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A Missa Brevis for Jumping Timelines

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Jean-François Charles has released *Missa brevis Abbaye de Thélème* under his New Flore Music label (2023). The work's incredible synthesis of chant, hymnody, hip-hop, ballad, gospel funk, art song, electronic dance music, and improvisatory electroacoustic space music pushes boundaries of both genre and theology in sacred music.

Each word in the title is instructive.

Missa: there are six Mass ordinary vocal movements. There are also three framing instrumental movements: an Introitus, Offertorium, and *Ite, missa est*.

Brevis: on the whole, the Mass texts are abbreviated, leaving space for interleaved French poems from the 15th to the 19th centuries.¹ These poems interpret the Mass texts, and conversely the Mass texts weave the poems into a rite, and a ritual space.

Abbaye: the album sonifies the gargantuan, utopian abbey described by the ex-Franciscan friar François Rabelais in the first book of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (ca. 1532), a kind of Grail-quest parody featuring two giants (Probst-Biraben 2020). The album art features stone tracery from the abbey interlaced with X-ray ribs arching down to a spine, playing off the ancient tradition of the temple as a giant cosmic man (Figure 1; see Lawlor 1982, 90–93).



Figure 1. Missa brevis Abbaye de Thélème album art

¹ In addition, the six-vocal-movement design is modeled on the *Missae breves* of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (Jean-François Charles, personal communication).

Rabelais's abbey has six stories (*étages*) joined by a colorful staircase running along its hexagonal perimeter (Rabelais 1952, 61–62). The album similarly has six stages (*étages*) or vocal movements.² As I will explain further, the vocal movements group thematically into three pairs, as a positive triangle versus the negative triangle of the three instrumental movements (Figure 2).

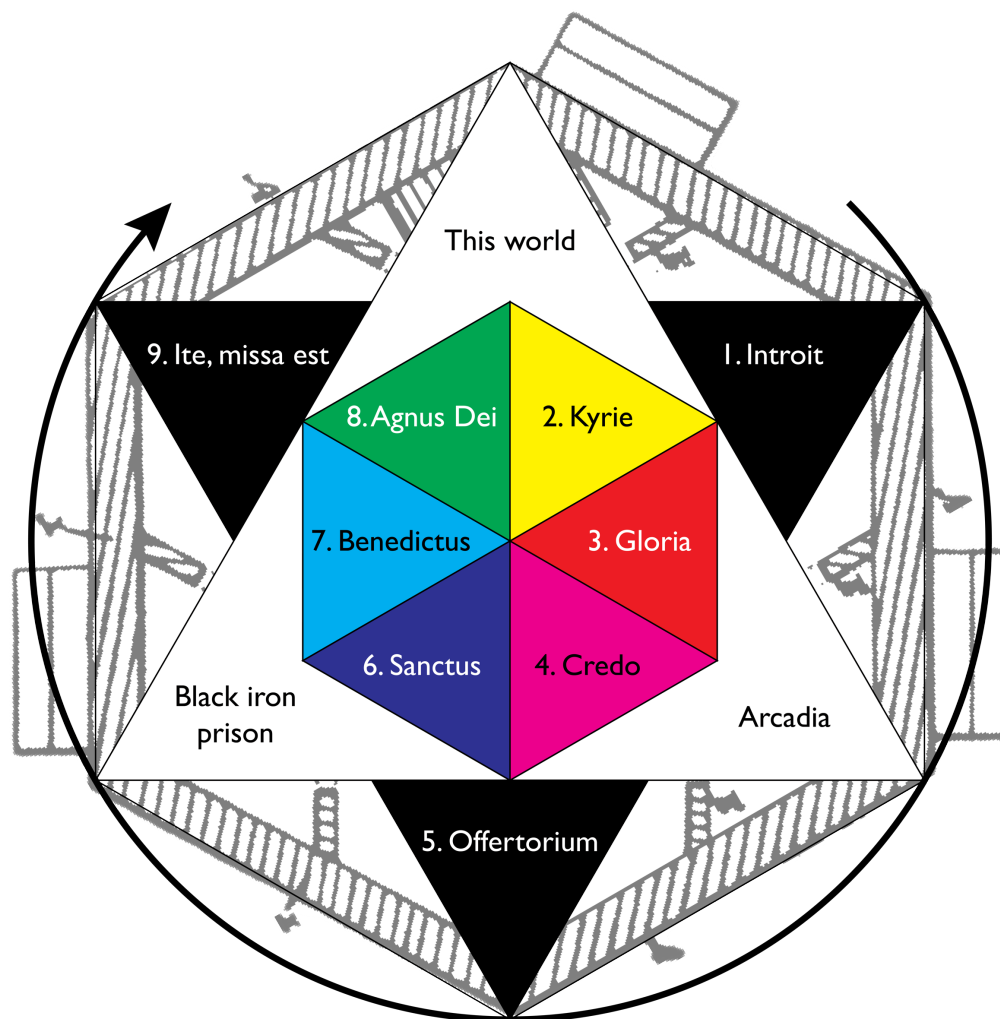


Figure 2. Charles's Missa brevis Abbaye de Thélème as Rabelais's Abbey

² Each side of the abbey is 312 paces long (Rabelais 1952, 61), roughly the number of seconds in each vocal movement.

de Thélème: *Thelema*, Greek for appetitive will, is commonly known as the spiritual movement fashioned by Alistair Crowley, the sole principle of which is “Do what thou wilt.”³ It is not widely known, however, that Crowley based his movement on Rabelais’s Thelema Abbey (Crowley n.d.),⁴ the sole principle of which is again, in the original French, “Fais ce que voudras.” These words, repeated with a hypnotic lilt, are the first on the album (Example 1). Broadly speaking, as I will show, the poems’ supplementation of the Mass texts in their musical context evokes the will aligning one with divine love. This *supplementation*, this continuance of the Word, seems to be alluded to at the close of the album booklet, which quotes from the inscription over the entrance of Thelema Abbey (my translation):

Let the holy Word
Never be interred
In this place revered.
Let all here be girt,
Let each one be stirred
With the holy Word.

Example 1. “Fais ce que voudras”⁵

I explicate this supplementation with reference to sympathetic elements in the exegesis of Philip K. Dick (see again Figure 2). Charles’ Mass triangulates us between (1) a heartfelt search for God in the midst of war and inner turmoil (highlighted in the Sanctus and Benedictus), (2) a conflict between unloving zealots and willful iconoclasts (spelled out in the Kyrie and Agnus Dei), and (3) a utopia of divine love (seen especially in the Gloria and Credo). Dick similarly shares actual memories of alternative timelines, triangulating us between (1) a so-called “black iron prison police state world” in which Christianity, due to its antiauthoritarian affirmation of the divine image in humans, is illegal, (2) this world, partially good and partially bad, in which we and Dick exist, and (3) an Arcadian paradise presided over by Aphrodite, the goddess of love, “something

³ The will in this context is considered one’s true will, encompassing rational and emotional aspects as well as appetitive.

⁴ In fact, Crowley ran his own little Abbey of Thelema in Italy between 1920–23.

⁵ For the musical examples, see the online version.

older and more beautiful than that which my own religion can conjure up as a lure to keep us in a state of dutiful morality and faith” (2020).⁶ Dick acknowledges that his report is incredible:

You are free to believe me or free to disbelieve, but please take my word on it that I am not joking; this is very serious, a matter of importance. I am sure that at the very least you will agree that for me even to claim this is in itself amazing. (Dick 2020)

Dick reports that we can move not only through time but laterally between times, the deadly serious game of life being to move away from the police state and towards Arcadia along with our “Advocate,” who has already won the game against “the dark counterplayer” (2020):

In winning each sequence in turn he claims some of us, we who participate in the sequence. This is why instinctively people pray, “Libera me Domine,” which decodes to mean, “Extricate me, Programmer, as you achieve one victory after another; include me in that triumph. Move me along the lateral axis so that I am not left out.” (Dick 2020)

As a heterodox Christian rite/site based on a Grail drama, Charles’s Mass/abbey is comparable to Richard Wagner’s *Parsifal* at Bayreuth, with the added advantage that it makes sense. In the wry words of Dick,

Parsifal is one of those corkscrew artifacts of culture in which you get the subjective sense that you’ve learned something from it, something valuable or even priceless; but on closer inspection you suddenly begin to scratch your head and say, “Wait a minute. This makes no sense.” I can see Richard Wagner standing at the gates of heaven. “You have to let me in,” he says. “I wrote *Parsifal*. It has to do with the Grail, Christ, suffering, pity and healing. Right?” And they answer, “Well, we read it and it makes no sense.” *SLAM*. (Dick 2011)

In listening to/visiting the Mass/abbey, to borrow a phrase from Gurnemanz in *Parsifal*, “time becomes space.”⁷ Through the Mass’s prayer, we can aim to jump timelines, as if they were arrayed in space, making Arcadia more real for us, at least for the duration of the album, if not permanently. I will share a bit about each movement.

⁶ In the abbey, there is a statue of the three Graces, attendants of Aphrodite (Rabelais 1952, 63).

⁷ In the abbey, there is “neither clock nor dial,” in order that time be not regulated there (Rabelais 1952, 60).

Introitus

In the Introitus, we hear layered and evolving bells, electronic rippling and scratching, and other sounds. Something like an evolving shofar and a crackling plasma entity evoke the titular entrance with a procession to an altar, yet cricket sounds situate us still outside (Example 2).

Example 2. Introitus

Kyrie

The Kyrie pairs the full Mass text, a prayer for mercy, with Rabelais's inscription over the entrance of the Abbey: a colorful litany of "enter nots" directed at the "twisted zealot," and a litany of "enters" directed at the "fearless iconoclast." There is also an English insert by Charles in this vein, presented by Jhe Russell. Whether the listener receives the mercy of welcome at the album's "sanctuary of *Joie de Vivre*" is bound to their following the law of the will, "Fais ce que voudras" (Example 3).

Example 3. Kyrie

The chorus features a serene women's choral setting of the Kyrie text, a development of the "fais ce que voudras" tune, over laidback drums. I once experimented by similarly adding a drum track to a Bach chorale, and that evening two of my professors made fun of the idea without knowing I had just tried it that afternoon. I said nothing, although I was not ashamed, but I had to wait another 20 years for my willful iconoclasm to be vindicated in Charles's Mass (Example 4).

Example 4. Kyrie

Gloria

The Gloria combines the opening line of the Mass text, "Gloria in excelsis Deo" (Glory to God in the highest), with a poem by Marceline Desbordes-Valmore that connects this glory or light to Mary. The song alternates between pastoral verses that mention this celestial woman and a faster rock chorus with the title, like "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" but with a deeply stirring ballad quality (Example 5). The holy woman also calls to mind Aphrodite in Arcadia. The text

mentions troubling elements, but the song is pervaded by peacefulness in light of the repeated affirmation “No, it is not all bad luck!”

Example 5. Gloria

Credo

The Credo combines the opening line of its text, “Credo Deo” (I believe in God), with two poems by Paul Verlaine that connect this belief with witnessing the wonder of life. If the Gloria lulls one with a sunny, Arcadian peacefulness, the Credo rocks with even sunnier Latin funk stylings, serendipitously melded with Hildegard of Bingen-esque melismas (Example 6). God here has none of the hushed mystery that it has in the Gloria; it is as “simple and easygoing” (*simple et tranquille*) as the rhythmic play of the repeated vowels in “Credo Deo” (Example 7).

Example 6. Credo

Example 7. Credo

Offertorium

In the Offertorium, accelerating drums rev up electronically augmented sheets of feedback, in whose expanse we hear raspy saxophone moans and churning, jittery, speckling scratches. The diaphanous sheets of feedback eventually settle into something reminiscent of a cadence on the organ (Example 8). The thumping drums and organ sounds suggest that we are now indeed in the heart organ of the abbey/cosmic man.

Example 8. Offertorium

Sanctus

The Sanctus centers on a poem by Arthur Rimbaud concerning the mechanized slaughter of men at war. The Mass text on the holiness of God is relegated to an obscured backing chorus, much as God is seemingly reduced in the poem to someone who “falls asleep” and yet is ready to wake up at a cry from the heart. The piteous song is driven along by war drums and a

traditional lament bass, the music repeatedly twisting into the utmost degree of harmonic tension. This tension is underscored by swelling, mournful brass, like air raid sirens (Example 9).

Example 9. Sanctus

Benedictus

The Benedictus cuts between the short Mass text and Charles Baudelaire's "Examination of Conscience at Midnight." The poem expresses remorse at our falling prey to passions that we detest, violating the law of the will. The song reflects such inner conflict by means of irony, in that every means of expression is countered by its opposite. Already the poem notes how "the clock, striking midnight, engages us ironically" (*la pendule, sonnante minuit, ironiquement nous engage*). Not only is the song bifurcated between turbulent verses for the poem and fleeting moments of relative respite for the Mass text, but the verses are again split between two voices, so to speak: the one harsh and spoken, the other mournful and sung. When the mournful voice interjects the phrase "avec grande dévotion" (with great devotion) after the harsh voice's "baisé" (kissed, understood euphemistically), the irony is so unnerving that it is somehow sincere, in that it makes one question everything, including oneself. More simply put, one could say that repentance requires both tender compunction and harsh honesty, and the song provides both (Example 10).

Example 10. Benedictus

Agnus Dei

The Agnus Dei pairs the Mass text, a prayer for mercy for our sins, with a poem by François Villon, a petition by a group of hanged men toward "human brothers, who live after" them, to "pray God that he wills to absolve us all." The text is so convincingly appropriated as to place us, too, in the position of praying for mercy, for the agreement of divine and human will in love. By further implication, and by the literal sense of the words, the song speaks to "human brothers, who live after *us*," in *our* future (my emphasis). One hopes that if our future brothers hear how hard Charles rocks, they will join us as fearless iconoclasts and will not, in the words of the poem, have their "hearts hardened against us," as twisted zealots. If people are praying all together from

the heart in the past, present, and future, then the merciful movement sought is not in time but again orthogonal to time.

The music reflects a conjunction of past and present by combining a traditionally crafted lyrical melody with an electronic dance music texture. There is also an old-school a cappella rendition of the rhyming phrase “pitié Dieu,” which gives one chills as it spills over into the following verse, deepening the wild rhythmic joy infused into the song’s prayer (Example 11).

Example 11. Agnus Dei

Ite, missa est

The concluding movement paints a paradisaical landscape of bell clinks, quasi-moos, water splashes,⁸ string bass squiggles and scrapes, saxophone chirps, feedback washes, and guitar plinks, patterned in part—it seems incontrovertible—after the soundscape of Charles’s idyllic alpine childhood home. This movement is one occasion where the all-purpose injunction “More cowbell” was heeded to good effect. We have gone through the abbey and out the other side, into a place that we pray the Other Side is like (Example 12).

Example 12. Ite missa est

Speaking of other sides, I like to think of Charles’s album with its prismatic design and cosmic thrust as affiliated with Pink Floyd’s *The Dark Side of the Moon*. Just as *The Dark Side of the Moon* syncs marvelously with *The Wizard of Oz* (this phenomenon is a focus of my book in progress), the adventurous listener may experiment with syncing the *Parsifal*-like *Missa Brevis Abbaye de Thélème* with another Grail drama, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Charles himself has taken up this suggestion and edited the first hearing of the album in *Indiana Jones and the Abbey of Thelema* (Example 13).⁹

⁸ A river runs along the north side of the abbey (Rabelais 1952, 61).

⁹ Here is the link to the video playlist on YouTube: <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLnrPHohNfNJ7GYkQBZ-qLDliIA8EO-AH>.

Example 13. Indiana Jones and the Abbey of Thelema

Of course, the alignment here is not an objective fact. But nor is it merely a subjective impression of order in a random stimulus. What I am pointing to here is a technique for continuing the holy Word. Those who have ears to hear may hear.

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Declaration of Interests

Jean-François Charles is my colleague.