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Transformations of Chant in Marcel Grandjany's *Rhapsodie pour la Harpe*

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Advisor: Dr. Erin Freund
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The purpose of this essay is to gain a deeper understanding of Marcel Grandjany's *Rhapsodie pour la Harpe*. A brief biography of Marcel Grandjany will be presented to provide relevant information about his musical influences and compositional style. Then the plainchant origin of *Rhapsodie* will be explained, followed by an analysis of the work. This will demonstrate how Grandjany showcases the range and colors of the harp by transforming a chant with changes in harmony and texture in *Rhapsodie pour la Harpe*.

Grandjany was born in Paris in the year 1891. Though his mother died early in his life, his cousin Juliette Georges supported him throughout his youth. Georges was a graduate of the Paris Conservatoire and noticed Grandjany's talent for music as she taught him the piano and solfège while he was still a child. Georges introduced him to one of her colleagues from the Paris Conservatoire, the great harpist-composer Henriette Renié.¹ Renié became an important mentor to Grandjany, and her career as a performer, composer, and teacher set an example that Grandjany followed in his own life. In addition to his harp studies with Renié, Grandjany was a composition student at the Paris Conservatoire.

Grandjany's early compositional style lead many in France to view him as the future of French modernism after Debussy.² This opinion faded as he turned his attention primarily to the harp later in his career. As the strong influence of medieval and classical music became apparent in his works for solo harp, he became viewed as a more conservative composer.³ In addition to composing, Grandjany had a successful career as a solo harpist and toured throughout Europe, America, and Canada. Toward the end of his life, he became the head of the harp department at

¹ Ruth K. Inglefield, *Marcel Grandjany: Concert Harpist, Composer, and Teacher* (Washington, D.C: University press of America, 1977), 1.

² Ibid., 57.

³ Ibid., 64.

Juilliard. His extensive knowledge of the harp contributed to his effectiveness as a composer of harp music.

In his essay, “In Defense of Transcriptions,” Grandjany outlines what he believes are the harp’s unique expressive strengths. This includes direct contact with the sound created, the potential for a singing legato sound, special effects, contrast in registers, variance in color, freely diminishing vibrations, and the ability to differentiate the color of each voice in polyphonic music.⁴ All of these unique qualities of the harp are highlighted in his composition *Rhapsodie pour la Harpe*.

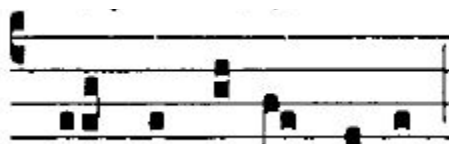
The melodic foundation of *Rhapsodie* comes from the Easter chant “Salve festa dies.” The name of this chant translates to “Hail festal day” and was used in the Easter vigil mass. Grandjany was a devout Catholic, so it is likely that the theme of redemption in this chant held personal significance to him. In fact, it has been argued that Grandjany composed this piece out of the profound gratitude he felt for the assurance of heaven to Christian souls.⁵ The free-flowing form and ecstatic nature of a rhapsody lends itself well to expressing the pure joy that Grandjany may have felt about his Catholic faith. Although rhapsodies also feature highly-contrasting sections, Grandjany primarily uses two excerpts from the original chant to provide cohesiveness to the work.

For purposes of analysis, the chant excerpts have been labeled as “Chant I” and “Chant II” although they are both from the same “Salve festa dies” chant. The text of Chant I is as follows: “Salve festa dies, toto venerabilis aevo, Qua Deus infernum vicit et astra tenet.” This

⁴ Ibid., 72.

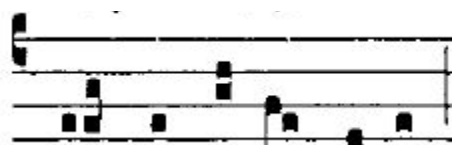
⁵ Jane Weidensaul, “Salve festa dies, the Plainchant Foundation of Grandjany’s Rhapsodie,” *American Harp Journal*, 1991, 27.

translates to “Hail, festive day, forever venerable, On which God conquered the underworld and took possession of the heavens.”⁶



*Figure 1: The plainchant in original notation. “Salve festa dies.”*⁷

The text of Chant II is as follows: “Ecce renascéntis testatur gratia mundi, Omnia cum Domino dona redisse suo.” This translates to “Behold, it declares grace for a reborn world All gifts have returned with their Lord.”⁸



*Figure 2: The plainchant in original notation. “Ecce renascéntis.”*⁹

Rhapsodie is in three main sections. The first section features four statements of Chant I. The second section of the piece is cadenza-like, and introduces the Chant II motive in a subtle way while still utilizing the Chant I motives throughout. The last section features two statements of Chant II and a final statement of Chant I.

Grandjany transforms this chant material throughout the work. The piece opens with a slow, homophonic statement of the chant in G minor. The chant is in octaves in the middle register of the harp, accompanied by hollow fifths in the left hand.

⁶ “Salve Festa Dies,” *Chant CD*, April 22, 2018, http://www.chanted.com/lyrics/hail_festal_day.htm.

⁷ Weidensaul, 27.

⁸ “Salve Festa Dies,” *Chant CD*, April 22, 2018, http://www.chanted.com/lyrics/hail_festal_day.htm.

⁹ Weidensaul, 27.

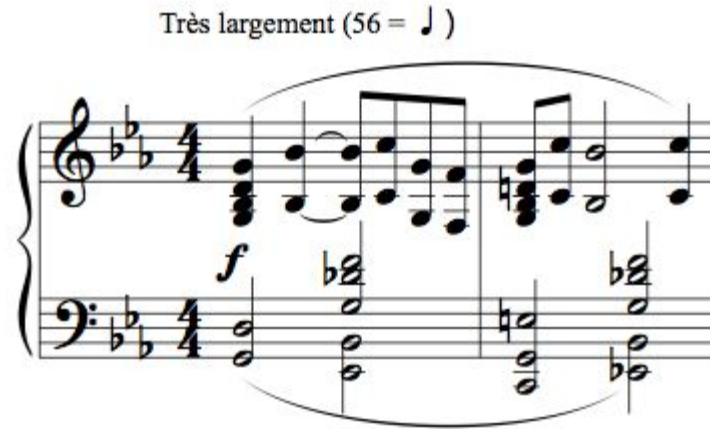


Figure 3: Measures 1-2 of Marcel Grandjany's Rhapsodie pour la Harpe.¹⁰

The simplicity of this statement allows for listeners to easily grasp the chant motive, which will lend coherence to the rest of the work. A motive from Chant I is repeated three times within a seven-bar transition before the second statement, reasserting the importance of this chant material to the rest of the composition.



Figure 4: Motive from Chant I.

The second statement of the chant is similar to the homophonic setting of the first statement, but this time in C minor. The chords are filled out with more voices and include more chromaticism, resulting in a stronger and more dramatic statement than the first.

¹⁰ Marcel Grandjany, *Rhapsodie pour la Harpe* (Paris: Alphonse Leduc Editions Musicales), 1.



Figure 5: Measures 12-13 of Marcel Grandjany's Rhapsodie pour la Harpe.¹¹

This statement soon turns into a rapidly arpeggiating transitional section in which the melodic voice embedded within the arpeggios floats upward with each passing bar. This transition ends with harmonics alternating with widely spaced chords in the upper register of the harp, which sets up the next, more delicate statement of the chant.

The third statement of the chant contrasts greatly with the two preceding statements. The tempo increases, and the accompanimental texture shifts completely. Rather than an octave-doubled melody accompanied by block chords, the melody and harmony are combined into flowing, sextuplet arpeggios. This is an example of the singing legato sound that Grandjany describes in his essay on the expressive strengths of the harp. The melody is placed on the top of each arpeggio, landing conveniently in the right hand thumb. This allows for a more agile melody, as well as more subtle harmonic colors since the chord tones no longer occur simultaneously.

¹¹ Ibid., 2.

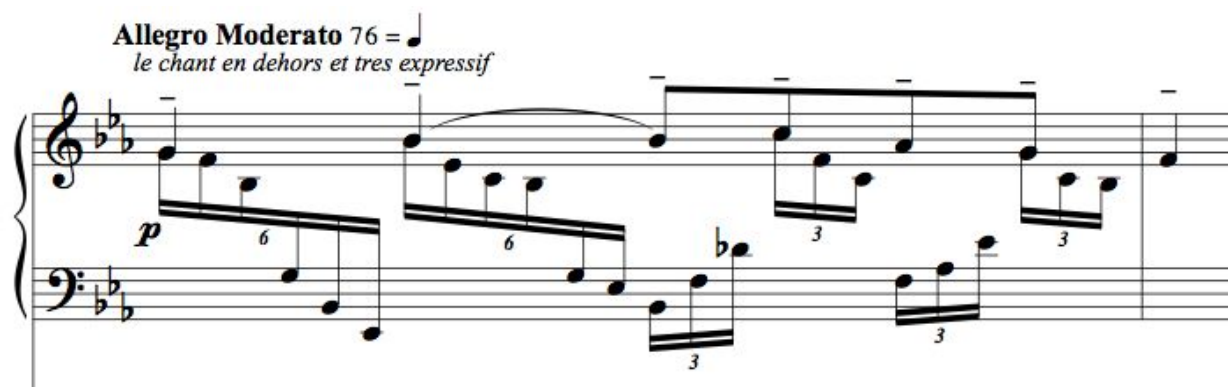


Figure 6: Measures 26-27 of Marcel Grandjany's *Rhapsodie pour la Harpe*.¹²

This statement of the chant is followed by a transitional phrase which features similar melodic motion to the chant, as well as the same setting of the melody in the thumb within rapid arpeggiations. This phrase, however, brings a heightened sense of excitement as the range rises, and the subdivisions increase from sextuplets to thirtysecond notes. The transition ultimately prepares for the broadened tempo of the fourth chant statement by a glissando and then a slowing scale leading into the tonic of the chant.

The fourth statement settles in at a slower tempo than the preceding statement. The texture combines the expansive, vertical chords of the first two statements with the added effect of fast arpeggios leading into each main chord of the chant. This creates a fuller, bolder, and more confident sounding chant setting than the one prior. After just one iteration of the chant, the thumb-melody with sextuplet arpeggios returns, creating a strong contrast to the outgoing statement just played.

¹² Ibid., 3.



*Figure 7: Measures 40-41 of Marcel Grandjany's Rhapsodie pour la Harpe.*¹³

This statement is followed by a transition in C-flat major, utilizing the contour of the chant melody, which leads into an extensive cadenza-like section. In addition to contributing to the rhapsodic nature of the piece and showcasing the various ranges and timbres the harp can produce, this section subtly introduces motives from the second segment of the “Salve festa dies” chant, which will appear in full form at the conclusion of this section.

The second chant is hidden initially in the left hand of this contrapuntal section of harmonics.



*Figure 8: Measures 57-58 of Marcel Grandjany's Rhapsodie pour la Harpe.*¹⁴

The opening motive from the second chant also appears in this line, which reinforces the importance of this new musical material. This excerpt is an example of the harp's ability to color

¹³ Ibid., 5.

¹⁴ Ibid., 6.

voices differently. The right hand has the bell-like tone of harmonics, and the left hand is plucking the strings to produce the standard harp sound.



Figure 9: Measures 71-72 of Marcel Grandjany's *Rhapsodie pour la Harpe*.¹⁵

Abruptly, the two introductory bars from the beginning of the piece reappear. Instead of continuing the first chant theme, the cadenza continues with a delicately voiced arpeggiated version of a chant, with the melody note at the bottom of each arpeggio. This is another example of the singing legato quality of the harp, similar in texture to the third statement of Chant I. This simple melody is evocative of the chant style, but does not suggest either of the specific chants which have been excerpted for this piece.



¹⁵ Ibid., 7.

Figure 10: Measure 80 of Marcel Grandjany's Rhapsodie pour la Harpe.¹⁶

At the end of this prolonged cadenza, Grandjany alternates between the Chant I and Chant II segments.



Figure 11: Measures 89-91 of Marcel Grandjany's Rhapsodie pour la Harpe.¹⁷

At this point, Grandjany shifts only to using the Chant II motives. He used organum-like triadic harmony to suggest the chant origins of this melodic material.



Figure 12: Measures 93-94 of Marcel Grandjany's Rhapsodie pour la Harpe.¹⁸

By the end of the cadenza section, the motives of Chant II have been repeated enough to be recognizable, but since the chant has not yet appeared in full form, its statement at the end of

¹⁶ Ibid., 8.

¹⁷ Ibid., 9.

¹⁸ Ibid., 9.

the cadenza is still a surprise. The first full statement of Chant II is in E-flat major. Marked “allegro con fuoco,” this statement is strident with its vertical texture of block chords.

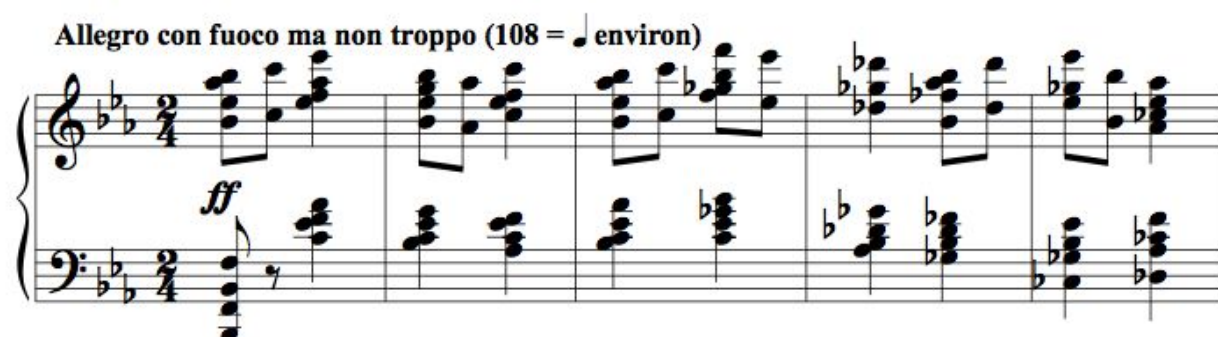


Figure 13: Measures 96-100 of Marcel Grandjany's *Rhapsodie pour la Harpe*.¹⁹

The texture quickly softens, as Grandjany makes a second statement of Chant II in the style of the thumb-melody descending arpeggios. He interjects the block chord texture within this same statement, and then the singing legato takes over again. This succession of textures imitates the structure of the first half of the piece on a condensed scale within this second statement of Chant II.



¹⁹ Ibid., 9.

Figure 14: Measure 101 of Marcel Grandjany's *Rhapsodie pour la Harpe*.²⁰

The final chant statement of the piece is Chant I in the key of E-flat major. At a broadened tempo and marked “risoluto,” this is the most triumphant statement of the entire piece. There is a full chord on every beat of the chant melody, which contributes to the grandness of volume of this final statement, which is comparatively less chromatic than other statements.



Figure 15: Measures 122-123 of Marcel Grandjany's *Rhapsodie pour la Harpe*.²¹

Grandjany ends this piece with arpeggiated flourishes and scales before ending the piece on a solid E-flat unison chord.

This essay provided information on Marcel Grandjany's *Rhapsodie pour la Harpe*. Grandjany's biography shows that his training both as a composer and as a harpist prepared him to compose music which effectively utilizes the unique expressive strengths of the harp. The plainchant origin of *Rhapsodie* was explained and the composition was analyzed. This demonstrated that Grandjany showcases the harp's range and colors by transforming a chant with changes in harmony and texture in *Rhapsodie pour la Harpe*.

²⁰ Ibid., 10.

²¹ Ibid., 11.

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