom music flows from another source. For the remainder of our presentation we will play for you a recording of Olivier Messiaen playing the second part "Life" of the fourth movement *Combat of Death and Life* of *Les Corps Glorieux*, a temporal battle of death as a gateway to the eternal "sunlit peace of divine love," to give you the opportunity of being one with eternity as it happens. An apparent conclusion may not be the end, with music beginning after the music ends.

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