

Dan Ramirez: Music of Spheres

by Buzz Spector, 2018

A couple of years ago Dan Ramirez and I attended a performance of Olivier Messiaen's "Des canyons aux étoiles" ("From the Canyon to the Stars") at the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. This was the St. Louis debut performance of Messiaen's 1971-74 orchestral work, commissioned as a celebration of the bicentennial of the United States Declaration of Independence, and accompanied by a program of projected still and moving images by the artist Deborah O'Grady. The unconventional and demanding instrumentation in "From the Canyons to the Stars" has made it an infrequently performed work, but its tonal complexities evolve from a simpler model of devotion. Messiaen's devout Catholicism finds its expression in sequences of chordal triads that envelop the "noise" of its many percussion parts.

My friend's interest in Messiaen precedes my own; already in 1981 Dan's *Twenty Contemplations on the Infant Jesus*, a group of 20 small etchings that took their title from Messiaen's 1944 piano suite, were the subject of a solo exhibit at the Art Institute of Chicago, and since then references to the French Modernist's music can be seen in many of Dan's paintings, drawings, and prints. Father Terrence Dempsey, SJ, was with us at the concert that night. As founding Director of the Museum of Contemporary Religious Art at St. Louis university, Terry had curated an exhibit of Dan's *Twenty Contemplations* . . . at MOCRA in 2004, and joined our after-concert discussion of what we had heard and seen. We three were initially critical of O'Grady's projections, deeming them a visual distraction from the music and, even more so, problematic in their inclusion of such unnatural elements as highways, buildings, and electric power transmission lines. We discussed how photographic stillness made the images, whether of human structures or canyon walls, remote from us even as the music carried us far in its triadic immediacy. Terry offered that Dan's most overt artistic references to Messiaen's music were also among the most spacious atmospheres in his own work. I share this anecdote as a starting point for my reflection on how, over the course of his career, Dan has responded to music in his studio production and how his own spiritual journey is evidenced in the way he understands the ties between musical composition and the crafting of works of visual art.

There are references to musical notation in a number of Dan's paintings over time, as well as in such current works as his *Aletheia and the Cosmos* series of twenty digital prints on aluminum substrate that include readable musical notation from Messiaen's 1943 suite for two pianos, "Visions de l'Amen" ("Visions of the Amen"). Many of the works from Dan's *TCl* series from the early 1980s—the initials stand for "Twenty Contemplations #1"—include staff lines. The graphic reference to musical notation in these multi-panel paintings is clearly visible, but with neither notes nor measure markings, there is no specific music to come to mind. One such from the series, *TCl: Variation #4 (Mi Hijo, Mi Hijo...)*, 1982, is a three panel acrylic on canvas work whose luminous portions, the result of the artist's application of many washes of silvery black pigment, are cut through with arrays of white staves. Against the atmospheric tonal gradation of the painted fields, these staves evoke a harmonics of silence. There is an apparent reference to John Cage's *4'33"* here, but the Cagean silence is scored in three movements, each titled "Tacet," and the sheet music contains no staves. Cage's title is the duration of the work and, while it can be performed with any instrumentation, the silence of all performances of *4'33"* will last just

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that long. The unnoted staves in the *TCI* paintings are for an unheard music rather than a duration in which all incidental sounds are proposed to be music.

From the beginning of his work as an artist Dan's interest in abstraction resonated with his personal spiritual quest. He would not describe himself as ever having been a deeply devout practitioner, but if the pieties of the church were a lesser matter to him, notions of the immanent and sublime at the core of religious faith resonated with his own feelings in his life and in his studio work. Dan was introduced to writings by Ludwig Wittgenstein in graduate school (1975-77) at the University of Chicago. In particular, the *Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus*, with its vast logical scope and undertones of the inexpressible, emerging fully only at the very end, would guide Dan's intellectual trajectory for a decade. The concluding Wittgenstein propositions in the *Tractatus* bring us to grasp the limits of language's capacity to delineate the eternal, culminating in the single proposition 7: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence." Dan saw in Wittgenstein's intellectual armature an opening where the ends of language give way to the limitlessness of the visual field, a flash of insight that returned to him when he read Claude Samuels's *Conversations with Olivier Messiaen* in 1977. Dan recalls reading of Messiaen's belief that God can only be comprehended in moments of illumination, rather than by analysis, as itself a "flash," a recognition of the composer as a kindred spirit.

In his work of the 1980s Dan explored several ways of incorporating perceptual illusion as visual manifestation of the insightful flash. One example of this is *Contemplation of the Virgin: var#3*, 1982, whose central component is a rectangle composed of four vertical acrylic on canvas panels; the two middle of which are flat white while the outer two are stained in gradations of black acrylic wash on exposed canvas. This array is flanked by a pair of monofilament lines, attached to the each of the outer panels at the top and angling outward to nearly invisible brads in the wall so as to make a virtual trapezoid. The monofilament is thick enough in diameter to cast shadows that viewers would initially read as edges of the form. The nylon lines' translucency furthers this illusion, which dissipates as viewers approach the work. In addition, the four vertical panels are flush at the top but the interior white ones jut out perhaps two inches at the bottom. The apparent trapezoidal unity of *Contemplation of the Virgin: var#3* gives way as viewers move toward the work or even merely across the room where it is installed; its changing appearance is simply the falling away of an illusion in the minds of its viewers. This shift in cognition constitutes a perceptual scintillation, evocative of Messiaen's description of the momentariness of divine comprehension, but also Wittgenstein's description, in the *Tractatus*, of the Necker Cube, the illusory isometric projection in which a cube reverses its spatial relationship to the paper it is printed on depending on which set of axes the viewer focuses on first. The falling away of illusion is at the core of both faith and philosophy, and this work's initial "oneness" remains in memory, similar to how a symphonic refrain reverberates in the moments following its final notes.

The most recent project incorporating music in Dan's work is the suite of twenty digital prints on aluminum whose full title is *Aletheia and the Cosmos: An Homage to Olivier Messiaen and his "Visions of the Amen."* This work has occupied the artist off and on for ten years, and its individual components all include portions of the score from the second movement of Messiaen's suite of seven pieces for two pianos. The title and opening bars of the second movement, "Amen des étoiles, de la planète à l'anneau" ("Amen of the Stars, of the Ringed Planet"), are clearly readable in the first print, and the concluding bars are visible in the last. Otherwise, for the most part, the places where words might be found are occupied by artistic affects constituting, so to speak, a music of spheres. In the overall grid of prints—stacked in four rows of five each—there is a repertoire of graphic embellishments, including

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whole or partial discs or ovoids, color bars and raking lines, catenary curves that suggest a peeling away of some prints from their substrate, and even manipulated astronomical photographs of celestial orbs. These effects move over, under, and through the pages of the score in all twenty prints, and their overarching purpose is to reinscribe the black background of the prints as outer space. Perhaps the entirety of Messiaen's movement is here, but the overall configuration of *Aletheia and the Cosmos* insists that a mental reshuffling of its score for a performance is not the point of the work.

Dan has never intended that any musical notation in this, or any other of his works, is meant to be performed. Titles, lyrics, notes; all are visual artifacts, adrift in atmospheres of color or endless black. The musical inclusions in *Aletheia and the Cosmos* are more comparable to how Picasso or Braque incorporated portions of sheet music in their Cubist pictures. Dan's imagery interferes with instrumental reading, but not with the recognition of a readable armature. The deliberate reordering of Messiaen's "pages" encourages us to pay more attention to the materiality of what's present; the glossy surface of the prints and also the sheen of the metal to which they are attached. The polished luster of this substrate is visually close to the lustrous elements of the prints, as if the imagery were drawing into itself something of its material support. Dan enlists substance and absence in service to his ideas about thinking and feeling. *Aletheia and the Cosmos* is a composition whose dialectical aspect necessitates that the gaze of reading become one of scanning, but that neither reading nor scanning can ultimately hold sway.

The definition of *aletheia* in philosophy is that of a disclosed truth, one that is manifest more than spoken. The cosmos manifested in these prints conveys the idea of musicality toward which Dan aspires in a different manner than how reading a musical score offers up its melody. We stand silent before *Aletheia and the Cosmos*, the fact of whose silence avails us to grasp its spiritual dimension. This homage to Messiaen reverberates between hearing and seeing. As William Carlos Williams puts it, in "Song," a brief lyric out of *Pictures from Breughel*:

undying accents
repeated till
the ear and the eye
lie down together
in the same bed.