

The Representation of the Medieval Idea of Ugliness in Messiaen's Saint François d'Assise

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Abstract : This paper explores the ways both medieval and medievalist conceptions of ugliness might be linked to the physical and spiritual transformation of the protagonists and how it is realised through specific musical rhythm, such as the dochmiac rhythm in the opera. As Eco and Henderson note, only one kind of ugliness could be represented in conformity with nature in the Middle Ages without destroying all aesthetic pleasure and, in turn, artistic beauty: namely, a form of ugliness which arouses disgust. Moreover, Eco explores the fact that the enemies of Christ who condemn, martyr, and crucify him are represented as wicked inside. In turn, the representation of inner wickedness and hostility toward God brings with it outward ugliness, coarseness, barbarity, and rage. Ultimately these result in the deformation of the figure. In all these regards, the non-beautiful is represented here as a necessary phase, which is not the case with classical (the ancient Greek) concepts of Beauty. As we can see, the understanding of disfigurement and ugliness in the Middle Ages was both varied and complex. In the Middle Ages, the disfigurement caused by leprosy (and other skin and bodily conditions) was interpreted, in a somewhat contradictory manner, as both a curse and a gift from God. Some saints' lives even have the saint appealing to be inflicted with the disease as part of their mission toward true humility. We shall explore that this 'different concept' of ugliness (non-classical beauty) might be represented in Messiaen's opera. According to Messiaen, the Leper and Saint François are the principal characters of the third scene, as both of them will be transformed, and a double miracle will take place in the process. Messiaen mirrors the idea of the true humility of Saint's life and positions *Le Baiser au Lépreux* as the culmination of the first act. The Leper's character represents his physical and spiritual disfigurement, which are healed after the miracle. So, the scene can be viewed as an encounter between beauty and ugliness, and that much of it is spent in a study of ugliness. Dochmiac rhythm is one of the most important compositional elements in the opera. It plays a crucial role in the process of creating a dramatic musical narrative and structure in the composition. As such, we shall explore how Messiaen represents the medieval idea of ugliness in the opera through particular musical elements linked to the main protagonists' spiritual or physical ugliness; why Messiaen makes reference to dochmiac rhythm, and how they create the musical and dramatic context in the opera for the medieval aesthetic category of ugliness.

Keywords : ugliness in music, medieval time, saint françois d'assise, messiaen

Conference Title : ICIM 2022 : International Conference on Interdisciplinary Musicology

Conference Location : Barcelona, Spain

Conference Dates : October 20-21, 2022