

## **PART IV**

### **THE FAUN AND THE VIRGIN, THE SAINT AND THE REAPER: MULTI-TIERED TRANSMEDIALIZATIONS**



## Two Pictorial Cycles and Their Mediated Paths Towards Music

### Claudél in Basel, Hindemith in Florence: How the Stories Began

In 1937-38, two cycles of art works—one in Florence, the other in Basel—impressed themselves on their respective viewers so strongly as to lead to the creation of musical works; in both cases, the path from the visual narration to the composition was mediated by another art form.

During a trip to Northern Italy in May 1937, Paul Hindemith visited the church of Santa Croce in Florence, where he saw in the Bardi Chapel Giotto's<sup>1</sup> famous frescoes depicting scenes from the life of Saint Francis of Assisi. Struck by the force of the images and wishing to respond to them in music, he chose an interesting, indirect approach. He turned to his friend, the Russian choreographer Léonide Massine,<sup>1</sup> dragged him (as Massine recalls it) into the church and in front of the frescoes, and implored him to design a ballet on these depictions so that he might write the music for it.

A year later, on 12 May 1938, Paul Claudél<sup>1</sup> came to Basel for the premiere of *Jeanne d'Arc au bûcher* (Joan of Arc at the Stake), an opera by Arthur Honegger<sup>1</sup> for which he had written the libretto. The French poet, using his visit to the old humanist city to enjoy Basel's art works, found himself entranced both by the surviving traces of the old frescoes of the *Baseler Totentanz* (The Basel Dance of the Dead) and the woodcut series on the topic by Hans Holbein.<sup>1</sup> Profoundly touched by the subject and its mode of representation, Claudél only took days until he presented Honegger with a draft of the scenario for an oratorio.

How much did Massine in the one case, and Claudél in the other, influence not only the form in general, but also the specific shape and the details of the musical compositions they helped come into being? And how did they fulfill the role of mediator between the visual stimulus—in each case, a cycle of visual images—and its transformation into music?

<sup>1</sup>Hindemith is well known. For the other creative contributors, see the appendix: pp. 587-88 (Giotto), 625-28 (Massine), 601-02 (Claudél), 610-11 (Honegger), and 589-90 (Holbein).

With the ballet, the story is of a continuous mutual influence. Massine's first ideas about a plastic transposition of Giotto's images led to a jointly designed "libretto." (The term, used by Hindemith, refers in this case, of course, merely to a verbal description of the dramatic action, a scaffolding within which the actual work would take shape, not a component part of the final product.) Hindemith then composed the music and sent it to Massine. Both men again worked together during the first week of the choreographic rehearsals, discussing details and structure of both the music and the corresponding dance.

In the parallel scenario, the collaboration gave perhaps even more room to the impact of the mediating artist. Paul Claudel was himself something of an unrealized composer. Far from simply providing a text and leaving the musical realization entirely to the composers with whom he worked, the poet gave the most detailed instructions. Here is just one example, which Honegger later described to his publisher Salabert. When Claudel first opened the manuscript of his text, ready to read it to the composer, he explained: "It begins with a formidable burst of thunder; not a simple theatrical thunderclap but a musical thunder, prolonged, where the sound rumbles, comes and goes, bounces back from itself, as one hears it during the great thunderstorms in spring."<sup>2</sup>

Already when composing *Joan of Arc at the Stake*, Honegger had declared that he considered Claudel the "co-compositeur." In the *Dance of the Dead*, the poet's input was very explicit.<sup>3</sup> How specific Claudel's ideas about the musical realization of a jointly created work could be can be seen from the written indications he gave for the incidental music Honegger was to write for his *Soulier de satin* (The Silken Slipper):

- (1) Wind instruments, (various flutes), extremely green and acid, which sustain indefinitely the same note up to the end of the scene; from time to time, one of the instruments stops, discovering the underlying lines that continue their weaving;

<sup>2</sup>Translated from Harry Halbreich, *Arthur Honegger: un musicien dans la cité des hommes* (Paris: Fayard/SACEM), 1992, p. 183.

<sup>3</sup>It was Claudel, interestingly, who suggested to Honegger the use of a ratchet. In a letter of 24 September 1938 he wrote to the composer: "I have had an idea for the *Danse macabre* [*sic*], that of using the ratchet (which replaces the bell in the mass of Good Friday)." And he links his suggestion to an impression received in Japan, where Claudel had lived as French ambassador for several years: "At the funeral of the Mikado the coffin was carried by a cart drawn by six black oxen, and the turning wheels produced new noises stipulated by the ritual." Translated from Harry Halbreich, *Arthur Honegger*, p. 184.

- (2) three piercing notes, in ascending scale, on string instruments;
- (3) one note with the bow;
- (4) dry roll with sticks on a small flat drum;
- (5) two small metal gongs;
- (6) ventral and, in the middle, detonations on an enormous drum.<sup>4</sup>

The following chapters will explore how the pictorial sources that inspired Hindemith and Massine in the one case, Claudel and Honegger in the other, expressed the subject matter, how the literary sources additionally consulted in each case (the Bible and the early biographies of Saint Francis of Assisi respectively) helped to shape the mediators' original conception, and how each pair of creative artists generated a work with a distinctive message, inspired by yet reaching beyond the signification communicated in the visual depictions.

### **The Dance of Death—The Dance of the Dead**

The depictions of people of all ages and from all walks of life meeting their destiny in the form of a skeleton or cadaver have their origin in France approximately in the middle of the fourteenth century. Their *raison d'être* was "the attempt to find an effective means to counteract the general social decay of morals due to the prevalence of the Black Death, and the consequent general loss of value put on life because of a possible sudden death."<sup>5</sup> The bubonic plague, which within a few terrible months during the year 1348 is estimated to have wiped out one third to one half of the population of Europe and killed still more in successive later outbreaks, brought about a pervasive, if often macabre, engagement with mortality. "All those grinning, leering, dancing skeletons who call the living off to death are a fearsome if edifying reminder of one's long home. Such depictions may also have served to some extent to contain the terror of death through the imposition on it of form and theme; it is of some potential comfort that death plays, makes festival, even though we may not wish to be caught up in that choreography."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Translated from H. Halbreich, *Arthur Honegger*, p. 725.

<sup>5</sup>Leonard P. Kurz, *The Dance of Death and the Macabre Spirit in European Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934), p. 281.

<sup>6</sup>Ralph G. Williams, "Love and Death in Medieval and Renaissance Literature," *Images of Love and Death in Late Medieval and Renaissance Art* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Museum of Art, 1976), p. 32.

The pictorial tradition associated with the term “dance of death” is often presented as consisting of two genres or scenarios. In the one, Death (with a capital D, as an allegorical *persona*) invites a living partner to “dance with him”; in the other, the dead—either as mere skeletons, if necessary with skulls that fall off and can be put back on, or as cadavers in shapes closer to those of humans but with sickly coloring—are seen mingling in a mad, nightmarish vision. The terms that are used to describe the genre in the various languages often predetermine our association. Thus while the German “Totentanz” suggests that it is the dead who leave their graves and are seen dancing, the English “dance of death” insinuates rather the depiction of the Grim Reaper approaching somebody still in the midst of life. Romance languages have two terms, possibly with different connotations depending on the seriousness of the occasion. The French distinguish “la danse des morts” (which more often than not involves an allegorical Death) from “la danse macabre,” which eventually came to be used for both forms but seems originally linked with midnight scenes of specters dancing on graves.<sup>7</sup> The Basel frescoes that inspired Holbein and, through him, Claudel and Honegger, belonged to neither of these two types but represented a third option. Here, each scene portrays a living being confronted with his or her individualized death—an intriguing variant on which more will need to be said.

What all three strands have in common is that nobody is actually imagined as “dancing”; at the most, a paired position that might lead to a dance is shown. There are several reasons for the use of the term dance. On the one hand, the extensive sequence of people from every walk of life meeting their last hour was apparently itself perceived as a kind of round dance. Similarly in depictions of multiple skeletons, the characters could be shown to lead a kind of procession or pageant, which would sometimes take the form of a round. On the other hand, the “invitation to

<sup>7</sup>Robert Eisler, in his article on the *danse macabre*, has shown that the term *macabre*, which originates from the Syrian dialect that is used in the *Peschita*, the Syrian version of the Bible, refers to a grave-digger. He also observes that in almost all representations entitled “danse macabre,” the skeletons have hands and feet like living persons, and the lines that separate the hands from the arms and the feet from the leg look like the seams of a dress. This suggests that the figures are represented as if they were wearing skeleton costumes! (Cf. Robert Eisler, “Danse macabre,” *Tradition* vi [1948], p. 187.) It is indeed possible that in certain regions, the grave-diggers would have performed such pantomimes at annual gatherings of their guild. They would thus be imitating the magic dances of the souls of the dead who, according to the fairy tales of many peoples, may sometimes be seen emerging from their graves and dancing in the cemeteries.

dance” with Death also existed as a self-sufficient metaphor that did not require pictorial suggestiveness to be understood.<sup>8</sup>

From France the genre spread to Germany and Switzerland, Italy and Spain, and mural painting was far from the only medium employed. As James Clark has shown in his seminal study on the topic, “there were poems and prose works, manuscripts and printed books, paintings on wood, stone, or canvas, stained glass windows, sculptures, embroidery, tapestry, metal work, engravings on stone or metal, and woodcuts.”<sup>9</sup> And the tradition has by no means come to an end. Long after the heyday of murals and engravings on the topic, Goethe’s *Totentanz* and Walter Scott’s poem, “The Dance of Death,” revived the fascination with the macabre midnight revel, and nineteenth-century music gave us the famous works by Liszt and Saint-Saëns. Among the best-known twentieth-century adaptations of the medieval theme are, in the visual medium, Alfred Kubin’s *Ein Totentanz*<sup>10</sup> and Hans G. Jentzsch’s 1904 series of eighteen pictures, entitled *Ein neuer Totentanz*; in drama, August Strindberg’s two short companion plays, *The Dance of Death I* and *The Dance of Death II*, of 1901; in poetry, Anatole France’s work, “La danse des morts,” published in 1924; and in music, Frank Martin’s ballet music, *Ein Totentanz in Basel*, composed in 1943. In their interpretations of the old theme, though, these twentieth-century versions vary widely. While the Swedish playwright interprets the “dance of death” as modern marital hell, the French poet reflects on the medieval representations themselves, expressing his belief that they served as saintly and edifying pictures at which people looked without fear, knowing that, ultimately, Death himself will die and they will live again.

Contemporary with the first recorded visual representations, possibly even preceding them, there were three kinds of verbally based forms of the Dance of Death or Dance of the Dead: poems, staged dramatic works, and illustrated sermons. As to the first, there existed in France around 1300 a form of short Latin poem known as the *Vado mori*. Following an

<sup>8</sup>Kathi Meyer-Baer adds that in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, the Dance of Death was “such a familiar phenomenon that the terms ‘to perform’ or ‘take part in’ the *danse macabre* were used colloquially to mean ‘to die’.” (K. Meyer-Baer, *Music of the Spheres and the Dance of Death: Studies in Musical Iconology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 298.

<sup>9</sup>J. M. Clark, *The Dance of Death by Hans Holbein* (London: Phaidon Press, 1947), p. 1.

<sup>10</sup>Published in Berlin without date; discussed in Alfred Scott Warthin, *The Physician of the Dance of Death: A Historical Study of the Evolution of the Dance of Death Mythus in Art* (New York: P.B. Hoeber 1931), pp. 118-126.

(optional) prologue on the inevitability of death, its main body consists of distichs, spoken by various persons from prince to pauper, each beginning and ending with the words “vado mori” (you shall die). This poetic form shares with the visual depictions of the *Totentanz* the appearance of characters of all classes, in descending social order and in almost equal representation of the Church and the State, each addressing Death. In the *Vado mori*, however, Death as a person or *persona* does not appear; there is no reply to the speeches of the doomed.<sup>11</sup>

As to the second kind of literary form, Clark mentions a description of a drama performed in the church of Caudebec in Normandy in 1393, in which “the actors represented all the states, from the scepter to the crook. They entered one at a time, showing that all has an end, king and shepherd alike. This dance is without doubt [...] none other than the famous *danse macabre*.”<sup>12</sup> In the same context, Clark documents “a certain play, history and morality relating to the fact of the *Danse macabre*,” which was staged in the Belgian city of Bruges in 1449, as well as a Dance of Death performed after the hour of mass in the church of St. John the Evangelist in the French town of Besançon in 1453, furthermore the *Corpus Christi* play at Aix-en-Provence in 1462, and various versions of the thematically related *Everyman* play in the Dutch, French, and English languages, in which Death appears distinctly as a judge condemning the superficiality of the doomed person’s lifestyle. Preceding all these dramatic realizations, the earliest scenic version seems to have been a Dance-of-Death masque or *tableau vivant* performed at the wedding of Alexander III of Scotland at Jedburgh in 1285.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup>A similar case, dating from 1440, is discussed by Anna Krause in her study *Jorge Manrique and the Cult of Death in the Cuatrocientos* (Publications of the University of California at Los Angeles in Language and Literature 1/3 [1937]). Jorge Manrique’s poem on the death of his father encompasses in its three sections many of the ingredients typical for the genre of the Dance of Death. The first section admonishes us to beware of omnipresent death in a form reminiscent of a *vado mori*; this part contains a sequence of personages from different walks of life very similar to those found in the classic *Totentanz*. The second sections expresses the doomed person’s regret to die together with the hope that exemplary conduct in life may lead to a form of immortality. The third section features a dialogue between Manrique’s father and Death exactly like the one found in the quatrains illustrating many visual depictions of the topic.

<sup>12</sup>Translated from the French after James M. Clark, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, p. 93.

<sup>13</sup>For a detailed description of these dramas and the early masque, see James M. Clark, *The Dance of Death ...*, pp. 92-94. Clark believes that the drama may have originated from a pageant, which in turn was inspired by the masque or *tableau vivant*.

As to the possibility of illustrated sermons as models for pictorial renderings of the Dance of Death or Dance of the Dead, Clark quotes a fifteenth-century moral tale about “a preacher who suddenly pulled out a skull which he had been holding under his cloak, in order to bring his point home to the congregation.” And he concludes: “Is it not conceivable that a friar, or for that matter a secular priest, should have worked out a kind of sermon-drama, in which he called upon members of every class by name, then led them one by one to an erection that resembled a mortuary, or an open grave or a coffin, thus impressing on his hearers the inevitability of death? The dialogue form would strengthen the effect. Each person would bewail his fate, repent his sins, give voice to his emotions in accordance with the circumstances of the case.”<sup>14</sup>

Finally, an independent tradition in the visual arts that may have fed into the development of the various pictorial reminders of mortality is that of the *memento mori* (remember [that one will have] to die). In representations of this genre, the individual person meets neither Death nor a corpse nor any other seemingly animated character who would do any dancing, acting, or speaking, but is simply depicted with a skull, a bone, or another emblem of mortality, or at the most with a complete but entirely passive skeleton.

Of all the pictorial representations of the *Totentanz*, none became more famous than the cycle of frescoes with life-size figures in Basel. References to it in literature—prose and poetry alike—abound, and it was emulated at Bern and Lucerne, in Alsace, Italy, and Austria. For a while, the city on the Rhine was even home for two such cycles. The slightly earlier one (the date of original creation has variously been given as 1437<sup>15</sup> and 1470<sup>16</sup>), the so-called *Kleinbaseler Totentanz*, was a wall painting in a convent of Augustinian nuns in the suburb of Klingenthal. It was not until 1480, when the nuns were ejected by the Dominican friars who were their spiritual superiors, that the citizens of Basel had a chance to see and appreciate the murals. The second depiction, the *Grossbaseler Totentanz*, was a copy of the first in picture as well as text, painted onto a wall in the churchyard of the Dominican friars. In both cases, no single original artist has been credited with authorship or even with the idea (which may not be surprising since the sequence was a general topos). Especially the

<sup>14</sup>J.M. Clark, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, pp. 94, 95.

<sup>15</sup>Alexander Goette, *Holbeins Totentanz und seine Vorbilder* (Strasbourg: Verlag von K. J. Trübner, 1897), pp. 67, 75, 88, and 283.

<sup>16</sup>Wolfgang Stammer, *Die Totentänze des Mittelalters* (Munich: H. Stobbe, 1922), p. 10.

latter frescoes are best described as a centuries-long work-in-progress. Many if not all of the individual scenes in Grossbasel were repeatedly “restored”—if perhaps sometimes too lavishly—often suffering considerable modifications of detail in the process as aesthetic approaches, styles, and societal sensitivities changed.

The *Kleinbaseler Totentanz* was very poorly preserved. After the eviction of the nuns, the building was used as a granary and then as a salt warehouse, and windows were broken through the frescoed wall. Only half of the frescoes survived, in a sad state of disintegration, into the middle of the nineteenth century, when the original convent was finally demolished. The Grossbasel depictions, by contrast, were deeply cherished by the citizens of Basel. In 1805, however, they, too, were largely destroyed because the wall on which they were painted obstructed street traffic. “The local residents protested violently. So great was the opposition that the work of demolition had to be done secretly by night. Local patriots rallied to the spot afterwards and picked up the remaining fragments of the Dance of Death. These were carefully preserved in various private houses. The relics are now to be seen in the old Franciscan Church (Barfüsserkirche), which is used as a Historical Museum.”<sup>17</sup>

The fullest account we have today of what the famous murals may have looked like at some stage in their ongoing metamorphosis is captured in the copper engravings<sup>18</sup> and woodcuts<sup>19</sup> made after the Grossbasel frescoes. I will base the comments that follow on these recreations, reproduced in a nineteenth-century edition under the title *The Dance of Death: Engraved from the fresco-paintings on the cemetery wall of St. John's church at Basel*.<sup>20</sup>

### The Early Woodcuts after the Dance of Death at Basel

The series consists of a total of forty-two colored woodcuts. The titles of the scenes are as follows:

<sup>17</sup>James M. Clark, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Glasgow: Jackson & Co., 1950), p. 62.

<sup>18</sup>See particularly those by Johann Jacob Merian and Mattheus Merian, first published in 1621 and 1696 respectively, with several editions following in the years up to 1832.

<sup>19</sup>These woodcuts, whose originals seem almost as difficult to date as the mural frescos themselves, have also been reprinted in many editions.

<sup>20</sup>My source is the 1868 republication by Felix Schneider in Basel.

## 1 The Preacher's Word      2 Death

3 Death to the Pope	4 Death to the Emperor	5 Death to the Empress,
6 Death to the King	7 Death to the Queen	8 Death to the Cardinal,
9 Death to the Bishop	10 Death to the Duke	11 Death to the Duchess,
12 Death to the Earl	13 Death to the Abbot	14 Death to the Knight,
15 Death to the Lawyer	16 Death to the Alderman	17 Death to the Canon,
18 Death to the Doctor	19 Death to the Nobleman	20 Death to the Lady,
21 Death to the Merchant	22 Death to the Abbess	23 Death to the Cripple,
24 Death to the Hermit	25 Death to the Young Man	26 Death to the Usurer,
27 Death to the Maiden	28 Death to the Minstrel	29 Death to the Herald,
30 Death to the Judge	31 Death to the Headsman	32 Death to the Jester,
33 Death to the Pedlar	34 Death to the Blind Man	35 Death to the Jew,
36 Death to the Pagan	37 Death to the Paganess	38 Death to the Cook,
39 Death to the Peasant	40 Death to the Painter	41 Death to the Painter's Wife [+ Child],
42 Adam and Eve: The Mirror of the Whole World.		

A little detail in the largely traditional arrangement of the scenes is interesting (and almost 'musical'). Number 1 appears as a prologue of sorts, while numbers 2 and 42 serve as a frame for the remaining thirty-nine depictions. At the same time, the first and the final depictions are related to one another insofar as they are the only ones in which no dead person is seen.

In the initial woodcut, entitled "The Preacher's Word," the topic of the entire series is introduced: the fact that everybody must die. The scene shows a sermon preached to a group of slightly uncomfortable-looking men. Yet while the visual imagery might make us believe that it is mortality itself which troubles these listeners, the accompanying poem (after the Bible, cf. Daniel 12) reveals that what is being addressed in this sermon is the fate of the dead—rather than the fate of the living:

Many of those who sleep in dust,  
Shall wake again; God says, they must  
Arise and at His Judgment seat  
Receive what for their works is meet:  
Some life eternal, others grief  
And endless pain without relief.  
Those who are wise shall brightly shine  
In heavenly light and joy divine;  
And they, who many souls have taught,  
And wanderers back to God have brought,  
Shall like the stars in glory be  
Made bright to all eternity.

This initial setup diverts the attention somewhat from the threshold between life and death that is the focus of the thirty-nine central panels. No. 2, entitled “Death,” introduces the prototype of one of the two protagonists that reappear throughout the series in ever new metamorphoses. Correspondingly at the end of the cycle, no. 42, entitled “Adam and Eve: The Mirror of the Whole World,” may be interpreted as standing for “Life,” or more specifically for the second player in each scene: the various humans who will encounter their death.

From the engravings after the Basel frescoes, one significant detail emerges. Not only is the person invited to dance always a different one—a fact of which we are all aware—but there is no once-for-all character called Death either. Instead, the corpse doing the inviting in each scene is characteristically shown with some (physical or moral) features mirroring the person approached: long flowing hair in “Death to the Empress,” a snake emerging from the open abdomen in “Death to the Cardinal,” sagging breasts in “Death to the Queen,” a jester’s cap and shirt with wide pointed sleeves in “Death to the Jester,” etc. Furthermore, each of these representations of death is actually not altogether far removed from the state of living: there is muscle, and skin to cover it; the silhouette, while pitifully emaciated, is fully or mostly intact, and even on the head, portrayed as a skull, there may be some wisps of hair left.<sup>21</sup>

Among the various manifestations of death, there are also surprisingly many who use music as a means of enticement. The duchess is approached by a cadaver plucking the lute, the skeleton that grips the doctor is playing a flute, the minstrel is enticed by a character with a viol, and the paganess meets her fate in a bagpipe-player. This individualized Death no longer follows linguistically determined gender stereotypes (making it predominantly female in Romance-language countries and usually male in Germanic regions) but can be either male or female, mostly reflecting the gender of the person who is being met.

Each of the depictions in which death meets a generic person defined by rank and gender is accompanied by a binary poem: in the first half, death addresses the doomed person and invites him or her to follow him; in the second half, the doomed person answers. (Hence the titling “Death to...,” as in Death speaking to ....) With the exception of a few longer

<sup>21</sup>Only in “Death to the Doctor” do we see an actual skeleton. Clark argues that this scene cannot possibly be original, since anatomy at the time was in its infancy and articulated skeletons were not to be found in Central Europe before the middle of the sixteenth century. (J.M. Clark, *The Dance of Death in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, p. 63.)

ones, each half-poem covers four short lines. As is typical for the Dance-of-Death tradition, the people thus addressed are arranged in descending order of social hierarchy. Interestingly though, worldly positions and church ranks are treated as equal not only in that they appear mixed with one another, but also in that there is no one-sided holiness among those who have dedicated their lives to the faith, and no predetermined lack of such holiness in those who have chosen to live in the world. The Pope is reproached for his use of indulgences just as the Emperor is chided for his delayed repentance; the King is neutrally described as epitomizing power and majesty just as the Cardinal is poetically characterized by his honor. There are as many replies to the beckoning of death that are accepting and poised among lay people as there are among God's designated servants.<sup>22</sup>

Looking back, with the benefit of knowing the entire cycle, towards its beginning, one understands clearly that the second woodcut, "Death," is a preview of what can be taken for the assembly of all these "individual deaths" in a similar way in which the final depiction, "Adam and Eve," is a retrospective view of all the various human beings who encounter their death. It is worth noting that Adam and Eve are depicted as extraordinarily well-nourished and muscular—not weak and soft but, as it were, brimming with active life. Counter-balancing this image, the depiction of "Death" shows two music-making corpses in front of an open hut. Both of these standing figures hold flutes to their mouths; one is additionally striking a small drum. The hut behind them, significantly, is portrayed in a way that seems to conflate a dog house with the stable of Bethlehem. The front gable shows a faintly sketched scene with worshippers, many of them on their knees, surrounding an angel who, praising God, is seen floating in the sky. In the hut, a crowd of corpses appears to be looking out towards the two musicians. A separate bone and a skull, lying on the ground beside the hut, serve as a reinforcement that these otherwise ambiguously active-looking creatures are actually "dead."

These, then, were the original depictions of the *Baseler Totentanz*, which Holbein knew and of which Claudel saw only fragments.

<sup>22</sup>Of the many further details that would deserve attention, I will mention just one more that speaks to the structural balance attempted in this extraordinary mural. The two final scenes both digress from the order established throughout the series in that they show three figures instead of just two. In no. 41, the painter's wife along with her little child are being bidden to the netherworld, as if to show that even the very young and innocent are not exempt from this "dance." As if to balance this image, the preceding no. 40 shows the painter confronted not only by his designated enticer. The painter's individual death, as it were, is accompanied by a smaller cadaver here.

## Hans Holbein's Woodcuts

While in no way the “author” of the *Totentanz* in Basel, as has sometimes been mistakenly assumed, Hans Holbein the Younger (1497-1543) is arguably the greatest master to have created in this genre. The woodcut series was his last work completed in Basel, where he had spent his early years. He changed his focus when he moved to London, where he gained great reputation as a portraitist at the court of Henry VIII. However, the topic indirectly caught up with him when he himself died of the plague.

His *Totentanz*, which bears the full title, *Simulachres et Historiées Faces de la Mort*, (Images and Illustrated Facets of Death) was created in 1526 and subsequently published as a book, although not until twelve years later, in Lyons in 1538. In the preface, the prior Jean de Vauzèle explains the two key words in the title. As to *simulachres*, the artist's representations of Death are by necessity concrete, embodied images of an abstract, disembodied concept. As to *historiées faces*, the situations and encounters illustrated in each scene should be seen as mere exemplifications of the myriad ways in which death may enter life. Leonard Kurz speculates that the reason for the hesitation between the creation and the date of publication may be found in the satirical component. “Perhaps the fear that the freedom of spirit with which these designs were imbued might cause social and political misunderstanding caused the printers to delay making them public until twelve years later,” he writes.<sup>23</sup>

Each of the forty-one scenes is accompanied by one or two quotations from the scriptures in Latin, placed above the depiction and chosen at the time of the engraving, and a quatrain in French below it, added only as an afterthought.<sup>24</sup> The quatrains do not represent the direct speech of either of the actors in the scene, but a narrator's comment; I will return to them later. Much more interesting are the various chapters in French prose that surround the visual narrative. Preceding Holbein's scenes we find a prefatory letter from a prior to an abbess on the religious necessity of contemplating death and the importance of artistic renderings of the subject, as well as a homily on life after death and the proper care of the soul while still here on earth. Following the portrayals there are eight chapters which

<sup>23</sup>L. Kurz, *The Dance of Death and the Macabre Spirit in European Literature*, p. 191.

<sup>24</sup>In what follows I will be referring to the facsimile reprint of the original edition, *The Dance of Death: 41 Woodcuts by Hans Holbein the Younger. Complete Facsimile of the Original 1538 French Edition* (New York: Dover, 1971), made available with English translations of the biblical quotations and quatrains.

depict death verbally in as many emblematic metaphors (as a stumbling block, a horned beast, a sergeant at arms, a harvester, a bolt of lightning, a strait gate, a passage on a difficult road, and a dark house, cave, or pit); these are followed by three sections with further morsels of wisdom on death (“Various Deaths of Good and Bad Men from the Old and New Testaments,” “Memorable Authorities and Sayings of the Pagan Philosophers and Orators Persuading Living Men Not to Fear Death,” and “On the Necessity of Death, Which Allows Nothing to Endure.”)<sup>25</sup>

The titles of the forty-one woodcuts can be grouped into

- 2 vignettes showing life before the advent of death
- 1 scene introducing the origin and concept of death (“The Expulsion from Paradise”)
  - 1 setting in which Death meets his first victim, Adam
  - 1 generic portrayal of “the dead”
  - 34 vignettes in which various persons are beckoned by Death
- 1 scene to conclude Death’s work (“The Last Judgment” or the return to paradise)
- 1 vignette asserting the dignity of Death

The opening vignettes portray death’s coming into the world according to the Book of Genesis. The beginning of the cycle with Creation and Temptation/original sin, while certainly germane to the introduction of death into life, is unusual in depictions of this genre. It underlines an aspect a good Christian may have felt was too often forgotten in view of a death inflicted indiscriminately on the just and the unjust, as in the case of the bubonic plague, namely that death is the result of human flaw and deficiency and thus (generically) brought onto its victims by themselves. Equally unusual is the conclusion with “death’s coat of arms.” In itself, this depiction seems aimed at lending dignity and stature to one whom humankind prefers to scorn and curse, vilify and, in representations such as these, caricature. By granting Death his own vignette, Holbein not only gives him the last word, the artist also emphasizes that Death is not retrospectively abolished when humans attain eternal life, but needs to be seen as one of the key players in the drama that alone allowed humans to reach that stage.

While the framing vignettes are probably passed over by many (and they are indeed less captivating, largely because they lack the satirical subject matter expected in this genre), they strike me as a powerful hint at

<sup>25</sup>In this summary of the sixteenth-century French text, I gratefully follow Werner L. Gundesheimer’s preface to the Dover facsimile edition of *The Dance of Death*, pp. vii–viii.

what distinguishes Holbein's *Totentanz* from other representations by this title. And as I will show, Claudel seems to have been impressed by the same facet.

This brings me to the central portion, the actual "dance of death," which encompasses thirty-six scenes. As I perceive the series of images, it is secretly composed of three lots of twelve, which are intermingled in a subtle way so as not to make the point too bluntly. The first lot is rather straight-forward; it comprises in six pairs the worldly hierarchy, whose members are likely to be caught in any of the vices characteristic of their respective classes and lifestyles: Emperor-Empress, King-Queen, Duke-Duchess, Count-Countess, Knight-Lady, Nobleman-Miser. The second dozen includes all those with a sacred mission—or, to rephrase, those who have a sacred calling but are nevertheless likely to succumb to human weaknesses. This group is lead by the person who had the option to live a life without sin and death, Adam. Having proceeded through the ranks of the clerical hierarchy, with Pope, Cardinal, Bishop, Abbot, Abbess, Canon, Monk, Nun, Parish Priest, and Preacher, it concludes with the one being that, parallel to Adam, still embraces all potential: the child. The third twelvesome, finally, is the one closest to the life of the multitude. It opens with the vignette entitled "The Bones of All Men," showing an assembly destined to bring home the point that in death we are all alike, and then continues in another line-up of individuals, from professionals down to simple people: judge, advocate, senator, physician, astrologer, merchant, seaman, ploughman, pedlar, old woman, old man.

Holbein's Death is a single individual, a manifestation of an abstract albeit personified idea, and no longer the multiple personality of a mummified "dead" counterpart to the individual "living." Although he—*der Tod* is clearly a male character—always comes as a skeleton, he assumes various roles. While in some scenes he is the grim killer, others show him as a helper; as often as he is seen struggling with the living (or they with him), he leads them to their rest as a caring friend.

Gilles Corrozet, the poet of the French verses, goes one step further: he does not treat Death as a person at all but merely as a concept. The material for his stanzas stems from selected biblical passages. Contrary to the verses attached to the earlier editions made after the Basel frescoes, which were full of popular humor, Corrozet's quatrains focus entirely on moralizing admonitions. In this he would seem to be a mismatch for Holbein, who interprets Death as an almost human type, open to all manner of jokes and often amusing himself at the expense of his victims.



**PLATES 32-35: Hans Holbein, *Totentanz*,**  
 Old Man (no. 33)                      Old Woman (no. 25)  
 Noblewoman (no. 35)                Duchess (no. 36)



**PLATES 36-39:** Hans Holbein, *Totentanz*,  
 Nun (no. 24) Parish Priest (no. 22)  
 Pedlar (no. 37) Bones of All Men (no. 5)

Holbein enriches the obvious coherence, provided by the consistent format of the engravings and continuous unfolding of the theme, by adding motivic threads. Two of these are epitomized with the help of props that must have charmed Claudel. The persons whom Death meets one after another could have been prepared had they only watched the hour-glasses, hidden in ever different corners of twenty-four of the vignettes. Death appears occasionally with a musical instrument, which he may play to lure or threaten. In “Expulsion from Paradise” (not reprinted here), Death plucks the instrument of sin, a kind of guitar. In the scenes with the old man and the old woman, he is seen playing a dulcimer and xylophone respectively, instruments that Kathi Meyer-Baer interprets as onomatopoeic since she associates their typical sound with that imagined to result from the rattling of old bones.<sup>26</sup> In the scene with the noblewoman, Death vigorously strikes a small drum, as if imitating a court page. For the duchess, whom Death finds in her bed, he plays a kind of violin or fiddle, as if to enliven her gloomy spirit for the last journey. In the scene where Death comes to beckon the nun, a lute is given not to Death but to a man in elegant dress, as if to underscore with this instrument of courtly love the inappropriateness of the gallant suitor’s visit in the pious woman’s chamber. Death himself assists the parish priest by ringing a bell, while the pedlar, seized at his sleeve by a lively skeleton, hears an “assistant death” playing the weird tromba Marina.<sup>27</sup> Finally, the assembly of “the dead” (in “Bones of All Men”) seem to be imitating a group of rowdy soldiers engaged in whole-hearted, noisy music-making. The instruments the employ include all manner of percussion and brass, noticeably the hurdy-gurdy, krummhorn, trumpet, and kettledrum. (These eight wood cuts, a mere sampling of the rich sequence, are reprinted in plates 32-39.)

## The Spirit and Theology of Claudel and Honegger’s *Danse des morts*

Claudel had discovered the Holbein woodcuts on occasion of the premiere of *Jeanne d’Arc au bûcher*, a work created jointly with Honegger. It was thus natural that he would think of this composer as a partner in the generation of a musical response to the pictorial stimulus. Shortly

<sup>26</sup>K. Meyer-Baer, *Music of the Spheres and the Dance of Death*, p. 304-305.

<sup>27</sup>I owe the identification of this instrument to K. Meyer-Baer, *Music of the Spheres and the Dance of Death*, p. 304.

after his first impression of Holbein's *Totentanz*, Claudel wrote to the composer:

"What struck me was much less the sinister and supposedly macabre nature of these interventions of the lean comrade next to his successive clients, but their joyous, seductive, and musical qualities. [...] What a contrast between this supple and lithe harlequin and the heavy creature towards whom he acts as a servant knight!"<sup>28</sup>

The same letter also contains the following, enthusiastic if rather irreverent reflections:

What good fortune! So this carnal form in which we find ourselves stuck and of which, in fact, we draw less pride, pleasure, and profit than bothers of all kinds, bravo! it's only provisional! One must not take it too seriously! [...] So make yourself comfortable, sluggish one! What good fortune to be relieved not only of one's garments, but also of one's skin and of that cumbersome and ridiculous character that we made ourselves to be! *I have nothing left but the bones*, the prophet Job wails plaintively. Oh well, that's something already! [...] that supple and naked gnome actually makes me think of a ballet instructor who, in order to train his group, dresses in shirt sleeves [...] Next to this agile jester who invites them and already embraces them, the dance has begun. Don't all those living ever appear thickset, heavy, and clumsy! [...] And not only these accouterments, but these jowls, these bellies, these breasts, these buttocks, these folds of fat and gut, all that bigotry, all this tallow...<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup>"Ce qui me frappa, ce fut beaucoup moins le caractère sinistre et, comme on dit, macabre, de ces interventions du maigre camarade auprès de ses clients successifs, que leur caractère allègre, entraînant et musical. [...] Quel contraste entre ce lesté et dégagé Arlequin et la pesante créature dont il s'est fait le chevalier servant!" (Letter by Claudel to Honegger, quoted in Harry Halbreich, *Arthur Honegger*, p. 526.)

<sup>29</sup>"Quel bonheur! Ainsi cette forme charnelle où nous nous trouvons empêtrés et dont nous tirons en somme moins de fierté, de plaisir et de profit que d'embêtements de toute sorte, bravo! elle n'est que provisoire! Il ne faut pas trop la prendre au sérieux! [...] Mets-toi donc à l'aise, engourdi! Quel bonheur d'être débarrassé non seulement de ses habits, mais de sa peau et de ce personnage encombrant et ridicule que nous faisons! *Il ne me reste plus que les os*, s'écrie lamentablement le prophète Job. Eh bien, c'est déjà quelque chose! [...] Ce gnome lesté et déshabillé, il me fait penser en somme à un maître de ballet qui, pour entraîner sa troupe, se met en manches de chemise. [...] A côté de cet agile *grazioso* qui les invite et qui déjà les enlace, le bal est ouvert! Que tous ces vivants apparaissent épais, pesants et maladroits! [...] Et pas seulement ces accoutrements, mais ces bajoues, ces ventres, ces seins, ces fesses, ces replis de graisse et de tripaille, tous ces préjugés, tout ce suif..." (Quoted in Harry Halbreich, *Arthur Honegger*, p. 272.)

As Honegger explained it two weeks later to Paul Sacher, the conductor and patron of the arts who was his benefactor,<sup>30</sup> Claudel's text for an oratorio to be entitled *La danse des morts* (The Dance of the Dead) is developed from three core sentences, variations of the *memento mori*:

Souviens-toi, homme, que tu es poussière  
 Souviens-toi, homme, que tu es esprit  
 Souviens-toi, homme, que tu es pierre  
 et sur cette pierre je bâtirai mon église

Remember, man, that you are dust  
 Remember, man, that you are spirit  
 Remember, man, that you are [a] rock and  
 that on that rock I shall build my church

Honegger describes the text as made up of large fragments from Ezeiel and Job. As enthralled by the project as the poet, he began composing as soon as the text was ready, in July 1938, and completed the score in November of the same year. Sacher, who immediately shared in the enthusiasm for the topic expressed by Claudel and Honegger, promised to schedule the new composition for the spring of 1939. (The work was in fact premiered, in its intended oratorio version and in French, on 2 March 1940 in Basel, under the baton of Paul Sacher. It received a second premiere three months later, when a staged performance of the German translation was produced, on 2 June 1940, at the Stadttheater of Zurich, also under Sacher's direction.)

The first and the third of the motto phrases are taken directly from biblical sources; the second stems from Claudel's own pen. In the comments offered prior to completing the text, Claudel gives them a new twist in the direction of the work which they are designed to sustain. He says, "Remember, man, that you are dust, a dust that my breath has blown into the four directions, but which it is equally powerful to reassemble."<sup>31</sup> While both the related verse from Job (Job 19:9) and especially the pertinent verse from Genesis, "For dust thou art, and to dust shalt thou return" (Genesis 3:19) refer to the cyclical development from "clay" to human flesh and back to decayed matter, the poet's elaboration alludes to another

<sup>30</sup>Letter of Arthur Honegger to Paul Sacher of 28 May 1938, quoted (in a French translation of the German original) in Harry Halbreich, *Arthur Honegger*, p. 182.

<sup>31</sup>"Souviens-toi, homme, que tu es poussière, une poussière que mon souffle a ventilée aux quatre coins du ciel, mais qu'il est également puissant à rassembler." (Quoted in Halbreich, *Arthur Honegger*, p. 526.)

potential cycle: that from living humans to dry bones and back to—should God so wish—fleshed-out skeletons, creatures allowed to dance one more time.

The explanatory clause about God's breath being "equally powerful to reassemble" the dust which humans have become seems essential for an understanding of Claudel's intriguing collage in the initial dialogue of the oratorio. In it, the narrator relates, in the words of the prophet Ezekiel, the verses that in many modern Bibles are grouped under the heading "The Valley of the Dry Bones." The prophet's words are interrupted by the choir, singing verses from a variety of biblical sources, above all Genesis, Job's Lament, and Job's Hope and Trust. Without the context of, on the one hand, the visual representations by Holbein and, on the other hand, Claudel's own remarks, this dialogue in the form of a collage could be understood figuratively: as a resurrection of the soul—in the body, yes, but towards eternal life and thus removed from earthly concerns. Yet Claudel manages to juxtapose the two texts in such a way as to subtly suggest that one might, for just this once, take Job literally when he exclaims, "in my flesh shall I see God." To remove further doubt, Claudel even adds a clause to the famous lines that Schütz, Händel, Telemann, Johann Michael Bach, and others have set as a chorale. His text reads:

Je crois que mon Rédempteur vit  
et que de nouveau je serai enveloppé de ma peau.  
Et il arrivera que dans ma chair je verrai mon Sauveur.

and later:

Car je sais que mon Rédempteur vit  
et au dernier jour je me relèverai de la terre  
et de nouveau je serai enveloppé de ma peau  
et dans ma propre chair je verrai ce Dieu qui est mon Sauveur.

Literally:

I believe/For I know that my Redeemer lives (cf. Job 19:25)  
and that I [Bible: He] shall stand at the latter day upon the earth (cf. Job 19:25)  
and that I shall again be enveloped by my skin (Claudel).  
And /it will come to pass that/ in my flesh I will see /God who is/ my Savior  
(Job 19:26, rephrased; cf. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my  
flesh I will see God).<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup>This and all other English verses corresponding with Claudel's quotations from the Bible are taken from *The Holy Bible, New International Version* (New York: Harper Collins, 1984).

When the narrator interjects, “This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life” (Ez 37:5), the audience, anticipating dancing skeletons, will be tempted to interpret such “new life” much more profanely than the prophet intended—and that was evidently Claudel’s goal.

With regard to the third motto phrase, Claudel’s comment reveals even more strongly his careful re-reading of biblical words in the light of Holbein’s depictions. “Remember, man, that you are rock, and on this rock I will build,” he quotes. And he continues, “I will rebuild my church; this fellow who all alone is a church! And the wailing of despair becomes an exclamation of wonder.”<sup>33</sup> The sentence is a collage of the incipit of the *memento mori*, “remember, man,” combined with Jesus’ prophesy in Matthew regarding the future of Christianity in the Church to be founded on Jesus’ favorite disciple. The “fellow” to whom Claudel points is, of course, Peter/Pierre = the rock. However, the oratorio’s context has not really led us to associate the dramatic events with Christ or his contemporaries. The time of the “dance of the dead” is alternately that of modern (i.e., 14th- to 20th-century) humanity trying to come to terms with epidemic death, or that of the Old Testament prophets whose words have been evoked so far, their visions about the “dry bones of Israel” or their laments about undeserved tribulation. Thus Peter the rock would seem to enter the scenario somewhat unannounced.

Or maybe not quite. The third motto phrase just discussed follows a section entitled “Hope in the Cross.” This section supports the connection between a resurrection of the dry bones into a dance of revived skeletons—a notion of folk legends, bolstered by the poet with cleverly juxtaposed verses from the prophets—and the Resurrection in Christ at the end of all time. The section opens with free paraphrases from various gospels mentioning the wounds of the Crucified, interspersed with verses from the Psalms and the prophet Isaiah, reassuring us about the opening of the heavenly gates and the love and infinite parental compassion we are to expect. But no sooner have we accepted a switch from the Old-Testament visions and laments to the New Testament message of hope, than Claudel gives the word “cross” another twist! By rephrasing two verses of the very chapter from Ezekiel upon which the main thread of the oratorio rests, he brings us back from the Cross of Golgotha, one more time to the

<sup>33</sup>“Souviens-toi, homme, que tu es pierre, et sur cette pierre je bâtirai, je rebâtirai mon église, ce bonhomme à lui tout seul qui est une église! Et le sanglot du désespoir devient une exclamation d’émerveillement!” (Quoted in H. Halbreich, *Arthur Honegger*, p. 526.)

resurrection of Israel. With this twist, Claudel manages to refer at the same time to the resurrection of all mankind (Israel = the church) and, in the context of this piece, to a resurrection to be imagined as a dance of the revived and refitted “dry bones.”

Here is a literal translation of Claudel’s text at the end of the section “Hope in the Cross,” along with the original wording of the prophet. Compare Claudel:

“Take a piece of wood and write upon it: Judah. And another piece of wood, and write upon it: Ephraim. And that makes a cross and I will spread myself on it for I have not come to resolve and to divide but to fill.”

with the biblical wording:

“Son of man, take a stick of wood and write on it, ‘Belonging to Judah and the Israelites associated with him.’ Then take another stick of wood and write on it, ‘Ephraim’s stick, belonging to Joseph and all the house of Israel associated with him.’ (Ez 37:16) “Join them together into one stick so that they will become one in your hand.” (Ez 37: 17)

Honegger, Swiss Protestant that he remained throughout all of his life in Paris, proved the ideal composer for this text by the devout Catholic Claudel. As a friend said about him, his music is essentially religious, not primarily because of the choice of topic or text, but in the affective quality expressed in the music itself.<sup>34</sup> Significantly within his own biography, *La danse des morts* was to be the last of his compositions that he heard in a live performance before his own untimely death.

## Reframing Ezekiel: Dialogue (I) and God’s Reply (V)

Honegger’s score<sup>35</sup> follows Claudel’s suggestion in falling into seven movements. Among these, the initial dialogue and “God’s reply” in the

<sup>34</sup>“Si le style d’Honegger, dans la plupart de ses œuvres ‘a sujet religieux’, doit être qualifié d’essentiellement chrétien, ce n’est pas à cause des sujets ni des paroles et situations mises en musique, ni même des croyances de l’homme. [...] Sa musique est chrétienne en cela qu’elle signifie, par son affectivité même, ‘l’adéquation physique [de l’homme] au monde’, pour reprendre une formule d’Ansermet...” (Denis de Rougemont, quoted in Harry Halbreich, *Arthur Honegger*, p. 718.)

<sup>35</sup>I refer to the orchestral score based on the hand-written fair copy, published in 1939 by Éditions Salabert in Paris.

fifth movement are held together by the consecutive text of Ezekiel 37: 1-14 (the prophet's vision of "The Valley of Dry Bones"). The way in which Claudel juxtaposed these texts with other biblical excerpts in the dialogue, and the way Honegger set all of them, proves crucial for the interpretation of the entire piece and, particularly, for the relationship of the oratorio to Holbein's woodcuts. I will therefore begin with a closer look at these two movements.

The untitled section preceding the first heading makes full use of most of the instruments with which Sacher's Basel Chamber Orchestra had to be reinforced, especially brass, organ, and percussion.<sup>36</sup> Structurally, this section has sometimes been referred to as prelude or overture; however, since its material and tonal argument recurs almost completely shortly before the end of the first movement (as well as being quoted elsewhere in the composition), I prefer to regard this section as an integral part of the first movement, despite the placement of the first heading, "Dialogue," after measure 19. On this basis, the structure of the first movement can be summed up as follows:

opening section with thunder	mm. 1-19		4/4 ♩ = 96
first dialogue	mm. 20-40	RN 2 [-1]	♩ = 72
choir, reflecting	mm. 41-46	RN 4	♩ = 72
procession	mm. 47-77	RN 5	♩ = 72
return of thunder	mm. 78-91	RN 8	♩ = 96
completion of procession	mm. 92-100	RN 9	♩ = 72

In the opening section, following the exact specifications given by Claudel, the composition begins with a "prolonged thunder." Honegger shows his sense for realism when he precedes the thunder by a flash of lightning, not suggested by the poet. The unison in the highest register of this single flash of lightning is followed by eighteen bars of thunderous grumbling in the low instruments (see example 68. I have been wondering whether Claudel's wish, despite his unambiguous wording, may not have been less for a concrete thunderstorm but more for the thunder that alerts humans of God's presence—which, presumably, does not require lightning to trigger it. Musically, however, the "flash" is very effective.)

<sup>36</sup>The scoring in this composition requires 2 flutes (picc+flute), 2 oboes (2nd also English horn), 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns in F, 2 trumpets in C, 2 trombones, 4 timpani, percussion (ratchet, triangle, woodblock, cymbals, tenor drum, large drum), piano, organ, and strings. The four solo voices are a narrator (spoken, male voice) as well as soprano, alto, and baritone. The mixed choir splits, on one occasion, into a "small" choir (altos and basses only) opposed to "large" choir.

**EXAMPLE 68:** Honegger, *La danse des morts*,  
the “thunder” announcing God’s direct contact with humans

In this thunder, any discrete melodic motions are obfuscated by a superposition of up to five only minimally different patterns on the same pitches.<sup>37</sup> The development (m. 9 onwards) plays itself out on the level of intensities alone. While the pitch contours in all instruments remain unmodified, the motivic density increases, together with the dynamics, through six measures before it falls back again during the remaining five.

After the subsiding of the thundering sound and a general pause with fermata, the first section, entitled “Dialogue,” begins. The conversation unfolds between the narrator and the full mixed choir. The narrator recites consecutive verses from Ezekiel’s vision of the plane with scattered bones. Having begun entirely unaccompanied, his voice is later heard over suspended notes in varying combinations of piano, timpani, tam-tam, and celli+basses. The choir answers with its fragments from Genesis and Job in varying homophonic textures but always *a cappella* (more specifics on these textures and their symbolism below). Here is the first segment of the text. The footnote gives the corresponding verses in English from the New International Version of the Bible and, where the differences are significant, also a literal translation of Claudel’s wording.

<sup>37</sup>See, for instance, in the first measure of the “thunder” the sustained B $\flat$  in the organ pedal, the accented eighth-note repetition in the trombone, the sixteenth-note repetition and eventual tremolo on the same pitch in the first division of the double basses, the ascending whole-tone step B $\flat$ -C in the organ pedal, and the ascending chromatic steps B $\flat$ -B $\natural$ -C in bassoons, piano, and second division of the double basses.

*Narrator:*

La main de Dieu s'est posée sur moi et  
il m'a emmené en esprit et il m'a laissé  
au milieu d'une vaste plaine qui était  
remplit d'ossements.

Et il m'en fit faire le tour car il en avait  
à l'infini à la surface de la terre et ils  
étaient secs à l'extrême.

Et Dieu dit: Fils de l'homme, penses-tu  
que ces os vivent?

Et il me dit: prophétise sur ces os et  
dis-leur: ossements arides, écoutez la  
parole du Seigneur!

*Choir:*

Souviens-toi, homme, que tu es poussière  
et que tu retourneras en poussière!

Dieu dit: que les eaux qui sont sous le ciel  
se rassemblent en un seul lieu et que  
l'Aride apparaisse! Et il en fut ainsi.

Et je répondis: Seigneur mon Dieu vous  
le savez.

---

(Narrator) The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord, and set me in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. (Ezekiel 37:1)

(Choir) Remember, man, that you are dust and that you will return to dust. [Cf: Remember that you molded me like clay. Will you now turn me to dust again? (Job 10:9), and For dust you are, and to dust you will return (Genesis 3:19)]

(N) He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. (Ez 37:2)

(C) God said, "Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so." (Gen 1:9 etc. in Gen 1)

(N) He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"

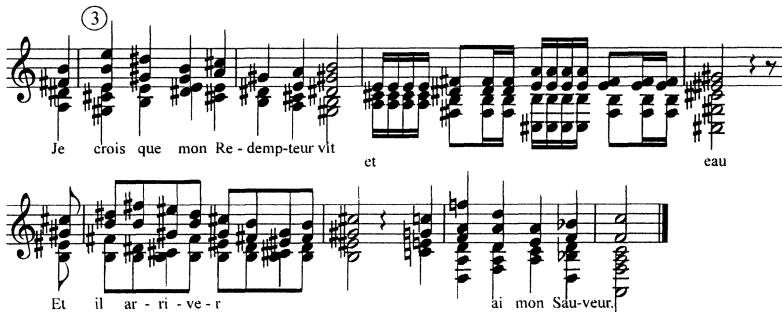
(C) I said, "O Lord God, you alone know." (Ez 37:3)

(N) Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.'" (Ez 37:4)

The first segment of the dialogue with its interpolation of Ezekiel and Genesis creates a striking subtext: While the prophet is talking about a vision regarding a particular people, whose fate he deplores and aims to change with his admonitions, the choir's fragments from the Creation Myth seem to reinterpret the "dry bones" not as a result of a death already suffered, but as the state of humans before God breathes life into them. The voice of the narrator, whom we have so far understood to embody the prophet, now becomes the voice of God who speaks the Creation into being. Honegger sets these words in what amounts to an unearthly temporal dimension, in measures entirely outside any metric order. This enhances the impression of a supernatural presence, in a way that communicates itself powerfully even to listeners not aware of the textual devices.

The idea of juxtaposing the context of a “dance of death” with the state on the day of Creation almost certainly came to Claudel from the way Holbein frames his scenes of macabre encounter. In the woodcut series (as in the Book of Genesis), the day of innocent life in paradise is contrasted with the fall of Adam and the subsequent introduction of death into human life. As I interpreted earlier, Holbein may have intended this as a way of gently reminding people frightened by the prospect of an untimely end to their lives that death is something Adam brought upon himself and humankind, not so much something inflicted by an evil power. Claudel extrapolates from this perspective, as the voice of the people answering Ezekiel’s vision and prophesy interpret God’s will to resurrect them as a new Creation, a new beginning before any Fall.

A musical contrast follows with the choir’s statement from Job. It stands out from its surrounding as a four-to-seven-part chorale in the style of many settings by Bach. This chorale, which recurs prominently later in the oratorio, is set in a tonal language that is far enough removed from Honegger’s general style to come across as a quotation:<sup>38</sup>



**EXAMPLE 69:** The chorale in Honegger’s *Danse des morts*

<sup>38</sup>Harry Halbreich (*op. cit.*), Pierre Meylan (*Arthur Honegger: Humanitäre Botschafter der Musik*, Stuttgart: Huber, 1970), and Hans Dieter Voss (*Arthur Honegger, 'Le Roi David': Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Oratoriums im 20. Jahrhundert* [Munich: Musikverlag Katzschichler, 1983], p. 179) all mention that the text is “by Erdmann Neumeister” and the tune from Bach’s Cantata no. 160—the one now believed to be by Telemann. Especially the latter assertion is definitely odd, given that the cantata tune is distinctly different in rhythm, meter, and contour. Willy Tappolet (in *Arthur Honegger* [Zurich: Atlantis, 1954], p. 154) talks vaguely about “eine lutherische Choralmelodie,” but the Lutheran hymnal does not contain any melody truly similar, other than the so-called “Ellacombe” hymn tune (from the *Gesangbuch der herzoglich-württembergischen Hofkapelle* of 1784) included today in Lutheran, Baptist, Methodist and probably other hymnals of Protestant churches. Even this tune, however, differs in details within the first line and completely thereafter.

Still part of the “dialogue,” though, each pair of chorale phrases is followed by interjections from the narrator.

*Narrator:*

Ainsi parle le Seigneur Dieu à ces os:  
Voici, je vais introduire un esprit en  
vous et vous vivrez!

Je mettrai sur vous des nerfs et je ferai  
croître sur vous des chairs: J’étendrai  
de la peau sur vous et je vous donnerai  
un esprit et vous vivrez et vous saurez  
que je suis le Seigneur.

*Choir:*

Je crois que mon Rédempteur vit et que de  
nouveau je serai enveloppé de ma peau.

Et il arrivera que dans ma chair je verrai  
mon Sauveur.

---

(C) I know [believe] that my Redeemer liveth [and that I shall again be  
enveloped by my skin]. (Job 19:25)

(N) This is what the Lord God says to these bones: I will make breath enter you,  
and you will come to life. (Ez 37:5)

(C) Yet in my flesh I will see God [my Savior]. (Job 19:26)

(N) I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you  
with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know  
that I am the Lord. (Ez 37:6)

This part of the dialogue is ambiguous for a new reason. The sorely tempted prophet Job, having lamented that God punishes him without any fault on his part, reaffirms his faith in God’s righteousness that is an essential ingredient of his basic goodness. His words express his belief that he will one day stand vindicated before God, his moral and spiritual strength restored. In a biblically unrelated but strangely fitting reply, the voice projecting the prophet Ezekiel’s vision speaks of the physical restoration of the bones in the desert, so that they may know their Lord.

In view of such juxtaposed “realities,” a brief look at the tonal layout up to this point may be in order here. After the opening flash of lightning, which climaxes in a non-triadic chord framed by E $\flat$ s, the “thunder” is rooted in the related B $\flat$ . The first section of the dialogue begins, shifted a semitone upwards as it were, with a unison stroke on E followed by an opening line in the Locrian mode on E. The music eventually turns via C $\sharp$  to B, which prepares for the E-major entry of the chorale. When the chorale’s fourth phrase is chromatically shifted a semitone downwards, the earlier anchoring is abruptly restored—as if Honegger was reminding us of God’s terrible presence at the very moment when Job imagines himself in the flesh seeing God.

In the following reflective passage the choir, now rudimentarily accompanied, suspends the interchange with the narrator to engage in canonic structures within itself—as if throwing a thought back and forth, looking at it from all sides. For all its brevity of only six measures, the passage is ternary in its layout: two measures of four-part fugued entries are contrasted with two measures of strict two-part canon (female against male voices) before the initial two measures recur in transposition.<sup>39</sup> The text is:

*Choir:*

Seigneur Dieu, penses-tu que ces os vivent?

Seigneur Dieu, (Flétri) je me suis flétri comme l'herbe!

Seigneur Dieu! Seigneur Dieu, feras-tu que ces os vivent?

Lord God, do you think that these dry bones shall live?

Lord God, withered I am like grass!

Lord God, Lord God, will you make that these bones live?

(Free paraphrase of Ez 37:3, with reminiscences of Psalm 102:11)

In the contrasting phrase, Honegger gives a foretaste of a feature that will soon become symbolic for the procession and eventual dance of the “reassembled bones”: a rigid, mockingly stately pulse of “left-right, left, right,” presented as a pattern of two alternating *pizzicato* pitches in violoncelli and basses.

The dialogue is resumed when the narrator remembers what happened when the prophesy actually came to bear, when the bones were regrouped to skeletons and these began walking around.

*Narrator:*

Et alors je prophétisai et il se fit une  
espèce de bruit et un mouvement. Et  
les os se rapprochèrent les uns des  
autres, chacun s'adaptant à sa jointure.

*Choir:*

Et dans ma propre chair je verrai le Dieu  
qui est mon Sauveur.

Je regardais et voici que des nerfs et de  
chairs se formèrent sur eux et de la  
peau s'étendit par dessus, mais il n'y  
avait pas d'esprit en eux.

Et la terre était inane et vide et les ténèbres  
étaient sur sa face et l'Esprit était porté sur  
elles.

<sup>39</sup>The ternary choral reflection begins in a Dorian mode on A over a pedal A, but the transposition of the phrase a whole step up restores B, in which the “procession of the reassembled bones” will again be anchored—despite a pervasive pedal on A and a bassoon melody centered in C.

Dieu me dit: Prophétise à l'esprit, prophétise,  
 fils de l'homme, et dis à l'Esprit: ainsi parle le  
 Seigneur Dieu: Viens des quatre vents, Esprit,  
 et souffle sur ces morts, afin qu'ils revivent.

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(N) And then I prophesied and there was a kind of noise and movement. And the bones moved closer to one another, each adapting to a joint. (Cf. So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. (Ez 37:7)

(C) Yet in my flesh I will see God [who is my Savior]. (Job 19:26)

(N) I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them. (Ez 37:8)

(C) Now the earth was formless and empty; darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. (Gen 1:2)

(N) Then said he to me, "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Lord God says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.'" (Ez 37:9)

While the narrator is watching the gradual reassembling of the bones into skeletons that acquire muscles and flesh, sinews and skin, and eventually even the breath of life, the voice emanating (presumably) from these creatures themselves reinterprets the process once again. In the words of the tormented Job, they seem to suggest that, finally, right is done to them after so much undeserved misery. Continuing in the words of Genesis, they once again link their coming to life to the beginning of Creation. There is no notion (as it persists in the narrator's retorts) that they were slain, and for a reason. There is only the joy of life, devoid of troubling memories of past sins.

The music is stunning, expressive both of this astonishing innocence and of the awkwardness of motion given the newly assembled bones. Honegger designs a song with two ten-measure stanzas followed by a coda. The first five measures present a group of instruments playing an amusing *staccato* melody led by the bassoons, whose dry sound is perfect for the jerky movements of joints that have to relearn flexibility. The melody is accompanied by the "stately procession" feature introduced a little earlier, in *pizzicato* low strings and timpani. Pre-downbeat slides in the violas contribute a sound suggestive of bones slipping into sockets. When, in the second half of the stanza, muted brass answers the bassoons, the choir in unison, doubled an octave higher by the oboe, repeat Job's words of hope to see God "in the flesh." The second stanza reinforces the skeletons' eager commotion: the melody (now in a canon of trombones and oboes/violins) and the march-like accompaniment of the "stately

procession” are intensified with twice-a-bar slides (all those loose bones quickly finding their place) and the additional color of the large drum and the ratchet, for which Claudel had explicitly asked. Ezekiel in his vision may have seen the skeletons as breathing humans in their flesh, but the music reminds us: these are recently revived, minimally outfitted bones.

At this point, Honegger recalls the thunder preceding the vision of God’s prophet at the beginning of the composition. But what change even this thunder has undergone! The slight variations in contour seem inconsequential next to the fact that the passage, quoted with the first fourteen of its eighteen measures, sounds three octaves higher than initially. The high woodwinds and the high strings in harmonics unfold the repetitive patterns over a sustained cymbal sound; no trombones, no organ this time, none of the timbres deemed symbolic of God’s presence. But then, as we learn from the narrator, this is not a moment where God meets man on the latter’s turf; instead, God’s transformed thunder denotes the descending of the spirit (= breath) into the revived skeletons.

*Narrator:*

Et l’Esprit entra en eux et ils devinrent vivants ... et ils se tinrent sur leurs pieds.

And breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet. (Ez 37:10)

Correspondingly in the music, the crescendo that marked the high point of the initial thunder is not as before reverted with a diminuendo. Instead, it is intensified with a powerful increase of the tempo. This propels us into the sentence that confirms the picture we are to imagine. From the rhythmically shouting narrator together with the choir’s accented monotone we hear, in a forceful *crescendo* and strikingly, breathtakingly drawn out *martellato allargando*, the report that “C’était une armée extrêmement nombreuse” (It was an exceedingly numerous army).

This army of revived bones now resumes its procession: we hear the third stanza of the song, transposed and with the march rhythm emphasized by the full orchestra (including timpani, large drum, and cymbals). The ratchet and the tenor drum now alternate their pre-beat rolls in such a way that the “joint-fitting” slides are further intensified. These skeletons are really preparing for a dance!

This ends the first movement. After the dramatically retarding components of the picturesque Dance of the Dead in movement II and the lyrical lament of man (III) followed by the expression of despondency at the prospect of the land of darkness (IV), the interchange between the

voice of God's prophet and the revived continues in "God's Response" (V). This movement can be said to initiate the second half of the oratorio, insofar as it introduces a motif of hope that will then play a major role in the large and complex "Espérance dans la Croix" (VI).

"La réponse de Dieu" consists of two extensive quotations of the thunder signaling God's presence on earth.<sup>40</sup> The initial passage, which follows the narrator's first, unaccompanied utterance, is timbrally identical with the original, albeit somewhat abridged. By contrast, the passage with which the movement closes, heard in *piano* and restricted to what was originally the six-bar diminuendo ending, is merely a faint echo, sounding without the strings and, more significantly, without the organ. The initial words from Ezekiel—and especially Claudel's consequential insertion of God's "*I am*"—frame once more the symbolic signification poet and composer intended for the thunder:

*Narrator:*

Dieu me dit: Fils de l'homme, tous ces os sont les enfants d'Israel. Ils disent: Nos os se sont desséchés, notre espérance a péri et nous sommes retranchés du nombre des hommes. Prophétise donc et dis-leur: Ainsi parle le Seigneur Dieu: *J'existe*.

Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.' Therefore prophesy and say to them, 'This is what the Lord God says:'" (Ez 37:11-12.)<sup>41</sup>

In the central segment of the movement, the narrator is heard, for the first time in the oratorio, reciting freely while the music takes its course. The texture accompanying the speech is simple, dominated by chromatically winding figures in the strings which become ever more frenzied as the tempo increases by about one half in the course of the section's thirty-one measures.<sup>42</sup> From the musical realization of the boiling waters that so often metaphorically denote God's offer at a direct interchange with humankind, there rises a brief melodic gesture, which will play a role later in the composition. Presented at first in the subdued colors of double

<sup>40</sup>Compare V mm.1-2/3-11 with I mm.2-3/8-16; Honegger leaves out the repetition of the four-bar opening and the original conclusion here. Compare further V mm. 43-48 with I mm. 14-19, in which Honegger complements the earlier quotation with a full conclusion.

<sup>41</sup>What God actually says is contained in the next biblical sentence; He will open their graves. God's self-declaration at this moment, *I am*, is Claudel's own addition.

<sup>42</sup>See Honegger's indication ♩ = 72-106 heading the section of mm. 12-42. The tempi and their proportion corroborate the structural analogy of this movement and the opening "Dialogue": in both cases, the beats relate to each other as 96:72.



and musical response to the visual depiction is indeed ingenious. Musically, the movement is heard as a logical continuation of what preceded and, more specifically, as the realization of the return to life towards which the “procession of the exceedingly numerous army” had been marching. This impression is created not only by the *attacca* connection, but also by the tonal return to E $\flat$ , by a bass pattern that continues the stately “left–right, left–right” of the procession (albeit with more room for variation and in a slightly swifter tempo), and by the metric relationship. The “dance of death” movement in fact complements the alternation of two tempi in 3:4 proportion upheld in the preceding movement by answering the procession’s four-four-time at  $\text{♩} = 72$  with six-eight measures at a pace of  $\text{♩} = 96$ . For all these reasons, it is only the score that informs us about the division of movements. Musically as well as dramatically, the “dance” is the crowning event to which the procession leads.

After a small introductory “flash,” with its unison texture and similar instrumentation reminiscent of the bolt of lightning at the oratorio’s opening, the movement consists of three large sections rounded off by a coda:

A	mm. 2-121	from RN 10 [+1]	6/8 $\text{♩} = 96$
B	mm. 121-168	from RN 20	
C	mm. 169-195	from RN 23	
coda	mm. 196-205	from RN 25	

Sections A and C both build on a twelve-part repetition. The number twelve with its connotations of completion and perfection (both within the Christian context and outside of it, from the twelve disciples to the twelve months in a year, to times twelve hours in a day, twelve semi-tones in a scale or the circle of fifths, etc.) raises the representation from the purely mundane to the symbolic level. And yet, the two dimensions clearly coexist in this music as much as they do in Holbein’s portrayals. There, too, it has been shown that the thirty-six central vignettes portraying variations of the well-known scenes of the Dance of Death can be perceived as three groups of twelve; but this play remains as subtle as it is in the music (where audiences are not characteristically known to be counting repetitions).

The material consists of an astonishing array of diverse components (see ex. 71). Three of them are instrumental motifs, assigned to characteristic timbres. The first motif takes quite a while to assemble from fragments that are at first presented in disjoint snippets,<sup>43</sup> as if to reproduce

<sup>43</sup>See mm. 3-4, 4-5, repeated in joint form in mm. 7-8; further segments introduced in mm. 9-10, 17, 19. The motif is first presented as a compact entity in mm. 30-33; see ex. 71.

Souviens-toi, homme, que tu es es-prit, et la chair est plus que les vêtements, et l'esprit est plus que la chair et l'œil est plus que le vi-sage, et l'amour est plus que la mort.

m1 (picc/flute - oboe) m2 (horns) m3 (trumpets)

(1) Dan - - - sons, y danse en rond

(2) Sur le pont de la tom-be on y dans' y dans' y danl-se, sur le pont du tombeau tout le monde y danse en rond. etc.

(3) Dan-sons la car-ma-gno-le, vi-ve le son, vi-ve le son, dan - sons la car-ma-gno-le, vi-ve le son du clai-ron du clai-ron.

(4) En - - - trez dans la dan - - - se, Vo - - - yez comme on dan - - - se. Sau - - - tez, dan - - - sez, Em-bras-sez qui vous vou-drez.

**EXAMPLE 71:** Honegger, *La danse des morts* (II),  
the superimposed material of the Dance of the Dead

in musical form once more the process by which the “dry bones” came together to form the human bodies that are now ready to dance. This motif is further significant in two respects. In its coloring and gesture, particularly the repeated pre-beat slides, it recalls details of the procession of the skeletons, reminding us of the “genesis” of the creatures now imagined in light-hearted frolicking. At the same time, it is the stem of this same motif that will be heard in twelve-part repetition in section C of this movement; I will return to that later. The two other instrumental motifs, relegated to the horns and trumpets respectively, add ambiance without discernible symbolic content.

The core of the texture is, of course, the twelve-times-repeated vocal phrase, “Souviens-toi, homme, que tu es esprit.” This *passacaglia* theme, as it were, presented in alternation by a few basses and a few altos split off from the large choir, is based on a text which Claudel developed with poetic freedom from various Biblical verses strung together with the “Remember, man” of the *memento mori*.

*Small choir:*

Souviens-toi, homme, que tu es esprit et la chair est plus que le vêtement et l'esprit est plus que la chair et l'œil est plus que le visage et l'amour est plus que la mort.

Remember, man, that you are spirit and the flesh is more than the garment and the spirit is more than the flesh and the eye is more than the face and love is more than death.<sup>44</sup>

The collage is in many respects even more striking than it would appear at first glance. The fact that the text is recited *recto tono*, i.e. in a rhythmicized but monotone style of recitation on a single repeated pitch, lulls listeners' attention to the words somewhat—so much so that they are likely to miss, the first few times at least, that this is not at all the often-heard admonition regarding man being dust and returning to dust. Quite to the contrary: as if hiding behind the conventional formula, Claudel and Honegger encourage the dancing dead to remember that they are *spirit*, not just and not even primarily the dry, inevitably decomposing matter that their recent state as scattered bones had them take for real. Their wish to regain skin and flesh, which just a few minutes ago we were enticed to find understandable, should pale, or so the voice reminds them, in view of their longing for the realization of their spiritual nature.

Whose voice is this? Hardly that of the “joyous skeletons,” as Halbreich believes, who seems to have missed the essential twist here.<sup>45</sup> The skeletons are up to something else altogether. Beginning halfway through the fifth statement of the *Souviens-toi, homme*, one section of them (the choir's basses) begins a contagiously repeated “Dansons, dansons” (Let's dance, let's dance). Not to be asked twice, the choir's tenors join two measures later with a slyly reworded form of the well-known folk song “Sur le pont d'Avignon”. The C#-D# of the basses' “dansons” and the F# major of the tenors' “Sur le pont de la tombe” (On the bridge of the grave) clashes significantly with the continuous E $\flat$  of the rephrased *memento mori*, whose six-eight dance rhythm is threatened by the two-four time in the song from Avignon. As if in reaction to this competition to its more serious message, the voices presenting the *Souviens-toi, homme* raise their pitch level to E. As it turns out, this leaves not only the impertinent dancers with their songs behind, but also the regular accompaniment, and thus actually aggravates the tonal discomfort in a rather funny way.

<sup>44</sup>Reminiscence and rephrasing of Gen 3:19, the Sermon on the Mount (Matth 6:25), and the Song of Songs 8:6 “For love is as strong as death.”

<sup>45</sup>Harry Halbreich, *Arthur Honegger*, p. 528.

Encouraged by the increasing pandemonium, the choir's female voices now enter as well. Having briefly joined the "en rond" with which the tenors conclude their "Sur le pont," they separate and contribute yet another folk song, "Dansons la carmagnole" (Let's dance the carmagnole). In growing excitement (or is it desperation?), the next statement of the *memento mori* sounds raised by another semitone. Mercifully, this time the dancers follow along and accommodate their joyous if turbulent singing to the key of F. At the same time, however, the choir's sopranos and altos go their different ways, thus opening the door for the introduction of yet another folk song, the refrain "Entrez dans la danse, voyez comme on danse" (Join the dance, look how we dance), later complemented by the second line, "Sautiez, dansez, embrassez qui vous voudrez" (Leap, dance, kiss whom you'd like) of the popular song "Nous n'irons plus aux bois."

These folk songs, while ostensibly chosen because of their reference to dancing, bring with them various layers of hermeneutic baggage.

- First, the language used in the popular lyrics clearly contrasts with that of the somber *Remember, man*, thus reminding us again that there is another presence to be felt from which the lighthearted playfulness is purposefully distinguished. One thinks of the two ways in which each vignette of the "dance of death" (by Holbein or other artists) can usually be read: superficially as a snapshot that catches the actors in a moment of involuntary humor, but also more seriously as an incentive to be always mindful of the transience of carnal life and the spiritual goals to be pursued.
- Second, the specific folk songs chosen here also import the historical and cultural context of their origin. "Sur le pont d'Avignon" dates from the time of the Pope's exile in that Southern French city. The old bridge of Avignon, which was graced by a small chapel, used to be the scene of many community and social events and was thus reputed as a gathering place for elegant lords and ladies as well as visiting dignitaries of the Church. All of these, or so the people wanted to believe, became alike as soon as they began dancing rounds—as alike as the successive clients of Death in Holbein's woodcuts. "Dansons la carmagnole," originating in 1792 in the context of the French Revolution, is a song of triumph. France was at war and was winning quite a few glorious victories, which were celebrated by the Carmagnole. It became a round dance associated with the prouder aspects of the French Revolution. One could infer that just as people singing and dancing the

Carmagnole in later years chose to ignore such depressing aspects as the serial executions with the guillotine, so also do the skeletons in their dance choose to forget the grimmer side of their frolicking. The same wish to focus on the bright side must have prompted Honegger to include only the invitation to dance and be merry contained in the refrain of “Nous n’irons plus aux bois.”

- Third and finally, Claudel substitutes a word each in the first two songs. “Sur le pont” surprises with its unexpected description of the bridge as “de la tombe.” It thus alludes not only to the mingling of clerics and aristocrats with common people in the Pope’s Avignon, but also to the dances “on the bridges of graves” in which engaged, according to folk legend the restless dead, but more probably, as mentioned earlier, the grave-diggers in skeleton costumes as a kind of relief to their gloomy profession. In “Dansons la carmagnole,” the original “vive le son du canon” (long live the sound of the canon) is changed to “vive le son du clairon” (long live the sound of the bugle), further emphasizing a confident attitude instead of the destructive power of the weapon.

So much for the folk songs overlaid over the voice of the *memento mori*. But let me retrace to give the full picture. Soon after the beginning of the passacaglia’s sixth statement, roughly at the time when the choir’s female voices first join with the second folk tune, the narrator tries to capture attention over the general clamor. Changing his voice from the earlier serious recitation of the prophetic vision to the hollering of a fair-ground promoter, he announces some of the personages seen in Holbein’s *Totentanz*. “Le Pape! L’Évêque! Le Roi!” he shouts (The Pope! The Bishop! The King!), and a little later, “Le Chevalier! Le Philosophe!” (The Nobleman! The Philosopher!—interestingly, one who is not listed among the artist’s professionals). “Les Messieurs! Les Dames! Les Demoiselles! Tout le monde! Entrez la compagnie! Entrez!” (Gentlemen! Ladies! Young women! Everybody! Join the party! Come in!)<sup>46</sup>

Meanwhile, everybody is getting more excited, the dynamic level increases constantly, and the dancers throw back and forth between their voices mere snippets of the three folk songs. Meanwhile the orchestra, so far retaining a transparent texture, is reinforced with more and more

<sup>46</sup>Note that the printed text in the vocal score has “Ces Messieurs! Ces Dames! Ces Demoiselles!”, which not only contradicts the rather clearly legible “Les” in the handwritten full score, but also diminishes the power of the message. (We are not confronted with a specific group of “these gentlemen,” but precisely with all of them, indiscriminately.)

percussion instruments, among them the idiosyncratic sound of the ratchet. For the tenth statement, by now in *f*, the voices of the *memento mori* raise their pitch by another semitone, and the eleventh and twelfth statements are no longer sung at all but shouted, the latter homorhythmically reinforced by the tenor drum.

This ends the first section of the movement—but not the “Dance of the Dead.” The subsequent section (B) brings snippets from the folk songs and developments of the instrumental motifs, among which a homophonic version of “Sur le pont de la tombe” in *ff pesante* stands out. The section functions primarily as a momentary release of tension before the second climax of the movement in section C.

The twenty-four measures of this section present a startling superimposition of four different materials.

- 1 In a *ff* unison of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and first violins we hear, as already mentioned, the twelvefold statement of the first instrumental motif, accompanied by ratchet, cymbal, tenor drum, and large drum. The motivic material recalls the dry bones that were only recently reassembled to limbs and whole skeletons; the twelvefold repetition reminds the listener both of the symbolic signification of this dance and, indirectly, of its singularity, since the number of repetitions signals completion and roundedness.
- 2 The choir (no longer reduced by voices split off for the *memento mori*) presents a four-part canon of “Dansons la carmagnole.”
- 3 The lower woodwinds, brass, lower strings, and piano counter the still prevailing six-eight time in an almost vulgar way with a waltz rhythm. (Halbreich speaks colorfully of a “clumsy and obscene oom-pah-pah”).
- 4 Organ and solo trumpet top the complex texture with a quotation of the *Dies irae* in the solemnly measured pace that gives this plain-chant the impact of a *cantus firmus*. With its text (“That day of wrath”) and its allusion to the requiem mass of which it customarily forms a section, it adds a note that is otherwise entirely missing since the voice of *memento mori* has fallen silent: a dimension of solemnity and, even beyond that, of genuine grief.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>47</sup>Liszt’s *Totentanz*, Saint-Saëns’s *Danse macabre*, and George Crumbs’s *Black Angels* all make use of the *Dies irae*; another famous quotation appears in Mahler’s *Das klagende Lied*, very appropriately according to Malcolm Boyd since “the subject [...] is loosely connected with the oldest tradition of the dance of death.” (M. Boyd, “Dance of death,” *The New Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians* [London: Macmillan, 1980].)

As all these layers break off simultaneously, only the ratchet and the tenor drum sustain a sound. Into the tension created by this quasi vacuum breaks the recurrence of the short flash of lightning that opened this movement. Following a sudden dramatic hush to *p*, the full choir once more takes up the monotonous recitation of *Souviens-toi, homme, que tu es esprit* on its original pitch, E $\flat$ . This thirteenth statement, duplicated in the timpani, develops a momentous crescendo which, accompanied by chromatically ascending figures and a cymbal sound that increases to bursting, rounds off the movement in a very dramatic way.

### Laments and Sobs (III, IV)

The third and fourth movements of the oratorio provide the lyrical adagio that balances the drama and commotion. As Halbreich observes correctly, Claudel's scenario, which positions the most spectacular section of the oratorio almost at the beginning of the work, would have created a problem for a lesser composer. It required all the lyrical genius of Honegger in the "Lamento," and later in the "Espérance dans la Croix," to avoid imbalancing the whole and to assure a progression of spiritual ascent.<sup>48</sup>

The "Lamento" is fashioned as a variation of the *da capo* arias in Bach's oratorios. Limited to a single singer (the baritone solo, not heard previously in this work) and a very reduced body of instruments, it is laid out following the schema A, B, B', A', C, coda. In contrast to all other entries of vocal soloists in the composition, the singer here appears identified not by his voice category (baritone) but by what he represents: "Voix d'homme"—Man's Voice. This voice represents humankind's answer to the reality of omnipresent death, of which the preceding movement tried to make light.

Claudel's text is an extraordinary collage from and variation on the words of the prophet Job:

*Voix d'Homme:*

Souviens-toi de moi, Seigneur, parce que je suis poussière et que je retournerai en poussière! Et vous ayez pitié de moi, vous du moins qui vous disiez mes amis parce que la main du Seigneur m'a touchée. Mes os se sont desséchés comme du bois et il ne me reste plus que les dents autour de la bouche. Qui est l'homme pour que tu le magnifies et pour que Vous lui attachiez votre cœur? Tu le visites au point du

<sup>48</sup>Harry Halbreich, *Arthur Honegger*, p. 528.

jour et l'épreuve commence pour lui aussitôt. / Jusques à quand sera-ce que Tu oublies de m'épargner et que Tu ne me laisses pas le temps que j'avale ma salive. Ma vie est comme le vent qui souffle et ma substance devant Toi est comme rien. L'homme né de la femme et qui vit peu, Tu vois de quelles misères, Seigneur, il est rempli! / Il s'élève comme une fleur et aussitôt il est brisé, il fut comme l'ombre et jamais il ne demeure dans le même état. Et c'est sur un individu de cette espèce que Tu juges digne de Toi d'ouvrir les yeux et de l'amener devant Toi en jugement! Et il est vrai que j'ai péché? Qui peut faire pur quelque chose né d'une semence que ne l'est pas? Toi seul, Toi seul, qui as fixé le nombre de ses mois et constitué devant lui ce terme qu'il ne saurait dépasser. Retirez-vous de lui un peu qu'il ait repos et que lui arrive enfin comme à un mercenaire le jour, le jour désiré. Car / je sais que mon Rédempteur vit et au dernier jour je me relèverai de la terre et de nouveau je serai enveloppé de ma peau et dans ma propre chair je verrai ce Dieu qui est mon Sauveur.

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(Man's Voice) Remember me, Lord, for I am dust and will return to dust (New take on Job 10:9). Have pity upon me, you at least who call yourselves my friends, for the hand of God has touched me. (Cf. Have pity on me, my friends, have pity, for the hand of God has struck me. Job 19:21) My bones are dry as wood and I have nothing left but the teeth around my mouth. (Cf. I am nothing but skin and bones; I have escaped with only the skin of my teeth. Job 19:20) What is man, that you make so much of him, that you give him so much attention, that you examine him every morning and test him every moment? Will you never look away from me, nor let me alone even for an instant? (Job 7, 17-19 [Older versions of last sentence: till I swallow down my own spittle?]). Also reminiscent of Psalm 8:4-5, What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?) My life is like the wind that blows and before you my substance is nothing. (Reminiscent of Job 7:7, Remember, o God, that my life is but a breath; my eyes will never see happiness again.) The man that is born of a woman and short-lived, you see, Lord, how he is full of misery. (Cf. Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. Job 14:1) He springs up like a flower and withers away; like a fleeting shadow, he does not endure. (Job 14:2) Do you fix your eye on such a one? Will you bring him before you for judgment? (Job 14:3) And is it true that I have sinned? (Cf. How many wrongs and sins have I committed? Show me my offense and my sin. Job 13:23) Who can bring what is pure from the impure? (Job 14:4) You alone, you alone who have fixed the number of his months and constituted before him this term that he will not be able to surpass. (Cf. No one! Man's days are determined; you have decreed the number of his months and have set limits he cannot exceed. Job 14:5) So look away from him and let him alone, till he has put in his time like a hired man. (Job 14:6) For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that I shall stand at the latter day upon the earth and I shall again be enveloped by my skin, and in my flesh shall I see God who is my Savior. (Cf. For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God. Job 19:25-26)

Note that the verse Job 14:1 appears, in Latin, above Holbein's woodcut of "The Child." This is the only biblical quotation employed by both the artist and the poet.

Honegger's music for this movement is of singular beauty. It begins with a single E $\flat$  in the first horn, establishing both a connection to the tonality of the preceding movement and a new instrumental timbre of human warmth. Into the lonesomeness of this note, the violins enter with the seemingly unrelated third G $\sharp$ -B,<sup>49</sup> establishing the lament's tonal identity of G $\sharp$  minor. This unusual beginning is mirrored at the close of the movement, where the same first horn places a single, surprising E $\flat$  against the G $\sharp$ -B of the violins. Another link to the previous sections is suggested in the beginning of Claudel's text, where the "Souviens-toi de moi, Seigneur" creates a sorrowful counterpart to the "Souviens-toi, homme" of the *memento mori*.

The twenty-four measures of section A unfold above a background pulse of quarter-notes, effected by the violins who, alternating from bar to bar, descend in chromatic steps until they have completed the full twelve-tone scale. Above this serene portrayal of inevitability—an impression conveyed both by the regularity of the rhythm and by the foreseeable end of the section at the consummation of the progression through twelve semitones—two voices soar. The first is that of the solo violin, *obbligato* as in Bach's "Erbarne Dich," "Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben," and many other laments; it is joined by that of the baritone.<sup>50</sup>

In the twelve-measure-long middle section, the plaintive English horn takes over the *obbligato* part, expressing sixteenth-note impatience over the fact that God does not even give Man time "to swallow his spittle." A contrast characterized by homophonic brass, prompting Man to admit his unworthiness, prepares the transposed return of the impatient woodwind voice, now heard in the flutes and oboes. Meanwhile, Man suspends his argument.

The return of the A section occurs significantly at the word "misery." The original *obbligato* is now sounded in the full violin I section, making this second "subject" of the lament less personal (and, perhaps, less subtle). The vocal line is freely varied. But the greatest deviation in the

<sup>49</sup>Honegger's care to string the movements together guarantees that this tonality is in fact not as unrelated to what preceded it as it appears. The coda of the "Dance of the Dead" closes in fact on a chord that, while dominated by E $\flat$ /D $\sharp$ , has a good share of B and E $\sharp$  mixed in. This suggestion of a simultaneously sounding E $\flat$  major and E major provides, with hindsight, a logical preparation for the overlay of E $\flat$  with G $\sharp$  minor at the opening of the "Lamento."

<sup>50</sup>It would take somebody of the perspicacity of Naomi Cumming to ascertain the identity of the subject speaking in the violin's voice. See her excellent deliberations on the topic in "The Subjectivities of 'Erbarne Dich'," *Music Analysis* 16/1 (March 1997): 5-44.

expressive content is due to the fact that the serenity of the regular pulsation in chromatically descending thirds, now in viola and violin II, is jeopardized by the “syncopated iambs” (accented upbeat—unaccented downbeat) of a four-part unison in piano, violoncelli, and basses. If the initial section expressed a large degree of acceptance of the fate awaiting one who, after all, is essentially dust, the variation is full of complaints over the impossibility of meeting God’s demands in so hopeless a situation, and Man’s desperate request that the Lord leave him alone at least for a little while. For, Man assures in finally turning to the chorale first heard in the “Dialogue” of the first movement, he basically trusts in his redemption. And it seems that the whole creation joins him in this newly regained trust: the chorale’s third and fourth phrases are taken over by the full woodwinds and the full (though muted) brass respectively, allowing the human voice every freedom of variation.

The coda, returning once more to material from the A section, reinstates the “second voice,” that of the solo violin, this time not in addition to but instead of the baritone’s. This almost abstract expression of grief allows the listener some respite before the outbreak of the distressed, violent sobs in the fourth movement.

How tormented and disturbed humans are in view of their utter vulnerability to death at any moment is expressed powerfully in the musical language of “Sanglots.” The emotional framework for the short piece is established with the unusual seven-four time. In a variant of the Arabic scale on A#, a 3½-octave ascent in *molto stringendo* and crescendo<sup>51</sup> explodes into disconsolate sobbing. This despair is expressed in a two-bar *ostinato* in which the orchestra is joined by the two-part parallels of the choir’s female voices who, reminiscent of medieval *organa*, sing in perfect fifths interrupted by one perfect fourth. The effect of the *ff* exclamations of their “Ha—! ha! ha! ha! ha— $\pi$ !” (which, on the written page at least, seems like a somewhat unfortunate transliteration of the wailing Claudel no doubt intended here) is heartrending and must have satisfied the poet, who had requested “a heavy scream of despair, then jerky sighs and the final inhalation through a strangled throat.”<sup>52</sup> A unison of the male voices joins them one measure later with a biblical verse in Latin. This text,

<sup>51</sup>A#-B-C\*-D#-E#-F#-F\*-G#-D#, in a gradual build-up of unison texture involving woodwinds, piano, and strings.

<sup>52</sup>“Le cri lourd du désespoir, puis les soupirs entrecoupés, l’aspiration finale de la gorge étranglée.” Paul Claudel as quoted in Harry Halbreich, *Arthur Honegger*, p. 530. For English speakers, “Ahhh! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah!” may give a better idea.

which strings the two movements, “Lamento” and “Sanglots,” together, follows Job’s wish that God may leave him alone at least for a moment (and is only fully comprehensible in the context of the earlier request):

*Choir (male voices):*

Antequam vadam et non revertor ad terram tenebrosam et opertam  
mortis caligine ubi nullus ordo sed sempiternus horror inhabitat.

Before I go without return to the land of darkness, which is open to  
the gloominess of death, where no order but eternal horror dwells.  
(Cf. Before I go to the place of no return, to the land of gloom and  
deep shadow, to the land of deepest night, of deep shadow and  
disorder, where even the light is like darkness. Job 10:21-22)

After six measures (or three statements) of the *ostinato*, the entire phrase is repeated a semitone lower and with exchanged voices; the men now do the wailing, while the women confirm the prospect of the gloomy land towards which they know themselves and all humankind headed. The coda, back on G $\sharp$ , juxtaposes an emphatic eight-part wailing of the full choir with the first measure of the orchestral *ostinato* (now reinforced by the brass section), before half of the instruments in unison take up an augmented “Antequam vadam et non revertor.” Then the plaintive sound vanishes into the *pp* of a C $\sharp$  minor chord, enriched—as if to remind us of the larger context—with a D $\sharp$  (= E $\flat$ ).

## Hope and Affirmation (VI, VII)

Just as the initial Dialogue led to the exceedingly complex “Dance of the Dead” movement, God’s Reply in the fifth piece is followed by another long and multifaceted movement, “Espérance dans la Croix” (Hope in the Cross). And just as one of the most picturesque motifs in the Dialogue, epitomizing the stately march of the reassembled skeletons and the rhythmic clattering of their still-loose joints, turned into the basis underlying the twelve-(plus-one)-part repetition in the Dance, so also does the motif introduced newly in God’s Reply become the foundation of a seventeen-part variation form in the movement of Hope.

Claudél’s “Espérance dans la Croix” begins a turn—completed in the “Affirmation” of the final movement—from the imagery characteristic of the Old Covenant to that of the New Testament. For the first time in his oratorio text, the poet inserts quotations and paraphrases from the gospels of St. Matthew and St. John, linking a dramatic setting that was so far dominated by Old Testament prophets to Jesus and the Crucifixion. But,

as already mentioned, later in the same movement the Cross is reframed again. As a metaphor of Oneness, still in its hope-giving perspective, it is reconnected with the context of Ezekiel's vision.

Honegger designs this movement in four sections, of which the first balances the other three in both length and spiritual weight:

rondo ( <i>Stabat mater</i> )	mm. 1- 70	RN 37	3/4	♩ = 84
summons and chorale	mm. 71- 92	RN 42	2/2	♩ = 63
variation form	mm. 93-123	RN 43	4/4	♩ = 96
return of thunder	mm. 124-140	RN 46	4/4	♩ = 60

Despite a moderate tempo in the *Stabat mater* section, the interchange of voices at the foot of the Cross of Golgotha functions as the oratorio's second lyrical movement. It thus provides a counterpart to the "Lamento," which it balances beautifully in regard to its religious message: the sorrowful words deploring human unworthiness and abandonment in the one are as if offset in retrospect by the awestruck admiration for the act of infinite love expressed in the death on the Cross.

The refrain in the large-scale rondo form is provided by a monodic phrase in muted high strings. Like the tessitura and the emotion in this scene, the tonal language, too, is "high-strung": at the beginning, the middle, and the end of each phrase within the refrain, we hear a juxtaposition of cross-related triads: an A-minor chord pitted against a G $\flat$ -major chord. Over this foundation, the melodically leading first violin initiates a dialogue with a very chromatic solo soprano. Her words, anchored in C, focus almost exclusively on the wounds in Jesus' hands, feet, and side, in a deeply moving attempt to comprehend the truth of the Crucifixion.

*Refrain, Soprano solo:*

(mm. 1-12)	Quelles sont ces plaies au milieu de Tes mains et de Tes pieds et quelle est cette ouverture à Ton côté?
(mm. 18-24)	Les plaies au milieu de Tes mains et cette ouverture à Ton côté, pour que j'y entre.
(mm. 28-34)	Et c'est vous qu'on appelait le lointain et l'inaccessible.
(mm. 43-49)	Cette plaie à mon côté, dit le Seigneur.
(mm. 64-70)	(instrumental)

(Soprano:) What are these wounds in the middle of your hands and your feet and what is that opening at your side? / The wounds in the middle of your hands and that opening at your side, so that I may enter through them. / And it is you whom they have called remote and inaccessible. / That wound in my side, says the Lord. (The wording is Claudel's very free take on John 20: 20, 25, and 26.)

The episodes separated by these ever-varied recurrences of the refrain differ from it in their textual messages as well as in their musical styles, textures, and timbres. Almost all of them resolve into the major chord (or a combination of triad and superimposed fourths) on F $\sharp$ , the counter-pole of the refrain's melodic C and vertical A-minor triad. Yet beyond all this variety they have one thing in common: they all communicate hope.

- Episode 1 (mm. 13-19) features the solo alto accompanied by melodically and harmonically progressing clarinets and bassoons over slowly moving intervals in the violoncelli. The motherly voice does not respond to the soprano's searching question but expresses reassurance of unconditional love: "My son, I have given you my heart and I wait that you give me yours."
- Episode 2 (mm. 25-28) contrasts the solo voices with the choir which, integrated into the orchestra's three-part homophonic texture that is duplicated across five octaves, requests confidently: "Open wide, eternal portals" (cf. Psalm 24:7).
- Episode 3 (mm. 34-43) follows traditional rondo plots by showing some relationship to episode 1, both in the accompanying pattern and in featuring the solo alto as leading voice (here partly juxtaposed with the soprano, who is still appalled that Jesus had been called remote and inaccessible). The alto's words are taken from Isaiah and are the first link back to the prophets in this movement: "Est-ce qu'une mère oublie son enfant? et moi, quand elle l'oublierait, et moi je ne l'oublierai pas, dit le Seigneur." (Cf. "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! [says the Lord]" Isaiah 49:15.)
- Episode 4 is the longest, consisting of two segments that are contrasted in many respects. The first (mm. 50-56) features a solo flute in dialogue with the solo baritone acting as the voice of Jesus: "Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart." (Matth 11:29) The second segment contains a duet of soprano and alto in which the two solo voices, moving in almost perfect mirror symmetry, express the hope for Oneness: "Afin que je sois Un en vous et que vous soyez Un en Moi comme mon père et moi nous sommes Un parce que Un est nécessaire." (That I may be one in you and you may be one in me, as my Father and I we are one because one is necessary. Cf. similarly in John 17:21.)

Episode 3 and the refrains that surround it stand out in two ways. In the refrains, the melodic line of the first violins is doubled in the choir's altos, an octave lower and *bocca chiusa*. The soprano, having just presented her amazement that Jesus should have been called remote and inaccessible, repeats her words during the episode, with a new melodic contour in counterpoint to the motherly words of the alto. (One after the other the choir's male voices, also humming *bocca chiusa*, enrich this segment.)

The second section of "Hope in the Cross" consists of a two-part summons, presented by the baritone solo in a texture of four-part counterpoint comprising the assertive brass and bassoons.

*Baritone solo:*

Prends un morceau de bois et écris dessus: Judas!

Et un autre morceau de bois et écris dessus: Ephraïm!

Take a piece of wood and write upon it: Judah. And another piece of wood, and write upon it: Ephraim.

Both the full orchestra and the choir join in for the *ff* exclamations of "Judah" and "Ephraim". While the text so far corresponds with the (abbreviated) biblical wording,<sup>53</sup> Claudel has considerably modified the next verse of the prophetic utterance so as to establish a link between the Cross of Golgotha and the "cross" of the people of Israel, a cross he envisages God asking Ezekiel to form from the two sticks representing the quarreling contingents of the people of Israel.

*Baritone solo:*

Et cela fait une croix et je m'étendrai dessus car je ne suis pas venu dissoudre et résoudre et diviser mais remplir.

And that makes a cross and I will spread myself on it for I have not come to dissolve and to resolve but to fill. (Cf. "Join them together into one stick, so that they will become one in your hand." Ez 37: 17)

Honegger underscores the connection by pitting the solo voice against an instrumental version of the chorale, "I know that my Redeemer lives."<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup>Cf. "Son of man, take a stick of wood and write on it, 'Belonging to Judah and the Israelites associated with him'. Then take another stick of wood and write on it, 'Ephraim's stick, belonging to Joseph and all the house of Israel associated with him'." Ez 37:16

<sup>54</sup>The first phrase is led by first oboe and first trumpet and involves the second oboe and clarinets for the other voices of a four-part setting. The second phrase is much simplified. Stripped of all note repetition and thus very serene, it sounds in oboe 1/horn 1 with oboe 2, clarinets, and horn 2. The third phrase is reduced to its melodic line, presented in flutes and trumpets. While these three phrases are heard in the original key, the fourth phrase, added by the strings, is transposed down a whole tone (as it was in the Lamento).

The third section of the complex “Espérance dans la Croix” is a seventeen-part variation on the motif of God’s promise, introduced in “La réponse de Dieu.” The text is a continuation of the earlier part of the pledge:

*Choir:*

Je prendrai les enfants d’Israel et je les rassemblerai de toutes parts et je les ramènerai dans leur pays et je ferai d’eux une seule nation {Amen}. Et ils ne feront plus désormais deux peuples et ils ne seront plus divisés en deux royaumes {Amen}. Et je les sauverai et je les purifierai de leur péché {Amen}. Ils seront mon peuple et je serai leur Dieu {Amen}. Je ferai avec eux un pacte, il y aura une alliance entre nous {Amen}. Et je les établirai sur la pierre solide et je les multiplierai {Amen}. Et je placerai Mon sanctuaire au milieu d’eux, leur Dieu, et ils seront Mon peuple.

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Literally: I will take the children of Israel and will gather them on all sides and I will take them back to their land and I will make them one nation {Amen}. And they will henceforth no longer be two peoples and they will no longer be divided in two kingdoms {Amen} And I will save them and will cleanse them of their sin {Amen}. They will be my people, and I will be their God. I will make a covenant with them; there will be an alliance between us {Amen}. And I will place them on solid rock and I will multiply them {Amen}. And I will set my sanctuary in the midst of them, their God, and they will be my people.

Cf. “I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land.” (Ez 37:21) “I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. There will be one king over all of them and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms.” (Ez 37:22) [...] “I will save them from all their sinful backsliding, and I will cleanse them. They will be my people, and I will be their God.” (Ez 37:23) [...] “I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling-place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people.” (Ez 37:26-27)

The music starts out with two parts of the choir singing in *p marcato* before the backdrop of a scarce, dissonant accompaniment of the muted brass. As the variations unfold and move their way up in an irregular seven-step ascent—each level concluded by an enthusiastic but brief “Amen!”<sup>59</sup>—the intensity increases and the orchestra becomes ever fuller. The last three variations of the motif, restoring the initial tonal definition, present the climax in *Più largo*, accompanied by an orchestra that is powerful with timpani strokes, sweeping *glissandi*, and a dramatically

<sup>59</sup>The motif in its ascent is heard four times on B (mm. 93-94, 95-96, 97-98, 99-100), twice on E (mm. 101-102, 103-104), twice abridged on F (mm. 105-106, 106-107), twice abridged on F# (mm. 108-109, 109-110), twice on G (mm. 111-112, 113-114), twice on A♭ (mm. 115-116, 117-118), three times on B (mm. 119-120, 121-121, 122-123).

leaping figure, and in the choir's soprano by quickly repeated exclamations of "Amen! Amen!"

This mighty expression of God's commitment to His people leads to the last sounding of the "thunder," presumably at this point denoting God's leave-taking after He has pronounced His reassuring pledge. The instrumentation is identical with that at the very beginning of the oratorio; structure and melodic detail also resemble the model. A significant deviation is the simultaneous enunciation of the choir which, in a unison quotation from the Latin Bible, supplements the 37th chapter of Ezekiel with its final verse, God's last pronouncement in this context:

*Choir:*

Et scient gentes quia Ego Dominus Sanctificator Israel cum fuerit  
Santificatio mea in medio eorum in perpetuum.

Then the nations will know that I the Lord make Israel holy, when  
my sanctuary is among them forever. (Ez 37:28)

The oratorio's final movement, "Affirmation" is, with only sixteen measures, the briefest of all. It is a masterpiece of combining the function of essential summary and closure with yet unexpected new colors. In its layout a minute ternary form with coda, it incorporates reminiscences of the motto phrases (heard in I and II), the mirror-symmetry with which the two females under the Cross evoked Unity with the Divine (VI), the chorale celebrating the consolation given with the Redeemer's Resurrection to eternal life (I, III, VI), and the sobbing of despondency (V).

The text is the third of the phrases derived from the *memento mori* pattern:

*Choir:*

Souviens-toi, homme, que tu es pierre et sur cette pierre Je bâtirai  
mon église. Es les portes de l'enfer ne prévaudront pas contre  
elle! Souviens-toi, homme, que tu es pierre et sur cette pierre Je  
bâtirai mon église. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha—a.

Remember, man, that you are rock and that on that rock I will  
build my church. And the portals of hell will not prevail against  
it. (Cf. "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will  
build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."  
Matthew 16:18)

In the framing section, the choir picks up the rhythmic pattern used in "Remember, man, that you are dust" and "Remember, man, that you are spirit," but enhances it with an initial octave leap, *marcato* triplets, and shouts heightened by full-orchestra strokes, which interrupt the unison

texture at the repeated word “rock.” While the prospect of building the Church is presented the first time (mm. 3-4) as a lyrical reflection, it is embedded at its return in the woodwinds’ “I know that my Redeemer lives” (mm. 10-12)—where the Redeemer is both the hope known since Job and at the same time the voice that proposes to build the eternal Church. The central phrase combines the note repetitions characteristic for the context of all motto phrases in this oratorio, here in the choir’s altos and tenors, with the vertical mirroring in the choir’s sopranos and basses (mm. 4-7). With this device, Honegger links the promise that hell’s powers will be overcome to the striving for unity with God that was earlier connected with this musical figure.

Finally in the coda, the solo soprano—embodiment of the pious woman under the Cross—is heard with what one could describe as an internalized rendering of the choir’s earlier wordless wailing in repeated sighs. Just as the sixth movement with its lyrical expression of hope balances the lament of the third, so the sobbing in the fourth movement is transfigured into an expression of awed joy, closing *La danse des morts* in a gesture of sublime beauty.

### **The Symbolic Usage of Instrumentation and Vocal Textures in *La danse des morts***

Grasping the emotional and spiritual impact of the topic as Claudel had shaped it, Honegger realized that Paul Sacher’s Basel Chamber Orchestra would have to be reinforced to provide all the colors he envisaged. He decided for a slim but multi-colored body of sound within which special effects would be created not only by means of motivic details, but also through the symbolic use of ever-varying instrumental colors and vocal textures. I will focus here on the most striking effects of symbolically employed timbres: the trombone, the organ, and the violin, and will then attempt a reading of the signification concealed in the twenty-four different uses of the human voice.

Not evident from the score but striking in every recording and performance of the piece, the (second) trombone is heard as an assertive leader in the “thunder,” and only there. This supernatural rumbling, conceived by Claudel to prepare the prophet Ezekiel’s vision of the “Valley of the Dry Bones” and quoted by Honegger in such a way as to suggest its symbolic connection to God’s direct dialogue with humans, thus assumes an

additional connotation with this instrument. In the tradition of sacred music, the trombone is heard prominently in contexts in which man is to be judged, to be found either decent or morally wanting—no doubt inspired by the trombone- or trumpet-playing angels of the Last Judgment. Trombones also feature regularly in requiems; again, for the recently deceased Christian, divine judgment is imminent. Honegger could thus have had several subtexts in mind in choosing this aural signal. On the one hand, he may have wished to remind us that the “dance of the dead” as an artistic tradition serves a purpose that is complementary to that of the requiem as a religious ritual. In both cases the surviving, grieving the lost one and powerfully reminded of their own mortality, engage in an attempt at reassuring themselves; in the one case by submitting their incomprehension of death to God, in the other by sublimating it in macabre humor. On the other hand, Honegger may have reacted directly to the fact that Holbein enriched the pictorial practice of death or a skeleton beckoning humans not only with pictures from Genesis, which Claudel’s collage of biblical texts picks up, but also with the Last Judgment as plate no. 40. While a beholder of Holbein’s woodcut series may find it tempting to concentrate on the more entertaining engravings featuring Death with his successive clients, it is conceivable that the artist gave much more value than we are inclined to admit to the goal towards which all these passings lead. Honegger’s timbral choice of a prominent trombone in the recurring “thunder” thus supplements and expands Claudel when he turns from Golgotha and the “hope in the Cross” back to the Old Testament image of the resurrection of Israel; both men were no doubt aware of the link between the notion of the Day of Yahweh as the time of Israel’s salvation and the later eschatological idea of Judgment Day.

Another instrumental color of symbolic value is the organ. Honegger, conscious of the limitations faced in many halls housing (even reinforced) chamber orchestras, offers alternatives should an organ not be available: to double the bassoons, horns, and trombones. Clearly then, the color of which he thought when choosing this timbre was once again the low register, the range of awe and wonder. The composer’s emotional association is interesting since he does, in fact, also use in this piece the organ’s higher registers. At any rate, the instrument is scored so deliberately as to invite thoughts about its signifying power. Three of the five occurrences of “thunder” feature the organ, manuals and pedal with 32-foot in the octave C-c. (I: mm. 2-19, V: mm. 1-11, VI: mm. 124-140). Beyond that, the organ is heard three more times. In the second movement, the actual

“Dance of the Dead,” it doubles the trumpet for the unison *Dies irae* (II: mm. 173-193). In the movement devoted to the “Hope in the Cross,” a single organ chord highlights the enunciation of the word “God” (the context is: “I, their *God!*”) at the climax of the divine pledge (VI: mm. 122). Finally, the organ joins the full woodwind section for the very last quotation of the signature chorale “I know that my Redeemer lives,” the first phrase of which is heard immediately preceding the composition’s concluding vocalise (VII: mm. 10-12). Clearly, this sound stands for God.

Finally, Honegger’s use of the solo violin as an *obbligato* part in the “Lamento” has been much commented, and parallels to arias in Baroque oratorios have rightly been drawn. What strikes me, both in *La danse des morts* and in the predecessors on which it may have been modeled, is that this violin part, which invariably engages in a veritable duet with the human voice, seems to epitomize an invisible presence offering soothing and solace. As “Man’s voice” pleads that God may remember him despite his unworthiness, he is enveloped by the warmhearted and sympathetic sounds of a sister voice and thus—quite literally in the musical texture of this adagio—not alone. By the time the passage returns, Honegger decides to reinforce the part with the remainder of the violin I section. This seems (to this listener) to render the divine presence less personal, just when man is heard asking skeptically, “Do you fix your eye on such a one?” The effect is yet different in the third case of a duet-like interchange between solo voice and violin. In the *Stabat mater*, cast here in the form of a elegiac rondo, the refrain juxtaposes the pious woman under the Cross with a chain of slow-moving six-part homophonic chords in the second violins and violas. Above this rich and sweet cushion, the first violins soar in passionate eloquence. The impression is of a non-embodied, heavenly voice responding to the grieving woman before she has even fully articulated her concerned questions. This makes it right that neither her fellow human being (alto solo) nor the voice of Jesus (baritone solo) reply in any direct way to her ardent utterances. While her stunned incomprehension at the sight of the wounds in the body of the Crucified remains, her heart is not alone.

More could be said about the instrumental timbres and their symbolic power. But even more striking seems the fact that Honegger devised not seven (the number of the movements) or twelve (the number of completion) but  $2 \times 12 = 24$  different “timbral circumstances” for the human voice. Here is a list, with just the briefest reminders of what was earlier discussed in more detail in terms of their context and signification:

- 1 solo voice, spoken, without accompaniment or with only sustained chords outside time (I): declamation, the prophet Ezekiel's vision;
- 2 solo voice, spoken, against independently developing, accelerating music (V, middle section): prophet conveying the voice and promises of God;
- 3 solo voice, spoken in strictly rhythmicized fashion (reinforced with the choir singing on a repeated pitch in *martellato allargando*, and with a homorhythmic accompaniment (I): the prophet awed by the result of God's merciful resurrection of the dead bones;
- 4 solo voice, spoken/shouted (II): the narrator as a fairground announcer in the spectacle of the Dance of the Dead;
- 5 solo voice, wordless singing (VII): direct expression of the soul;
- 6 solo voice, heard against a varying accompaniment or as a counterpoint to independent instrumental statements (VI): humans trying to come to terms with the trials of the world by offering very human answers (unconditional parental love etc.);
- 7 solo voice, heard in duet with the violin (III, VI): expression of human loneliness, unworthiness, and vulnerability, meeting the comfort of God's invisible presence;
- 8 solo voice, heard as a counterpoint to the instrumental chorale (VI): man interpreting Yahweh's instructions in the light of the Cross;
- 9 duet of two solo voices in mirror reflection of one another (VI): yearning for Oneness;
- 10 choir, spoken, deliberately monotonous (I): the voices describing earth before the Creation of humans;
- 11 choir in unison, rhythmicized monotone recitation (II): the voice of the *memento mori*, rephrasing the admonition to remind humans of their nature as spirit;
- 12 choir in unison, unaccompanied (I): original *memento mori*;
- 13 choir in unison, accompanied with scarce but forceful orchestral strokes and breaking into shouts (VII): the voice of the *memento mori*, reminding humans of their duty to serve as the rock that supports the church;
- 14 choir in unison, melodic, accompanied (I): the voice of the people
- 15 choir in unison, heard as an integral voice in three-part instrumental homophonic setting (VI): Open, eternal gates!
- 16 choir singing in separate voices, *bocca chiusa* (VI): speechless before the Crucified?
- 17 choir divided: sobs in parallel fifths against a Latin apprehension of the dark future (IV);
- 18 choir in 2- to 4-part canon above sustained notes (I): expression of insecurity and doubt;
- 19 choir homophonic a cappella (I): the voice of the faithful;

- 20 choir homophonic in near-perfect mirror symmetry (VII): against the community of the faithful, hell loses its power;
- 21 choir in homophonic chords, with unchanged repetitions (II, “en rond, en rond”): humans obsessed with earthly possessions;
- 22 choir in a homophonic setting of a tune with homophonic accompaniment (II “Sur le pont de la tombe”): human carelessness;
- 23 choir singing in 2 to 4 parts, in various keys, in different meters, with different texts, over an unrelated accompaniment (II): the cacophony of the dance of the dead;
- 24 choir singing in 4-part canon over an unrelated accompaniment (including a waltz and the *Dies irae* etc., II): the low point of human loss of spiritual perspective.

What are we to make of these timbral choices? On the basis of the three details of instrumentation discussed above, it appears that Honegger’s musical realization centers this “dance of the dead” on God, rather than on the character of Death, who seems so clearly the protagonist of the visual depictions of the topic.

The second protagonist in all pictorial representations is, of course, the human being in all its facets and variations of learning, wealth, status, gender, age, etc. Translated into the scenario of Claudel’s text collage, the variations of the human being encompass the impersonal voice of admonition, the voices of God, Jesus, and the prophets, various human voices, and the folk songs of the joyous skeletons. Furthermore, by purely musical means, above all variations in vocal treatment, melodic contour, and texture, Honegger makes a distinction on what appears as a third level. Here, once again, the number twelve plays a significant role. While Holbein’s skeleton meets three dozen representatives of the human race whom he beckons to follow him to the netherworld, Honegger devises two dozen different ways of being human.

### **Saint Francis of Assisi and the Early Writings about His Life**

Francis, son of the wealthy merchant Bernardone, was born in Assisi in 1181/82. Spoilt as a rich heir, he spent his adolescence on thoughtless pursuits of pleasure. When he was about twenty years old, he enlisted, for the mere fun of battle noise and commotion, in the war between Assisi and its neighboring community of Perugia, and ended up in prison. When finally released, he was seriously ill; by the time his health was restored, he was a different person. His calling first became evident when he

suddenly found himself filled with compassion for the sick and poor, and especially for lepers, whom he had so far always shunned. This compassion was his first calling. During a prayer at a half-ruined little church, the Crucifixus spoke to him, summoning him to see that God's house is in ruins and he was designated to rebuild it. A third calling occurred in a dream in which Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience beckoned him. Upon awakening he vowed that he would henceforth "be married to Lady Poverty" and commit his life to absolute chastity and obedience. Breaking with his uncomprehending father, he returned to him the rich clothes which he deemed no longer appropriate and began a life of begging, itinerant preaching, and tireless caring for the sick of body and soul.

Disciples soon joined him in great numbers, and as early as 1215 he sought papal endorsement for his new order. As the religious community grew, however, factions developed, divided especially over the question of absolute poverty (which forbade the possession of books) and absolute humility (which discouraged learning) versus the demands of missionary activities and instruction (which would seem to require learning and the possession of books). Francis, not willing to relinquish his modesty by imposing his authority, eventually yielded to the pressure of more ambitious followers and renounced the leadership of his order. He spent the last years of his brief life mostly in solitude, attended only by a few faithful friends. In 1224, during an ecstatic vision on a mountain in which he saw in the sky a seraph nailed to the Cross, he received the stigmata. Weakened from these wounds as well as from his ascetic practices, he felt that he did not have long to live. He composed his song of gratitude to God's nature, *The Canticle of Brother Sun*, in 1225 and died in 1226. From the very moment of his death, he was venerated as a saint by all classes of society, from the simple people to poets and artists and even the Vatican, whose completion of the canonization process within a mere twenty-one months speaks of the unusual unanimity of all involved.

During the more than seven hundred and fifty years since his death, the body of legends and legendary biographies of the "Little Brother" of Assisi has grown to unheard-of proportions; there is hardly another man of the twelfth century about whose life we have so much detailed knowledge. The first *Vita* was written already in 1228, at the request of Pope Gregory IX in the context of the canonization, by Francis's disciple Thomas of Celano. Sixteen years later, protectors of the growing Franciscan community appealed to the saint's early companions, most of whom were then still alive, to send in their recollections and anecdotes. From

these, Celano's more stylized *Vita secunda* was fashioned, which already exhibited strong signs of the religio-political tendentiousness that was to characterize so many later accounts.<sup>60</sup> Just as the Gospels, written some time after Jesus' death at Golgotha, blend biography and legend with first attempts at doctrinal exhortations, the early "Lives" of Francis of Assisi were designed to serve many goals beyond recollecting the story of an inspired human being. As Arthur Livingston sums it up with regard to Bonaventura's 1260-61 *Legenda Maior Sancti Francisci*, "Eventually Saint Bonaventura was to write the 'official' biography, and to make it more 'official' still by burning, so far as he could lay hands on them, all conflicting accounts of the saint's life. [...] the party 'of good sense' was having many harsh things to say of those extremists who courted public ridicule for the benefit of their souls by preaching naked in the church pulpits [...] and doing other things disquieting to a theology which liked miracles in principle but was inhospitable toward them in the fact."<sup>61</sup>

The distortion of the beloved saint's story hurt many who had known him. As a result, less official chronicles were initiated in which many of his allegedly outrageous and extreme traits were lovingly recorded. More often than any other saintly man, the humble friar from Assisi was compared with Jesus.<sup>62</sup> His emphasis on absolute poverty and on the breaking with one's family for the service of God, and finally the stigmata received are only the most salient of many parallels. Around 1250-1260, a monk called Ugolino of Montegiorgio began compiling anecdotes he and others felt were being unjustifiably suppressed in the official biographies.<sup>63</sup> This

<sup>60</sup>For observations about the *Lives* in relation to strife and factioning within the order, see Michael Robson OFMConv, *St. Francis of Assisi* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1997). As Robson tells it, the saint's early companions emphasized in their recollections his love of poverty, simplicity, idea of discipline, and rejection of book learning. Celano's second *Vita* and Bonaventura's *Legend*, however, sought to establish Francis's place within the contemporary Church. The result was a "portrait [that] is frequently stiff and circumspect" (Robson, p. viii). For a thorough text-critical account of the compilations and distortions of the literature about Saint Francis, see John R.H. Moorman, B.D., *The Sources for the Life of S. Francis of Assisi* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1940).

<sup>61</sup>Arthur Livingston, *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis of Assisi* (New York: The Heritage Press, 1965), p. xiv.

<sup>62</sup>Much to the anger of Luther and other Protestants, who raged against such "blasphemy."

<sup>63</sup>According to Livingston, a copy of Ugolino de Montegiorgio's original *Floretum*, now considered lost, was last seen in 1623 and consulted by the great editor of Saint Francis's own writings and historian of the Franciscan Order, Luke Wadding. For a more detailed account of the initial compilation and its later metamorphoses see Livingston in *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis of Assisi*, p. xiv-xv.

compilation was distributed and copied clandestinely for the first 130 years of its existence, in the process undergoing enlargements and reworkings from uncounted hands. The result is known today under the collective name of *Fioretti di San Francisco* (where *fiori* or flowers means, simply, memorabilia), of which the earliest known manuscripts date from the 1390s. These *Little Flowers of Saint Francis*, which compare to the “official” biographies as devotional literature compares to the Gospels, comprise fifty-three chapters on the saint’s life and miracles followed by five “considerations” on the stigmata. Livingston reminds his readers that this is folk art, albeit a masterpiece of the genre, that its “shrewd simplicity” is often intentionally humorous, and that, while details may be rather far from historical accuracy, the tone gives “the ‘naturalism’ of the early Franciscans [...] the most complete and beautiful expression.”<sup>64</sup> Edmund Gardner calls the *Fioretti* “the most beautiful and convincing piece of Franciscan literature that we possess.”<sup>65</sup>

A significant contribution to the process of commemorating the “little brother” (rather than the stylized founder of a soon-to-be-powerful new religious order) was made in the visual arts, where the topic was enthusiastically taken up immediately after the saint’s death.

## Giotto’s Depictions of Saint Francis

Giotto first collaborated in depictions based on the story of Saint Francis when, during the last five years of the thirteenth century, he had a chance to contribute to murals on the walls of the Basilica di San Francesco in Assisi. This two-storeyed church, erected above the subterranean crypt containing the saint’s tomb, offered in its superimposed single naves four long and high walls for frescoes. Giotto was asked to execute the frescoes in the lower tier of the Upper Basilica, a cycle to be entitled *Storie di San Francesco*. In these depictions, Giotto represents Francis as he had come to know the saint from the account written in 1260-61 by Saint Bonaventura. In accordance with this text, Giotto approaches the saint not as a subject of a hagiography where legendary embellishments and anecdotal scenes predominate, but as a man of flesh and blood, albeit

<sup>64</sup>Livingston, *The Little Flowers...*, p. xix.

<sup>65</sup>Edmund G. Gardner, “The Little Flowers of S. Francis,” Walter W. Seton, ed., *St. Francis of Assisi: 1226-1926: Essays in Commemoration* (London: University of London Press, 1926), p. 125.

one of stylized flawlessness.<sup>66</sup> (Giotto later returned to Assisi to design the decoration, under the title *Allegorie francescane*, in the Lower Basilica and the Cappella della Maddalena. In these cases, however, he left the execution of details to his students.<sup>67</sup>)

Twenty-five years later, Giotto had the opportunity to return to a cycles of frescoes on the saint from Assisi when he was asked to decorate four of the family chapels in the great church of Santa Croce in his native Florence. Only two of the chapels survive with their frescoes to this day, both belonging to bankers' families, the Peruzzi and Bardi.<sup>68</sup> In both chapels, the frescoes have been badly damaged over the centuries. What remained was "repaired" in the nineteenth century (i.e., painted over, with bold completions that frustrate art historians to this day), but has been conscientiously restored in 1958-59, offering today's visitors an incomplete but nevertheless striking vision in fresh colors. While the Peruzzi Chapel houses frescoes devoted to the stories of Saint John the Baptist and Saint John the Evangelist, the Bardi Chapel is dedicated to a new version of the *Storie di San Francesco*.

In both the earlier Assisi cycle and the frescoes for the Bardi Chapel, Giotto created not only a new mode of representation, but in fact his own visual interpretation of the saint and his life. Roberto Salvini observes that

his treatment of the legend is different not so much because it is more naturalistic in imagery and surroundings, but rather because of the spirit of simplification and order which governs it. In each narrative moment Giotto isolates the dominant note of dramatic emotion, and by focusing upon human events, appears to seek in a religious ethos the motives of man's actions.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>66</sup>As Zuffi writes about one of Giotto's portrayals of Saint Francis, *Encounter at the Golden Gate*, made for Padua's Cappella degli Scrovegni a few years after the first Assisi cycle, "Here Giotto takes the occasion to bring back onto the stage of art sentiments and gestures that had disappeared for almost a millennium: the smile, the kiss, the emotion." Translated after Steffano Zuffi, *Giotto*, p. 38.

<sup>67</sup>Another early depiction by Giotto of Saint Francis of Assisi is the famous painting on gilded wood, *Saint Frances Receives the Stigmata*, now in the Louvre.

<sup>68</sup>"Bankers of the king of England and of the pope, the Bardi were, in the words of Giovanni Villani, 'the greatest merchants of Italy' until the failure of their company in January 1346." Rona Goffen, *Spirituality in Conflict: Saint Francis and Giotto's Bardi Chapel* (University Park: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1988), p. 51.

<sup>69</sup>Roberto Salvini, *All the Paintings of Giotto*, transl. Paul Colacicchi (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1963), vol. I, p. 14.

The Bardi Chapel is located immediately to the right of the chancel in Florence's Franciscan church of the Holy Cross. Its art work includes the following components:

- The *Stigmatization* appears above the entrance to the chapel, visible not only for visitors admitted to the private chapel but for the larger congregation, "taken out of chronological order to be given primacy of place and of scale in this very public location."<sup>70</sup>



**PLATE 40:** Giotto, *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata*,  
Bardi Chapel, Santa Croce, Florence

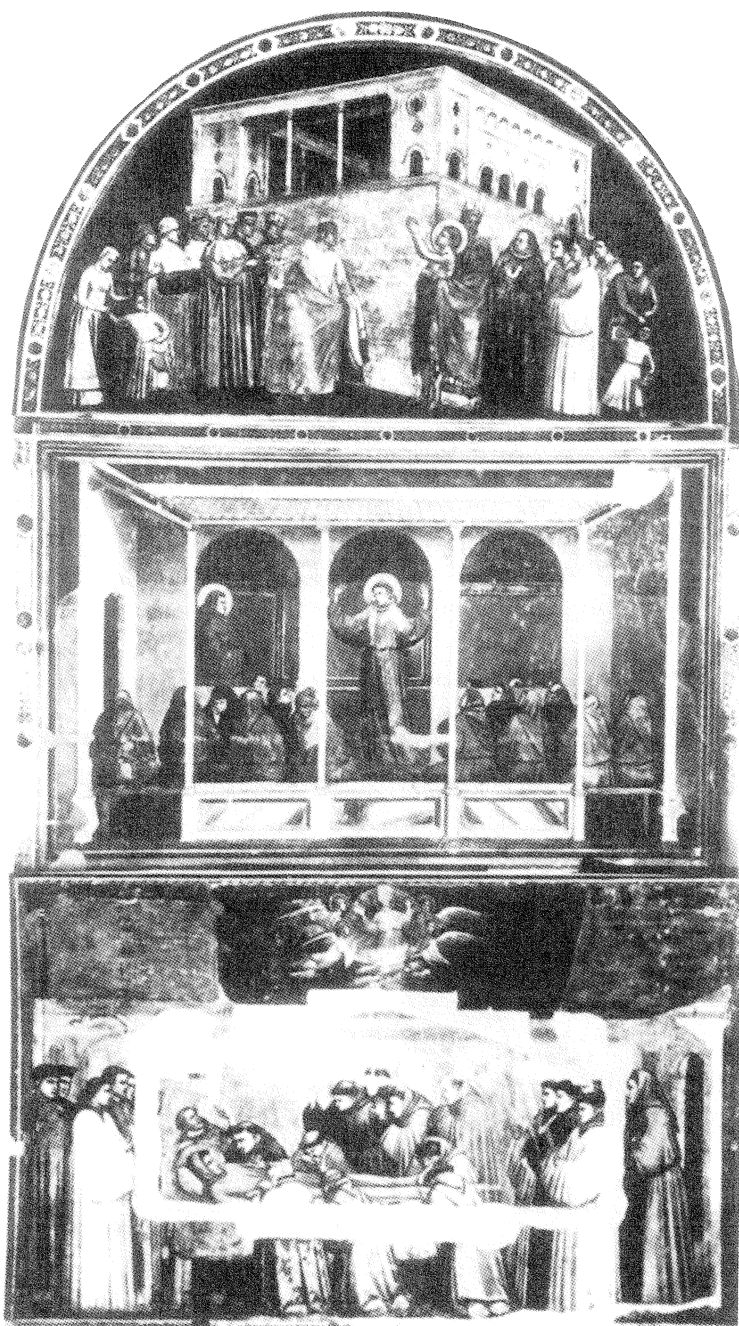
<sup>70</sup>Rona Goffen, *Spirituality in Conflict*, p. 60.

- Facing the entrance inside the chapel we find today, serving as an altarpiece, a compound panel known as the “Bardi Dossal.” Painted by an anonymous master at the time when many who had known Saint Francis were still alive, but added to the Bardi Chapel only much later, the twenty-one scenes arranged around a central standing Saint Francis portray the “little brother” as a compassionate human being, with some emphasis on his miraculous powers.
- The chapel’s two side walls are decorated each with three frescoed depictions. A chronological reading proceeds not vertically on either side but along a large double curve:
  - (1) *The Renunciation of the Possessions* (lunette, left wall)
  - (2) *The Approval of the Rule* (lunette, right wall)
  - (3) *The Proof of Fire* (mid-level panel, right wall)
  - (4) *The Apparition at the Chapter of Arles* (mid-level, left wall)
  - (5) *Death of Saint Francis or The Proof of the Stigmata* (lower panel, left wall)
  - (6) *The Apparition to Brother Augustine and the Apparition to the Bishop* (lower panel, right wall)
- The high windows behind the altar are flanked by depictions of other saints. One, depicting Saint Clare, is probably by Giotto; the others are so badly damaged as to be considered lost.

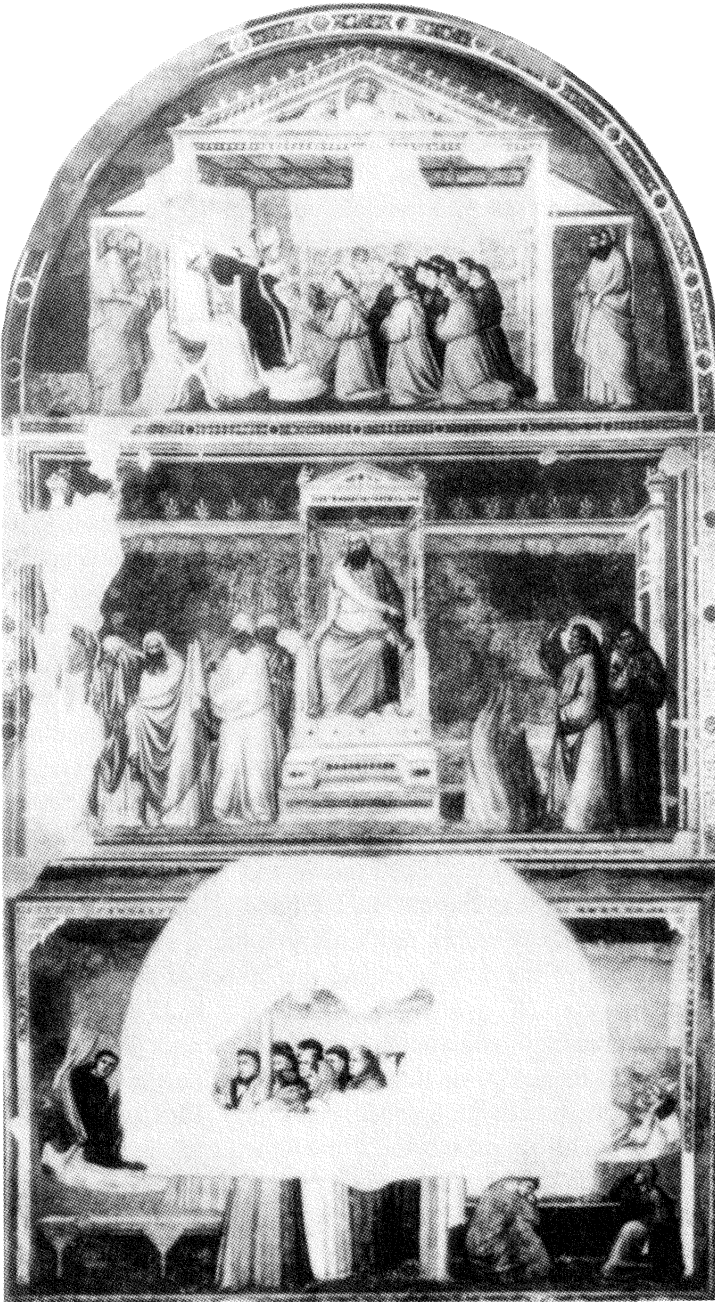
Hindemith and Massine’s *Nobilissima Visione* was inspired by the seven better-preserved frescoes. The large *Stigmatization* shows Saint Francis, alone in barren mountains near a little chapel, in the scene captured in one of Bonaventura’s chapter headings: “How, as he prayed on the slope of Mount Vernia, the blessed Francis saw the Savior in the form of a crucified Seraph, and was impressed miraculously on his hands, feet and on his right side with the Stigmata of the Cross, as suffered by our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>71</sup> In the fresco, Francis seems to have been

<sup>71</sup>As mentioned before, the scenes Giotto chose for the seven frescoes in the Bardi Chapel at Santa Croce are not new; all of them also formed part of the much larger fresco cycle in Assisi. In this earlier work, each fresco was accompanied by an inscription in Latin, taken from the chapter headings of Bonaventura’s text. These extensive captions, which in the course of the centuries had faded almost completely, have since been reconstructed by Bonaventura Marinangeli. The English versions quoted here are taken from Paul Colicchi’s translation in Roberto Salvini, *All the Paintings of Giotto*, vol. I, pp. 49-52.

The most vivid narrative of the stigmatization appears in *I Fioretti*, in the third of the “Considerations.” See *Saint Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies. English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1973) [henceforth quoted as *Omnibus*], pp. 1449-1450. For Bonaventura see pp. 730-731.



**PLATE 41:** Giotto, *The Renunciation of Possessions*, *The Apparition at Arles*, *The Proof of the Stigmata*, left wall, Bardi Chapel, Santa Croce, Florence.



**PLATE 42:** Giotto, *The Approval of the Rule, The Proof of Fire, The Apparitions*, right wall, Bardi Chapel, Santa Croce, Florence.

praying when he felt a presence behind him. Still on one knee, he has turned around, looking up with raised hands. There in the sky hovers a being half Christ, half angel: many-winged, his lower body wrapped in a billowing white loincloth and his head surrounded by a golden halo, the male figure is nailed to the Cross. Golden rays link each of the wounds to the corresponding points on Francis's body, indicating the stigmata that, as friars were to discover in awe after his death, the saint received as a result of this encounter.

*The Renunciation of the Possessions* depicts the confrontation of the spiritual and the material life. "How he returned all his goods to his father and, having removed his clothes, renounced his paternal and temporal goods, telling his father: 'From now on I may confidently say: Our Father who art in Heaven, for Pietro of Bernardone has repudiated me'." Two groups of people cluster in front of the bishop's palace. On the left, Francis's father is backed by the well-dressed citizens representing his social class. He holds over his arm the garments that his son returned to him to mark his rejection of worldly comfort. Visibly furious, he is held back by his peers and refrained from attacking his son physically. On the right, an almost naked Francis is seen protectively wrapped in the bishop's embrace and part of his gown. The bishop is accompanied by a group of clerics.<sup>72</sup> Flanking both groups, Giotto has painted corresponding scenes, each involving a child being chastised by an adult. Goffen interprets these episodes as compensations of what was thwarted in the center of the depiction: the physical punishment of a disobedient child by its elder.<sup>73</sup>

In *The Approval of the Rule*, Francis and his followers kneel before the enthroned pope, who has raised his hand in blessing over the scroll held between him and Francis. With his free hand, Francis points at himself as the author of the document and the leader of the new community. "How Pope Innocent III approved the Franciscan Rule and gave that order a mandate to preach penance, commanding the friars who were with the Saint to fashion Rosaries, so that they may preach the Word of God."<sup>74</sup> *The Proof of Fire* recalls an episode from the Fifth Crusade, proclaimed by Pope Innocent III, in which the Franciscans took part. "How his faith in Christ made him offer to go through the ordeal of fire together with the false priests of the Sultan of Babylon, but none would follow him through

<sup>72</sup>On this story see Bonaventura, *Legenda Maior*, II:4, in *Omnibus*, pp. 642-643.

<sup>73</sup>See Rona Goffen, *Spirituality in Conflict*, p. 65.

<sup>74</sup>See Bonaventura, *Legenda Maior*, III:9, in *Omnibus*, pp. 651-652.

the flames and the priests were all put to shame and fled.” The scene shows the Sultan seated prominently on a large throne in the center of the depiction, pointing to Francis, who is standing at one side, separated from him by a flaring fire. The sultan’s eyes are turned to his other side where his followers, invited to meet Francis’s challenge, turn away and leave one after the other.<sup>75</sup> *The Apparition at the Chapter of Arles* depicts “How, whilst Blessed Antony was preaching to the Chapter at Arles about the Title of the Cross, suddenly the Blessed Francis, who was bodily absent, appeared with arms outstretched and in the act of benediction. This was seen by Frate Monaldo, and all the others drew great comfort from it.” Francis, who could not personally be present at the chapter meetings of all the different provinces, had assured friars that he would always be with them in spirit. The fresco shows the Franciscan saint Antony of Padua standing at the left, preaching to the friars, who are seated on benches along the front and the back of a room. The figure of Saint Francis seems to be floating in the arched doorway that opens in the center of the back wall of the chapter hall.<sup>76</sup>

The two lower-tier frescoes portray scenes after the saint’s death. On the left wall, the dead body on its bier is surrounded by five kneeling men who are seen kissing the wounds in Francis’s hands, feet, and side. “After the Saint’s death news of the Stigmata went round, and many friars and laymen converged upon Assisi to make sure of ‘that which had caused them great surprise’.” In addition to three groups of people clustered at the head, the feet, and along the side of the bier, two men stand out. One is gazing, completely absorbed, into Francis’s face; the other, next to him, is motioning towards a celestial vision. This vision, high above the scene around the dead saint, shows Francis, his arms raised to reveal the stigmata in his hands, carried towards heaven by angels. This fresco can be said to have two agendas, one biographic and realistic, the other hagiographic and mystical. Correspondingly, it is known by two names, *The Death of Saint Francis* and *The Proof of the Stigmata*.<sup>77</sup> Complementarily, the lower-tier fresco on the opposite wall combines two scenes expressing one thought, *The Apparition to Brother Augustine* and *The Apparition to Bishop Guido of Assisi*. As Bonaventura told it, “The friar, who had fallen

<sup>75</sup>For the most detailed story on Francis’s attempt to convert the Sultan to the Christian faith, see Fioretti 24, in *Omnibus*, pp. 1353-1356.

<sup>76</sup>See Bonaventura, *Legenda Maior* IV:10, in *Omnibus*, p. 660.

<sup>77</sup>Rather than to Bonaventura, this depiction may go back to Thomas of Celano’s account. See Celano, *First Life of Saint Francis* 113, in *Omnibus*, pp. 326-327.

ill in the land of his labors and had long since lost his speech, suddenly cried: ‘Wait for me, Father, for I am coming with you’, whereupon he died and followed his holy father. Furthermore, as the Bishop was journeying on the Mount of San Michele Arcangelo, he saw the Blessed Francis who was saying: ‘At this moment I am going to my Maker.’ And at that moment the Saint was found dead.” At the panel’s left, the dying Franciscan friar prepares to join Saint Francis; at the right, the bishop of Assisi is blessed with a vision of Saint Francis ascending to heaven.<sup>78</sup>

### Hindemith and Massine’s Design for the Ballet on Saint Francis

In May of 1937, Hindemith and his wife as well as Massine and his Russian Ballet were in Florence for the famous festival, the Maggio Fiorentino. The two men became friends and spent much time together, including many sight-seeing trips.<sup>79</sup> Massine’s description of the first impulse for the new ballet has since become famous.

He [Hindemith] had just come from the great church of Santa Croce, which contains the frescoes by Giotto depicting the life of St Francis of Assisi. He had been deeply impressed by them, and taking me by the arm hurried me back to the church to see them. I too was struck by their spiritual beauty and could well understand why they had so profoundly moved Hindemith.<sup>80</sup>

It was Hindemith who suggested that together they create a ballet based on these frescoes. Massine admits that he had initial doubts, and so did many whom he asked. But as the poet François Mauriac confirmed who, despite his misgivings regarding the suitability of the subject matter for a ballet, had agreed to give his impressions on the production, Massine’s artistry and deep religiosity overcame the obstacles.

I must admit that when Léonide Massine spoke to me for the first time of the project for St. Francis, the idea seemed to me worse than bold—

<sup>78</sup>These two visions are described by Bonaventura as two instances of a single event; see *Legenda Maior* XIV:6, in *Omniibus*, pp. 740-741.

<sup>79</sup>See the chronological account of the genesis of this work, based on a detailed study of Hindemith’s letters, in Andres Briner, “Hindemith’s Ballettprojekte zwischen 1936 und 1940: Die Entstehung von *Nobilissima Visione* und spätere Ballettszenen,” *Hindemith-Jahrbuch* 1986/XV (Mainz: Schott), pp. 52-69. V. García-Márquez reports this joint trip for 1936 (*Massine: A Biography*, p. 262).

<sup>80</sup>Massine, *My Life in Ballet* (London: Macmillan, 1968), p. 207.

it was even sacrilegious. This is because I had not realized that the dance, as this great artist has conceived of it, can express what is most beautiful and sacred in the world: the love of God taking possession of the soul of a young man.<sup>81</sup>

As soon as Massine had developed original ideas for the choreography, the two men met again (for five or six days in September 1937) to finalize the libretto.<sup>82</sup> Hindemith then proceeded to compose both the complete ballet score and a three-movement orchestral suite using part of the ballet material. The suite was premiered on 13 September 1938 in Venice and is, somewhat unfortunately considering how much of the full work's essential musical material it leaves out, much better known today than the richer ballet music. Massine also involved Hindemith in the final choreographic rehearsals, which took place in May 1938 in Monte Carlo.

The ballet is rooted in a non-virtuosic modern idiom. The steps were stylized, trying to emulate the gestures in Giotto's depictions. Massine describes what came to be subtitled "choreographic legend" as "not a ballet at all. It was a dramatic and choreographic interpretation of the life of St. Francis in which Hindemith, Tchelichev [who designed the scene and costumes] and I tried to create and sustain throughout a mood of mystic exaltation."<sup>83</sup>

The story is told in five scenes. Details are strongly influenced by what was then the most influential book on the saint, Paul Sabatier's *Vie de Saint François*, a hagiography the French Franciscan scholar compiled in 1894 on the basis of Celano's two *Lives*, Bonaventura's *Legenda Maior*, The *Little Flowers of Saint Francis of Assisi*, and the then newly reconstructed *Legend of the Three Companions*. Massine mentions this study in his autobiography, and Hindemith almost certainly also read it.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>81</sup>François Mauriac, foreword, Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo souvenir Program, n.d.

<sup>82</sup>In August 1937, several letters go back and forth between the two artists. The question is first between two plans of which one would concentrate on the miracles while the other would focus on the life and character of the saint; Hindemith prefers the second (see Briner, pp. 59-60). Massine also changes the title, for which he had first chosen *Fioretti*, to *Nobilissima Visione*; for a later tour of the ballet through the United States, he will change it again to *Saint Francis*. On 21 September, Hindemith sends his publishers at Schott the written version of the libretto, which is in German (thus written by him and not by Massine) and clearly bears the marks of the composer's way of expressing himself.

<sup>83</sup>Massine, *My Life in Ballet*, p. 209.

<sup>84</sup>Paul Sabatier, *Life of Saint Francis of Assisi*, trans. L.S. Houghton (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917). Writing around the time Massine and Hindemith were working on the subject, the scholar of Franciscan sources, John Moorman, observes: "Sabatier's work

*Scene 1.*<sup>85</sup> The shop of the elder Bernardone. Young Francis and his three companions aid his father in displaying rich fabrics for the squires and their ladies who come to buy. A poor man in rags creeps in, begging alms. Young Francis angrily kicks him toward the door; suddenly repenting, he runs after the beggar and thrusts a purse into his hand.<sup>86</sup> A knight swaggers in and Francis is lured to try his hand with the sword. Bested in a mock duel, he shrugs away his chagrin, dons helmet, chain mail and sword, and goes off to war.<sup>87</sup>

*Scene 2.* A roadside where the soldiers are encamped, Francis among them. A family of travelers with all their goods, falls into the hands of the soldiers, who torture the man, carry off his wife and her women, and loot his possessions. Francis, horrified, tries to intervene but is brutally pushed aside. Alone and despairing, he sees a vision. Poverty, Obedience and Chastity appear before him, three figures moving through a measured dance symbolizing a life of gentle, quiet piety. He remains in ecstatic thought as the vision vanishes.<sup>88</sup>

*Scene 3.* Francis' father's house. A feast is in progress, the guests reveling, the table laden with golden vessels of food and wine. Francis enters, melancholy, and his friends press around him, urge him to recount his adventures at war. Haltingly, he tries to tell them of his horror and despair. They seize him and dance, pressing a wreath on his forehead. Impatient, he tears the wreath off and flings it away. A band of beggars creeps hesitantly into the banquet hall, seeking crumbs. Francis runs to them with outstretched arms, embraces them, loads them with his father's food, goblets, even tablecloths. His

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was immediately successful. Within a few years it had run into more than thirty editions and had been translated into English, German, Italian, Dutch, Swedish, Polish, and Russian" (John R.H. Moorman, B.D., *The Sources for the Life of S. Francis of Assisi* [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1940], p. 2), and "Sabatier worked for eight years on his *Vie de Saint François* which [...] quickly took the intellectual world by storm. Immediately the printing presses of Europe began to hum with Franciscan literature of all kinds and of widely different value" (Moorman, p. 9).

<sup>85</sup>The synopsis describes the ballet as it was danced in the premier performance in London; the text is taken from Gerald Goode, *The Book of Ballets: Classic and Modern* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1939), pp. 201-203.

<sup>86</sup>For the most likely source of this story see Bonaventura, *Legenda Maior* I:1, in *Omnibus*, p. 635.

<sup>87</sup>This probably goes back to Celano, *First Life of Saint Francis* I:4, in *Omnibus*, pp. 232.

<sup>88</sup>For the story that inspired the vision of the three women identified as Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience, see Bonaventura, *Legenda Maior* VII:6, in *Omnibus*, pp. 683-684. The ecstasy Francis felt when alone after a vision is described in *Legenda Maior* X:4, see in *Omnibus*, pp. 707-708



**PLATE 43:** Léonide Massine as Saint Francis and Nini Theilade as Poverty in the ballet *Nobilissima Visione*.

father, entering upon this scene, rises to a towering rage at this squandering of his treasure. But Francis humbly divests himself of the fine raiment, and lays it at his father's feet. Clad only in a single white garment, the grateful beggars sheltering him with their rags, he leaves his father's house forever.<sup>89</sup>

*Scene 4.* A bleak clearing in the wilderness. Francis, wandering alone, begs for a sign from Heaven. Suddenly a flood of joyous music pours into his spirit, he seizes two twigs and plays them like bow and violin, dancing his spiritual ecstasy.<sup>90</sup> He continues his wandering ... peasants appear, in terror of a ferocious wolf. The beast carries off one after another. Returning for a third victim, he is confronted by Francis, wandering now with his three companions who have forsaken the world for him. While the peasants and his companions watch in fright, he approaches the animal, calms his ferocity, and leads him to the peasants who take him with them as a tame friend.<sup>91</sup> Francis and his companions lie down to sleep on the bare ground. The Lady Poverty appears to them, the gracious and gentle figure of his earlier vision, and Francis pledges a mystical union with her by a symbolic exchange of rings. She climaxes his joy by fastening around his waist the cord of monkhood. Joyously they celebrate their heavenly marriage with a frugal feast of bread and water.<sup>92</sup>

*Scene 5.* Now from all directions come the men and women of the Franciscan order, robed and hooded, moving through a joyous pattern, their hands fluttering to symbolize the flight of the birds of St. Francis.<sup>93</sup> They turn, and above them Lady Poverty leads St. Francis and his three companions to a height, bathed in the light of transfiguration as the curtain falls.

<sup>89</sup>This is a very free adaptation of the "Renunciation of All Possessions" in front of the bishop's palace. Cf. Bonaventura, *Legenda Maior* II:4, in *Omnibus*, pp. 642-643.

<sup>90</sup>The most poetic description of this "dance with a violin" is found in Celano's *Second Life of Saint Francis* 127, *Omnibus*, p. 467.

<sup>91</sup>The story of the taming of the wolf of Gubbio is beautifully told in *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis* 21, see *Omnibus*, pp. 1348-1351.

<sup>92</sup>The allegorical story of the "Wedding with Lady Poverty" goes back to a separate text, *Sacrum commercium* or *The Holy Converse of the Blessed Francis with Lady Poverty*, allegedly written in 1227, one year after the saint's death, possible also by Celano. See *Omnibus*, pp. 1531-1596. For a briefer hint using the same language, see also Celano, *Second Life of Saint Francis* II:55, in *Omnibus*, pp. 1543, and elsewhere. The old metaphor of the "holy marriage" certainly plays an important role in Francis's own writings.

<sup>93</sup>The vision of the many Franciscan friars congregating joyously goes back to Celano, *First Life of Saint Francis* 27, in *Omnibus*, pp. 250-251. "The birds of Saint Francis" refers, of course, to those to whom he famously preached, as told in Bonaventura, *Legenda Maior* XII:3, *Omnibus*, pp. 722-723.

As the references given in the footnotes show, the legend as told in Massine's choreography draws on several different sources, combining them in novel ways. The story-line goes back to Celano and Bonaventura, portraying a man who, while superficial in his youth, is from the very beginning moved by remorse (over his own rude kicking of the beggar) and moral outrage (over the cruelty of his fellow soldiers). The somewhat naive details with which the segments of the tale are embellished—the literalness of the wedding to Lady Poverty, the taming of the fierce wolf—are inspired by the imagery of the *Fioretti*. Also influenced by this work is the liberty taken with regard to the “historical” facts; the renunciation of all possessions happens here not in front of the Episcopal palace (as told in all sources) but in the father's house, and Francis's nakedness is covered not by the bishop's cloak but “sheltered” by the beggar's rags. (The soldiers' assault on the travelers and the golden vessels and table linen pressed as gifts upon the beggars seem entirely an invention of Massine, or Massine and Hindemith.)

Finally, however, while all literal details may go back to verbal texts, the style of the visual presentation, the postures adopted, and the expression of human attitudes and feelings, are all powerfully fashioned after the art of Giotto, as critic after critic has remarked with admiration.

The impression this danced legend left on audiences is perhaps best summed up in the words of John Martin who, writing in the *New York Times*, called the creation “one of the most memorable and beautiful dance works of our day.” As he specified,

Unorthodox in subject matter, elevated in tone, and revolutionary in its choreographic procedure, it is one of those creations which [...] grew out of boldness of conception without regard for precedent or consequences. Massine has caught not alone the particular development of Francis “so little and simple and rude of speech,” but has evoked a masterly picture of the Middle Ages in which he moved. [...] The movement, though it does not deny its ballet premises, is touched in an extravagant style definitely influenced by medieval illuminations and those painters we have come to call “primitive” and richly evocative. If it is designedly naive, it is never merely quaint or whimsical, but eminently dignified and honest. For all its distortions and inhibitions, it has great pace and flow, and proves itself in every way fitted to convey feeling in eloquent terms. Like St. Francis himself, it is both ascetic and joyful, sparing and full of color.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>94</sup>*New York Times*, 23 October 1938.

## Hindemith's Music for the Ballet *Nobilissima Visione*

The music Hindemith wrote for the ballet production consists of eleven movements, of which several are further subdivided into sections of different tempi and meters. Four full movements and a section from a fifth have found their way into the three-movement orchestral suite.

### The Ballet

I	Introduction and Song of the Troubadour	3/4, ♩ = 132
II	Fabric Shoppers and Beggar	3/4, ♩ = 132
III	The Knight	5/4, ♩ = 132
IV	March	2/2, ♩ = ca. 100
	Lively	3/8, ♩. = ♩
	As before	2/2, ♩ = ca. 100
V	Apparition of the Three Women	3/4, ♩ = ca. 56
	Pastorale, Coda	6/8, ♩. = up to 60
VI	Festive Music	3/4, ♩ = up to 132
VII	End of the Festivity	3/4, ♩ = 132-144
	Lively	2/4, ♩ = 100
	In the tempo of the earlier Pastorale	6/8, ♩. = up to 60
	As before	2/4, ♩ = 100
VIII	Meditation	4/4, ♩ = up to 46
	Very slow	4/4, ♩ = ca. 46
IX	Violin Play. The Wolf	4/4, ♩ = 76-80
	Lively, somewhat clumsy	6/8, ♩. = ca. 96
	Calmly flowing	6/8, ♩. = ca. 88
X	Scanty Wedding	3/2, ♩ = ca. 96
XI	<i>Incipunt laudes creaturarum</i> (The Praises of All Creatures Begin)	3/4, ♩ = up to 80

### The Suite

II	March
	Lively
	As before
	Slow
	Pastorale
Ia	Introduction
Ib	Rondo
III	Passacaglia

The musical sections relate to the events described in the libretto and choreographed in the ballet roughly as follows:

### The Music

### The Story

I	Introduction + Song of the Troubadour	overture (mm. 1-100), Saint Francis
II	Fabric Shoppers and Beggar	<i>Sc. 1</i> , events in Bernardone's shop
III	The Knight	<i>Sc. 1</i> , Francis meets the Knight
IV	March	<i>Sc. 2</i> , Soldiers in roadside camp
	Lively	<i>Sc. 2</i> , Travelers passing by
	As before	<i>Sc. 2</i> , Soldiers attacking travelers
V	Apparition of the Three Women	<i>Sc. 2</i> , Vision of Poverty, Obedience, and Chastity
	Pastorale, Coda	<i>Sc. 2</i> , Francis alone, in ecstasy

VI Festive Music	Sc. 3, Party in Bernardone's house
VII End of the Festivity	Sc. 3, Francis melancholy
Lively	Sc. 3, Friends urge him to be merry
In the tempo of the earlier Pastorale	Sc. 3, Francis recalls horrors of war
As before	Sc. 3, Friends seize him and dance, he feeds beggars, then returns his garments to his father
VIII Meditation	Sc. 4, Francis begs for a divine sign
Very slow	Sc. 4, Joyous music, rapture
IX Violin Play. The Wolf	Sc. 4, Peasants
Lively, somewhat clumsy	Sc. 4, The wolf
Calmly flowing	Sc. 4, Francis + friends go to sleep
X Scanty Wedding	Sc. 4, Wedding to Lady Poverty
XI <i>Incipiunt laudes creaturarum</i>	Sc. 5, Franciscan friars and sisters gather, dance; Francis's birds fly away; Ascension of Francis

## The Musical Forms and Their Messages

The fact that Hindemith decided to number his musical pieces (I-XI) may seem somewhat confusing in two respects. On the one hand, as was shown above, they relate irregularly to the five scenes of the choreographic representation; on the other hand, several of them run into each other,<sup>95</sup> while contrasts within a single movement sometimes make one wonder why the composer chose to combine disparate material under one number.<sup>96</sup> In fact, many other options regarding the numbering of the segments would have been just as convincing. So why eleven musical movements?

<sup>95</sup>No. I runs into no. II and no. II into no. III without so much as a barline, no. IV into no. V through a linking melodic gesture, and no. VII into no. VIII through the absence of any pause and a direct translation of the metric unit.

<sup>96</sup>The connection between the main portion of no. V ("Apparition of the Three Women") and its "Pastorale. Coda" is no closer than that between the newly numbered movements mentioned above. The opening section of no. VII seems like a self-contained movement; the ternary form that follows, which uses as its contrasting middle section the previously attached "Pastorale," has no motivic, metric, or otherwise inner connection to the section from "Ein wenig breiter" (which in the ballet, too, corresponds with a new event on stage: the beggars' intrusion into Bernardone's banquet). No. VIII seems to consist of two separate segments; that the composer perceived them as such is born out by his decision to use the second, without the first, for his orchestral suite.

Hindemith has prominently used the number eleven as an organizational principle in another composition dealing, albeit somewhat more indirectly, with a saint. In his opera, *Mathis der Maler*, the famous “Temptation” scene is laid out in eleven (unnumbered) segments, and in the symphony that is partially derived from the operatic material, the “Temptation” movement, although consisting to almost half of newly composed music, also falls into exactly eleven sections. In the case of the “Temptation of Saint Antony,” the numerical choice may, as I have shown in some detail, been influenced by Grünewald’s eleven tempting monsters in the panel of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* that inspired the music.<sup>97</sup> The opera, composed in 1934-35, must still have been very fresh in Hindemith’s mind when he wrote the music for Saint Francis in early 1938, and it is conceivable that he might have wanted to create an inner connection between the Egyptian anchorite who, valiantly if terribly weakened, overcame all temptations to be more involved with the world and a monastic community, and the Umbrian mystic who, having decided in favor of just such involvement, was subsequently forced to abdicate from the leadership of his order and died weak and alone, spiritually victorious but disappointed with the lack of humility in some of his brothers. The correspondence in the number of structural elements is all the more unusual as it is not musically necessary in the ballet music. If my conjecture is correct and the design in eleven sections is purposeful, Hindemith alludes in his composition to something Massine’s choreography and Giotto’s frescoes omit: the “temptations” to which Francis was subjected by his fellow friars in their attempts to relax his strict rules of poverty and possessionlessness.

In terms of their internal layout, many of Hindemith’s movements or sections thereof are straightforward and do not warrant any symbolic reading. Ternary forms and rondos predominate; moreover, the distinction between these two forms as used in the ballet is rather small.

- No. I, “Introduction and Song of the Troubadour,” is an A B A form with the song as A, in which the “contrast” is followed, at the rise of the curtain, by a brief insertion with new material.
- In the rondo of no. II, “Fabric Shoppers and Beggar,” the first episode in Bernardone’s shop blends with the main material while only the second, larger episode, that of the beggar whom Francis

<sup>97</sup>For a detailed account see Siglind Bruhn, *The Temptation of Paul Hindemith: Mathis der Maler as a Spiritual Testimony* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon, 1998), pp. 336-340.

drives out and then recompenses, stands out as a contrast. (The other “episode” that, according to the libretto, occurs in the shop, Francis’s encounter with the knight, is musically separated as movement III.)

- In the “March” of no. IV, the distinction is somewhat more marked. Within the framing section, the main (refrain) material undergoes a dynamic development representing the sound of soldiers gradually drawing nearer; they are initially heard only distantly, in *pp*, but their music swells up to *ff*. The brief, integrated first episode with its tuneful half-notes seems to tell us that Francis is among them. The much more expansive second episode, “Lebhaft” in changed meter and with distinctly different material,<sup>98</sup> depicts the brutal assault on the travelers in a surprising musical structure to which I will return.
- Movement VI, “Festive Music,” is another ternary form. Its framing section quotes extensively from the ballet’s opening movement,<sup>99</sup> and the middle section is distinguished only as another aspect of the same setting; the contrast “Leicht beschwingt” (exhilarated), verbally suggested at the outset, is not canceled at the return of the “festive” material.
- In IX, “Violin Play. The Wolf,” the first section with its three-part woodwind unison melody over virtuosic arpeggios in the high strings apparently started out as a ternary form; the fourth component, expanding the structure to A B A<sub>var</sub> B<sub>var</sub>, is added as an appendix to the score. The simple C D C in the contrasting “Lebhaft, etwas plump” (lively, somewhat clumsy) is followed by an additional joint recap, combining the various elements of the villagers of Gubbio (as A B B) with interruptions by the melodic components of the wolf’s C and D.
- No. 10, the mystic union of Saint Francis and Lady Poverty in their “Scanty Wedding,” is a rondo by virtue of its title more than in actuality. Much more interesting than its rather irregular horizontal structure is the vertical interplay of timbres—multi-voiced unison here, four-part stretto imitation there—that, as Hindemith himself commented, “reflects the blessed peace and unworldly cheer with which the guests at the wedding participate in the wedding feast—dry bread and water.”

The three movements or sections that stand out by way of their structural organization are

<sup>98</sup>For episode 1 see RN 25-27 [+4]; for episode 2 see RN 29 [+6] - 37 [+10].

<sup>99</sup>No. VI, mm. 11-21 and 22-35 are taken from No. I, mm. 52-62 and 83-96 respectively, cf. RNs 45 and 46.

- the middle section of no. IV, in which the beautiful polyphonic texture initiated by the fugued entries of the (“fugitive”?) travelers is brutally interrupted by the homophony of the soldier’s fanfares and aggressive rhythms;
- no. VII, “End of the Festivities,” in which incomplete fragments of Francis’s music, presumably signifying his intense distress, surround first a ternary form (“Lebhaft,” “Pastorale,” “As before”), and then reminiscences of the music epitomizing the festivity (superficiality), the beggars (met previously in his father’s shop), as well as an exuberant new melodic line that accompanies Francis’s renunciation of his garments, inheritance, status in the world, and all possessions;
- the final passacaglia, in whose twenty-one variations the six-bar theme is explored, expressing simultaneously the multitude of Franciscan disciples and the eternal yet ever-varied wonder of creation.

### The Musical Representation of Characters and Conflicts

Hindemith has conceived several motifs that recur throughout the composition. In addition, intervallic relationships between different motifs are employed to create subtle hints at psychological undercurrents.

The most prominent, a *trouvère* song used in the manner of a *leit-motif*, is the tune that characterizes Francis himself. The composer may have taken his clue for a musical representation of the protagonist from Francis’s own words, according to the *Mirror of Perfection*: “For what else are the servants of God than his singers, whose duty it is to lift up the hearts of men and move them to spiritual joy.”<sup>100</sup> The source text which points more explicitly to troubadour and *trouvère* songs and at the same time links Francis’s “singing in French” to two scenes Massine includes in his choreography (his ecstatic make-believe violin playing and his being carried off to heaven) is found in an account that fills an entire chapter of Celano’s *Vita Secunda*:

Sometimes Francis would act in the following way. When the sweetest melody of spirit would bubble up in him, he would give exterior expression to it in French, and the breath of the divine whisper which his ear perceived in secret would burst forth in French in a song of joy. At times, as we saw with our own eyes, he would pick up a stick from the ground and putting it over his left arm, would draw across

<sup>100</sup>Quoted as the epigram opening the chapter entitled “God’s Singer” in Johannes Jørgensen, *Saint Francis of Assisi* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1955), p. 127.

it, as across a violin, a little bow bent by means of a string; and going through the motions of playing, he would sing in French about his Lord. This whole ecstasy of joy would often end in tears and his song of gladness would be dissolved in compassion for the passion of Christ. Then this saint would bring forth continual sighs, and amid deep groanings, he would be raised up to heaven, forgetful of the lower things he held in his hand.<sup>101</sup>

In his introduction to the saint, Walter Nigg mentions that Francis “loved to sing his provençal songs,” adding later, “Poetry was for him a heavenly message which he welcomed in song. He called himself one of God’s minstrels.”<sup>102</sup> The Provençal songs a twelfth-century man from Assisi would have known are, most likely, the songs of the troubadours and trouvères. These were songs of idealized love developed originally in Southern France, possibly in some connection with the Cathars, a group striving for religious renewal through mystical communion with God and for purification along lines in many respects similar to those the Little Brother advocated. The corresponding songs from Northern France, the poets of which were known as trouvères, were somewhat more formal. A youth from a good family of Assisi at Francis’s time would have known both of these traditions, which had taken root all through Northern Italy.

Medievalists have often pointed at the link between the poetic expression of “fine amour,” refined love, by the troubadours/trouvères and the language of Marian devotion and mystical theology.<sup>103</sup> It is therefore not hard to imagine that after his conversion Francis would continue to sing in the style of the troubadours, albeit now to a different addressee.

Hindemith selected the trouvère song “Ce fu en Mai” (“Ce fut en mai” in modern French; “It was in May”). The first stanza translates as:

<sup>101</sup>Celano, *Second Life of Saint Francis* 127, in *Omnibus*, p. 467.

<sup>102</sup>Walter Nigg, *Francis of Assisi*, pp. 27 and 31. The attribute “troubadour” was very closely attached to Francis; see, among many other literary accounts, Sophie Jewett’s *God’s Troubadour: The Story of Saint Francis of Assisi* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1957), in which the second chapter, “The Young Troubadour,” deals extensively with Francis’s enthusiasm for songs of courtly love and chivalry, and the final chapter, “The Troubadour’s Last Song,” interprets *The Canticle of Brother Sun* as belonging to the genre. How wide-spread the image of Saint Francis as a troubadour was can also be gleaned from titles like that of Henri Queffélec’s biography, *François d’Assise: Le Jongleur de Dieu* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1982) [“jongleur” was the word used for itinerant performers of trouvère songs] and Auguste Bailly’s narrative about the early Franciscans, *The Divine Minstrels* (London: Medici Society, 1909).

<sup>103</sup>Bernard of Clairvaux’s eighty sermons on the Song of Songs are witnesses to exactly the same kind of blending of spiritual and erotic imagery in thirteenth-century mysticism.

It was in May, in soft bright weather; how the season is beautiful.  
 I rose early and went to play by a fountain.  
 In an orchard, a field of wild rose bushes, I heard a *vièle*.  
 There I saw dancing a gallant knight and a young woman.

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system contains the vocal melody with lyrics in French and English. The second system contains the instrumental accompaniment for oboe, violin I, and flute/clarinet I.

**Vocal Melody:**

Ce fu en Mai, Au douz tens gai, Que la se - sons est be - - - le, Main fon - - te - ne - - le. En  
 me le - vai, Jo - er m'a - lai Lez u - - ne  
 un ver - gier Clos d'es - glen - tier, O - i u - - ne vi - ë - - le. La u - - ne de - moi - se - - le.  
 vi - dan - cer Un che - - va - lier Et

**Instrumental Parts:**

- Oboe:** *mp*, *coll'oct.*, *8va*
- Violin I:** *8va*
- Flute/Clarinet I:** *8va*, *f*, *>*, *>*

**EXAMPLE 72:** The troubère song “Ce fu en Mai” and Hindemith’s adaptation as a leitmotif for Saint Francis in *Nobilissima Visione*

The remaining four stanzas of the poem, which is attributed to Moniot d’Arras,<sup>104</sup> go on talking about the sweet caresses the dancers exchange, their retreat to the flowers for a play of love, the narrator’s caution to follow them without being seen, and his sadness over the fact that he has no part in such joy. Eventually someone calls him and asks him to tell his sorrows, upon which he explains that he loyally loves a lady for whom he

<sup>104</sup>This poet was allegedly a monk at the abbey of Saint-Vaast who later left the Order for unknown reasons. His creative period is estimated to cover the years 1230-1250. For more details on this song see Jean Beck, *La musique des troubadours* (Paris: H. Laurens, 1928), p. 108, and Friedrich Gennrich, *Grundriss einer Formenlehre des mittelalterlichen Liedes als Grundlage einer musikalischen Formenlehre des Liedes* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1970), p. 208. For a helpful overview see Friedrich Gennrich, *Troubadours, Trouvères, Minne- and Meistersinger* (Cologne: Arno Volk, 1960).

suffers pain and torment. The gentle couples comfort him and wish that God may bring him the joy of her whom he loves. In the tradition of mystics throughout the ages, the troubadour's love for an inaccessible lady is recast metaphorically as the pious man's ardent devotion for the Virgin and, through her, for Christ. In musically representing Saint Francis—who was adamant that carnal love was dangerous—with a love song of this kind, Hindemith draws on a well-established tradition.<sup>105</sup>

The first movement serves as an overture in kind; the curtain opens after 100 of its 152 measures. In addition to the trouvère song, which frames the movement,<sup>106</sup> the audience is led through a number of musical ideas which, either identical with or related to motifs significant later in the piece, introduce the main characters in a manner of a musical play bill.

- Motif 1 with its combination of seconds and fourths in ametrical phrasing anticipates the use of the same components in the main motif of the “Scanty Wedding,” thus presenting Lady Poverty as the second leading character (see ex.. 73)

No. 1 Einleitung, mm. 32-36



No. 10 Kärgeleiche Hochzeit, mm. 1-3



**EXAMPLE 73:** Hindemith, *Nobilissima Visione*, motif 1 in the “overture” as a forerunner of the material of No. 10, “Scanty Wedding”

- Motif 2 introduces the frivolity of dance, song, and drink. The motif recurs with a very similar figure in the seventh movement, where the superficial friends of Francis's youth urge the protagonist to forget his melancholy musings and his horror-filled memories of the war and instead dance and be merry. This simple-minded way of

<sup>105</sup>The fact that worldly troubadours may have intended a much more literal understanding of their explicit eroticism is no contradiction and does not, in my view, invalidate this specific adaptation of the genre by mystics.

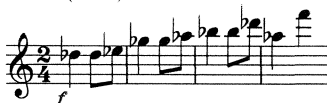
<sup>106</sup>See mm. 1-45 (up to RN 3) and mm. 115-152 (RN 6 [-7] to RN 9 [+2]).

dealing with the dark side of life is aptly expressed in the somewhat simplistic rhythmic pattern and melodic line (see ex. 74).

No. 1 Einleitung, mm. 40-41  
Leicht bewegte Viertel (♩ bis 132)



No. 7 Schluss des Festes, mm. 36-39  
Lebhaft (♩ = 100)



**EXAMPLE 74:** *Nobilissima Visione*, motif 2 in the “overture” as a forerunner of the dance material in the “Lebhaft” section of No. 7

- Motif 3 can be read either as the musical signature of Francis’s father or as the symbol for the mundane, socially ambitious life he represents. The fact that the material, which is given much space here in the overture, does not play a role in the ballet’s initial scene in the wealthy cloth merchant’s shop, but features prominently in the “Festive Music” of movement VI, suggests that Hindemith was thinking less of Bernardone as a person than of the frivolous aspect of Francis’s own life up to his conversion.

No. 1 Einleitung, mm. 52-55 (-100) and, transposed,  
No. 6 Festmusik, mm. 1-38

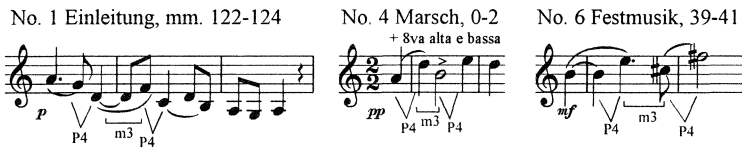


**EXAMPLE 75:** *Nobilissima Visione*, motif 3 in the “overture” and in the “Festive Music,” symbolizing a life of luxury and pleasure

This reading is supported by the textural surroundings in which the motifs appear. Motifs 1 and 2, introducing different counterparts of Francis (Lady Poverty as the counterpart of his new, the frivolous friends as counterparts of his old self), are sounded in a unison of the strings against the first phrase of the trouvère song. They are thus first heard as counterpoints to Francis’s signature tune, now confident in the trumpet and homophonically cushioned by other brass instruments in *f*. Motif 3, by contrast, is presented not *against* or *together with* but *instead of* the protagonist’s leitmotif. This would seem to invite listeners to hear it as symbolic of another aspect of Francis himself.

The saint's father does, however, also figure in this introduction of the players. The brief gesture that accompanies the actual raising of the curtain prepares for the primary motif heard in Bernardone's shop.<sup>107</sup>

- When, in the final third of the first movement, the *trouvère* song recurs, the last note of each phrase is drawn out, in the manner of the *fermata*-prolonged endings of hymn phrases. Each time, the expanded note is accompanied by a unison gesture in the strings. The intervallic succession, which contains sequential fourths linked by a minor third, and the metric pattern, which is marked by a salient syncopation, recur in two prominent motifs.



**EXAMPLE 76:** *Nobilissima Visione*, motif 4  
and its recurrences in contexts of internal conflict

An interpretation of the symbolism of this contour is possible when one looks at the shared background in the two later instances. The March of the forth movement accompanies that part of the story in which Francis is seen among soldiers. They are on their way to the roadside camp where Francis will eventually watch in horror the brutality with which his comrades torture a party of travelers. The music we are interested in here, however, shows the scene just before this incident happens, capturing the moment (to overstate just a little) between Francis's naive enthusiasm for the knight's shiny armor and his disillusionment with the base nature of the ostensibly noble warriors.

<sup>107</sup>Salmen believes that this gesture is derived from, or a variant of, the *trouvère* song. (See Walter Salmen, "'Alte Töne' und Volksmusik in Kompositionen Paul Hindemiths," 1969 *Yearbook of the International Folk Music Council*, ed. Alexander L. Ringer, pp. 89-122: 94-95.) I imagine that he reaches this conclusion because of the contour in the legato quarter-notes, which matches that of the third measure in the *trouvère* song. However, the much more prominent opening fanfare, more often than not heard without the legato complement, clearly points elsewhere. In fact, at the end of movement "Fabric shoppers and beggar," the fanfare is directly transmuted into Bernardone's motif (see II, around RN 18).

In the “Festive Music,” the motif with the sequential fourths opens the second section, marked “*Leicht beschwingt*” (exhilarated). Once again, the music accompanies a scene that is in itself value-free. The genteel guests whom the rich Bernardone is hosting this evening are seen milling around in a carefree manner, oblivious to any problems outside their well-protected doors. Neither the young Francis with his stories about the atrocities committed under the cover of war, nor the beggars with their reminder of the destitute part of humankind have yet entered and cast their shadow. What the music captures is the thought- and carelessness of socialites, to whom Francis belongs by birth.

It is thus only the benefit of hindsight that sheds light on the signification of the fourth motif in the initial movement. Just as the related motifs in the two scenes showing Francis in groups from which he will feel particularly alienated after his commitment to the service of God, the string unison responding to each line of Francis’s *trouvère* song may be heard as situating him emotionally and spiritually. And just as the exposure to the brutality of his fellow soldiers leads to his initial encounter with Lady Poverty and the experience at his father’s party to his renunciation of all possessions, so also does the closure of Hindemith’s first movement with motif 4 lay out the ground for the conversion experience as the center of the story: the recognition of evil born from insensitivity to one’s brothers, and the pledge for a life “wedded to poverty.”

## **The Development of Saint Francis’s Motifs**

As the discussion of the motifs introduced in the opening movement has shown, the protagonist is presented in the context of what will prove his main concerns. His signature tune is juxtaposed with—and for a while displaced by—emblems both of other players in this drama and of aspects of life and society significant for his internal development.

In the first category belong Lady Poverty, the companions of his frivolous youth, and his father. While the motifs of the “Scanty Wedding” (motif 1) and what one could call the “dance of social obliviousness” (motif 2) unfold, Francis’s tune remains present, just as in the course of his spiritual life he welcomed Lady Poverty as a spouse and some of his formerly rich and thoughtless friends as brothers into his new order. The

musical gesture prefiguring Bernardone, however, is heard not against but instead of the *trouvère* song, as though there was no way the two modes of interpreting life could coexist.

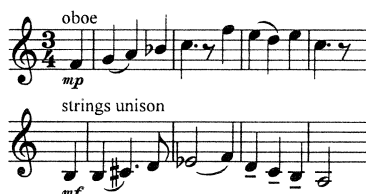
The second category comprises the musical emblems of the life of luxury and pleasure (motif 3) and of the peer-group situation out of which thoughtless cruelty will arise (motif 4). Motif 3—just like Bernardone's individual gesture, which arises from it in the "overture"—does not accompany Francis's theme song but supplants it. (The fact that this musical symbol, which represents an attitude towards life that is incompatible with Francis's, takes up very much room is also telling. Significantly, movement VI of the ballet, which is dominated by this "festive" motif, is rendered as a tableau without any progress in the protagonist's story.) By contrast, motif 4 is introduced as a fourfold afterthought suspending the final notes of the phrases in Francis's song—just as the peer-group situations to which this music points, with soldiers at camp and citizens at a party, prompt Francis to rethink and redirect his life.

The many additional motifs Hindemith introduces in the course of his *Nobilissima Visione* cannot all be discussed in detail here.<sup>108</sup> Instead I would like to focus on the transformations that two of the initial motifs, the *trouvère* song and the sequential-fourths motif, undergo.

Francis's signature tune is developed, in the course of the ballet, in three very different ways, all of them perceived as violations of one kind or another. These involve a distorted contour (while the rhythm remains intact), a drastically modified rhythm (which does not effect the pitches), and an interrupted and intermittently erased phrase sequence.

<sup>108</sup>Suffice it to point to a few conspicuous features. There are some that are almost visually depictive, such as the triangle-and-brass signal that opens the scene with the fabric shoppers (in no. 2) and the triangle-and-tenor drum figure that accompanies the soldiers' march (no. 4). Other memorable motifs include the Baroquish figurations in three rhythmically similar violin phrases on which "The Apparition of the Three Women" (no. 5) is based, the oboe melody—metrically a *Romanze*—of Francis's lonesome pondering after the vision (coda of no. 5), the hauntingly beautiful bassoon theme that shows Francis in deep meditation after his break with his father (first section of no. 8), the trombone motif embodying the fierce wolf, whose anarchic hemiola repeatedly threatens to overturn the order of life around him (in the "Lebhaft" section of no. 9), and the flute cantilena representing Lady Poverty in the wedding scene (no. 10). Notable among the thematic material presented by the full orchestra is the "flood of joyous music" in a style reminiscent of French overtures, which Francis the lonely beggar hears, according to Massine and Hindemith's libretto, in the second section of movement 8, and which the composer used for the opening of his orchestral suite.

- The two scenes in which Francis confronts beggars feature an identical motif. It is derived from the opening measures of the trouvère song, which they reproduce in a tangibly diminished version: the five-note ascent begins with a halting note repetition, uses the minor mode, reaches not the perfect fifth but only the diminished fourth, and is complemented by a descent launched not from the octave but restrained to the initial tonal range.



**EXAMPLE 77:** *Nobilissima Visione*, Francis's reaction to beggars, reflected in his trouvère song (see no. 2, from RN 7 [-7] and no. 7, from RN 60)

Only the last musical reference to the beggars (no. 7, RN 63 [-4]) reestablishes the interval between the partial phrases. In the ballet this is the moment when Massine's Saint Francis, having divested himself of his rich garments, is sheltered among the beggars' rags—becoming one of them and no longer just reacting to them.

- When, also in the ballet's first scene, Francis meets the Knight and becomes infatuated with the idea of joining him into battle, his reaction is expressed in a drastic distortion of his musical identity: the simplicity of the tune in its modestly regular three-four time is turned into a self-aggrandizing, proud five-four with syncopations and great irregularity of bearing.



**EXAMPLE 78:** *Nobilissima Visione*, Francis's decision to follow the Knight, as reflected in his trouvère song (see all of no. 3)

- At the height of the festive evening in his father's house, Francis becomes the focus of attention. As his friends urge him to recount his adventures at war, his signature tune expresses speechless horror, breaking off in the middle of phrases only to resume much later, as if the speaker felt inwardly destroyed.



**EXAMPLE 79:** *Nobilissima Visione*, Francis, speechless in view of the horror of war and torture (see no. 7, “Leicht bewegt”)

The second musical symbol that undergoes a spiritually significant development also presents itself with three dimensions, albeit of a very different kind. As was shown earlier, Hindemith employs motif 4, the sequential fourths linked by a minor third and accented by a prominent syncopation, as an emblem of the potential cruelty in peer-group situations (see “overture,” “March,” and “Festive Music”). When the melodic contour recurs one last time in the final movement of the composition, all its characteristic features are present, possibly even more pronounced than before. Whereas in the earlier instances of the motif, syncopations stood out as irregularities, they now appear as regular features of a sara-bande rhythm in the first two bars and in heightened intensity in the two following measures.

No. 11 *Incipiunt laudes creaturarum*, mm. 1-6



**EXAMPLE 80:** *Nobilissima Visione*, “The Praises of All Creatures Begin”

What is being depicted here by way of musical symbolism? Given the shared features, especially with regard to the interval structure, the composer evidently refers again to a group of like-minded peers. Rhythmically, i.e. in terms of internal order, the unusual has become prevalent here: syncopations, normally brief deviations from patterns reigned by

regular strong-beat accents, are everywhere, expressing a unique (sara-bande-style) grace. What is the group thus portrayed?

The libretto speaks of the numerous men and women of the Franciscan Order, robed and hooded, joining in a joyous dance. Moreover, Gerald Goode in his synopsis of the ballet describes that the hands of the dancers fluttered in the air “to symbolize the flight of the birds of St. Francis.”<sup>109</sup> Finally, Hindemith’s Latin title for this movement, “*Incipiunt laudes creaturarum*,” draws on Saint Francis’s own *Canticle of Brother Sun*, also known as the *Canticle of Creatures*. Three groups, then, are present in this final hymn of praise. The first group, literally present on stage, comprises the “little brothers and sisters” who, as disciples of Francis of Assisi, live wedded to Lady Poverty and have taken the vow of practicing humility and lovingly caring for the poor and sick. The second group, alluded to in the hand gestures of the ballet dancers and powerfully present in Hindemith’s music (especially in the many bars of exuberant high-register trills towards the end of the movement), consists of Francis’s dear little friends and brothers of his heart, the birds. The third group, referred to indirectly in the composer’s title and in the hymnal character of the variation movement, adds the elements at large, the “brothers and sisters” whom Francis praises in his famous canticle: Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Wind, Sister Water, Brother Fire, etc.<sup>110</sup>

### Summary: Pictorial Cycles Mediated Into Music

Many artists have been inspired by the topics represented in Giotto’s frescoes and Holbein’s woodcuts, by the saintly simplicity of the “little brother” and the theatrical sublimation of a satirically triumphing death. In both cases, there is much beyond the exquisite artistry of the two masters that fascinates the beholder. The ostensibly dissimilar themes address, in very different guises and from different angles as it were, the question of how to deal with the apparent meaninglessness of life—be it the shallowness of a life spent in superficial striving for wealth, power, and status, or the lack of meaning in a life about which nothing, least of all the duration, is certain. The response, it seems, is a willingness to reconsider priorities. This leads, in both cases, to a return to humility.

<sup>109</sup>See p. 448 and footnote 93.

<sup>110</sup>For the text, refer back to pp. 68/69 of this study.

In the two works examined here, the transmedialization did not develop directly from the pictorial to the sonic; on the contrary, there were active, contemporary mediators as well as passive ones from added source texts.<sup>111</sup> In the oratorio, Holbein's visual representations together with biblical excerpts resulted in Claudel's text and, ultimately, Honegger's music; in the ballet, Giotto's visual depictions together with excerpts from the early biographies of Saint Francis led to Massine and Hindemith's libretto and, from there, to Hindemith's music and Massine's choreography.

When Massine blended scenes from Celano's and Bonaventura's early biographies along with quaintly described details from the well-known devotional sources (both attractively presented by Sabatier) and combined them with inserts of his own invention, he remained within conventional boundaries; it is not the story that is exceptional here. What makes his choreography so stunning are the details that are inspired not by any (verbal or visual) narrative but by the mode of presentation in the pictorial source: many in the audience of the ballet believed to see "a Giottoesque" depiction.

The music complements this impression in a remarkable way. While the structural design of individual musical sections and many aspects of the thematic material as they represent characters or situations are well-crafted but largely unsurprising enunciations within the Hindemithian language, the composer's use of the troubadour-song leitmotif and its psychologically induced modifications as well as his development of the "social-group" motif up to its climactic expression in the final passacaglia hymn work on a very different level and strike a deep chord.

As a case of musical ekphrasis of the Giotto frescoes that inspired it, Hindemith's *Nobilissima Visione* is an astoundingly pure example of the "supplementing" category. The music speaks most enchantingly where it

<sup>111</sup>To mention just a few twentieth-century composers who were inspired directly by the legend around Saint Francis or pictorial representations of it and have devoted works to the subject: Gabriel Pierné, *Fioretti de Saint François d'Assise*, oratorio on texts from the *Little Flowers* (1912), Gian Francesco Malipiero, *San Francesco d'Assisi*, opera (mystery) after texts by St. Francis (1920-21), Charles Martin Loeffler, *Canticum Fratris solis* for voice and chamber orchestra to the hymn by St. Francis of Assisi (1925), Francis Poulenc, *Quatre petites prières de Saint François d'Assise* for male choir a cappella (1948), Arthur Honegger, *St. François d'Assise*, radio score for a text by W. Aguet (1949), Olivier Messiaen, *Saint François d'Assise*, opera (1975-83), Karlheinz Stockhausen, *Luzifers Abschied* (Lucifer's Farewell), for men's chorus, 7 trombones, and organ, Italian words from *Lodi delle virtù* by St. Francis of Assisi (1982).

complements the visual depiction with that which painters, by necessity, have to leave out, but which in this case particularly forms such an important part of the person being portrayed: the songs through which Francis expresses his deep inner joy, the heavenly music he hears and to which he dances with his improvised violin, and the *Canticle of Brother Sun* that he leaves as his poetic testament. On all this, the music dwells; in it, the sonic medium excels. In addition, the subtle numerical symbolism subtly present in the layout, through Hindemith's device of determining the number of "movements" as eleven—somewhat arbitrarily in view of the actual structure of the musical material—adds to Giotto's pious pictures the dimension of temptations overcome.

The case is in many respects reversed in *La danse des morts*. Saying that Claudel "used biblical verses" for this oratorio is by no means all there is to the poet's perspective of death and God's power over it in the text for the oratorio. His extraordinary technique of collage manages to leave the listener with an ambiguity that matches that expressed in the "narrative" of the visual *Totentanz*.

In Claudel and Honegger's oratorio, *La danse des morts*, the puppet-like procession of the reassembled skeletons and the "Dance of the Dead" with its humorous cacophony and its multiple overlay of voices with very different agendas, are no doubt the most entertaining segments. Beyond that, as I have shown, the components in Honegger's music that embody crucial symbolic aspects fall into two groups: those expressed by instrumental timbres, and those epitomized in human voices. The subtexts communicated in the specific use of trombone, organ, and violin in this composition all point to God, and to human submission to or consolation through God. The multifarious nuances of vocal colors, by contrast, focus on the second, human protagonist in this interchange. God is thundering and terrible as well as loving and comforting; humans move between despair and self-loathing on the one hand and trust and profound joy on the other.

In this musical *Danse des morts*, then, the two notorious partners in the pictorial genre of the "dance of death," Death and his interchangeable victims, are transmuted by means of a gripping poetic and musical composition to a new, more hopeful partnership: that between God and His children.