

Jean-Louis Florentz: *Laudes (Kidân Za-Nageh)*, Op. 5

Short Biography

Jean-Louis Florentz (1947-2004) received his initial degrees in ethnomusicology, natural sciences, and Arab literature. It was not until 1971 that Florentz joined the classes of Olivier Messiaen and Pierre Schaeffer at the Conservatoire Nationale de Paris. Florentz was influenced by the musical language of Messiaen, and the two shared a love for and scholarly interest in birdsong. During the 1970s, Florentz made his first travels outside of Europe to North Africa, Nigeria, and Côte d'Ivoire. In the 1980s, he took four voyages to Kenya, in part due to his post teaching composition and West African music at Kenyatta College in Nairobi. During the 1980s, the composer also went to Israel, Polynesia, and Egypt. He won numerous composition prizes throughout his career, and he served as composer-in-residence for l'Orchestre National de Lyon and l'Orchestre National de Pays de Loire. He taught Analysis of Music from Oral Traditions at the Conservatoire de Lyon. He died of cancer in 2004, at the age of 56.

Background on *Laudes*

The music from *Laudes* is Florentz's reimagining of the Ethiopian Orthodox Morning Office (prayer service) and is inspired by musical extracts from all over Africa. Florentz never visited Ethiopia because of the sensitive political climate there during his years of travel. He encountered Ethiopian Christians in Jerusalem after they had fled their homeland, and he learned the fundamentals of Ge'ez¹ from the dedicatee of this work, Abba Pietros de Hailu, whom Florentz met in Rome during the composer's stay at the Medici Villa (1980-1981). He gained additional knowledge from primary African sources that made their way to Western Europe, such as field recordings on LPs and sacred documents translated by nineteenth-century anthropologists.

Florentz's Op. 5, *Laudes*, subtitled *Kidân Za-Nageh*, is the central section of a Marian triptych composed from 1979-1988. These three works draw from religious prayers, rituals, and music from the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian liturgy, and they evoke three of the five Mysteries from the rosary, respectively: the second Joyful Mystery (the Visitation), the fifth Sorrowful Mystery (the Crucifixion), and the fourth Glorious Mystery (the Assumption). The first of Florentz's three major organ compositions, *Laudes* stands out in the triptych as a piece for solo instrument bookended by large-scale ensemble works:

- I. Magnificat – Antiphone pour la Visitation, Op. 3 (tenor, mixed choir, and orchestra)
- II. *Laudes (Kidân Za-Nageh)*, Op. 5 (organ)
- III. *Asun, Conte symphonique sur l'Assomption de Marie*, Op. 7 (soprano, tenor, baritone, mixed choir, children's choir, and orchestra)

¹ Ge'ez is the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church.

Important themes and techniques in *Laudes*

The subtitle “*Kidân*” references the Ethiopian Morning Office, and the subtitles of each movement correspond with a magico-religious text from that tradition. The composer specifies the three overarching themes *Laudes* as 1) homage to Mary, 2) faith in Christ, and 3) magic rituals (often kept and carried by certain Ethiopians in amulets). The Virgin Mary is an extremely important figure in the Ethiopian Christian Orthodox faith, and certain Ethiopians maintain magical beliefs and practices alongside – and indeed in combination with – their Christian faith.

Florentz utilized the effect of mutations² playing against fundamental (8^{ve}) stops at same pitch in order to create audible beats or vibrations within the music. He called this phenomenon *L’ondulation du Verseau* (the Undulation of Aquarius, a reference to end-time prophesy in ancient Babylonian texts) and lists it as one of two principal leitmotifs in the work. The other leitmotif is the Ethiopian Magnificat, *Watibye Mâryâm ta’abbio nefsiye*, heard first in *Harpe de Marie* (third movement) and then developed later in the piece.

In 1983-85, Florentz was a resident fellow at the [Casa de Velázquez in Madrid](#), a place where French researchers and artists study Spanish culture. During this time, Florentz traveled around to historic Spanish organs, learning about their mechanisms and sound characteristics, and he composed the bulk of *Laudes* during these years. The influence of Spanish organ sonorities – especially that of short-resonator reeds (*clarines* and *regals*) – is apparent in the registrations specified by the composer.

French organist Michel Bourcier premiered *Laudes* on 24 September 1985 at [Eglise luthérienne des Billettes](#). In June 1988, Bourcier gave the “true premiere” of *Laudes* in a festival that commemorated the new [organ by Daniel Birouste in Plaisance-du-Gers](#). Florentz collaborated with Birouste on formulating the specifications of the instrument, resulting a perfect union of organ and composition.

In the notes that follow, I will reference both Florentz’s directions and writings as well as the scholarship of Michel Bourcier, who authored two landmark volumes on the works of Jean-Louis Florentz.³ In these books, Bourcier transcribed many of Florentz’s sketches and decoded the various puzzles within the work in order to further enlighten the performer. Over the past year, I have been in touch with Michel Bourcier to discuss the composer’s intentions and performance practice concerns about the work, and I extend my gratitude to M. Bourcier today for his assistance.

² Mutations are stops that sound at partials above the fundamental, based on the harmonic series, commonly 5ths, 3rds, and 7ths. Since they are tuned “perfectly” (in meantone, with unequal divisions of the octave), they sound out of tune when played against equally-tuned stops, which would be any stop that is *not* a mutation.

³ Michel Bourcier. Jean-Louis Florentz et l’orgue. Essai analytique et exégétique en 2 tomes : 1 *L’univers florentzien* ; 2 *Une tétralogie pour l’orgue*.. Éditions Symétrie (Lyon).

I. Dis-moi ton nom... (*Nagrânni samaka*): a call to prayer

Tell me your name...

The first movement of *Laudes* begins with an imperative: tell me your name. The setting evokes a dream Florentz described: sunrise over an imaginary cathedral in Ethiopia, perhaps similar in style to the famous rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, a famous Christian pilgrimage site, or to [Abuna Yemata Guh](#). At the moment of dawn, ceremonial bells begin to ring. Florentz describes a ritual in which the organist echoes the sonorities created by the ringing of the bells – not just the pitches of the bells themselves, but also the overtones and chords resulting from the intermingling of their soundwaves.

This is how the first movement of *Laudes* begins. Three bell peals, each successively louder, summon worshippers to enter the church. The bell-chords give way to an introductory litany, which is declamatory and angular. This litany is followed by a long section of responsory incantations. These insistently repeated chords symbolize the various names of God in Amharic through a system of musical Morse code and the duration of note values. The incantations that utilize pedal and a secondary voice juxtaposing the initial incantation represent the congregational response within the ongoing litany, which Michel Bourcier connects to Florentz's experiences at Vespers in the Cathedral of Segovia in Spain.

The final section is the first instance of the *Ondulation de Verseau*, representing Mary's formal entrance into the piece: the power of her intercession. Sustained chords with a combination of mutations and fundamentals represent "les cloches-pierre," bells made of stone. The resultant chords are fuzzy and mystical. The repeated chords that close the movement are grouped in threes, representing the Morse code (• • •) for the final name of God: *Omega*.

II. Prière pour délier des charmes (*Mâftehê seray*): an incantation

Prayer to untie (loosen) spells

The second movement is the shortest of the seven, and its title is that of an ancient Ethiopian magic prayer to chase out demons and cure spells. The texture is monodic, meaning there is a single melodic line throughout, reminiscent of Claude Debussy's famous flute solo, [Syrinx](#). According to Bourcier, the movement is an homage to Olivier Messiaen, Florentz's beloved teacher, because of the movement's likeness to the elder composer's [Subtilité des Corps Glorieux](#). Florentz reused musical content from an earlier work in this movement, and Bourcier intimates that the material is connected to a basket-weaving song from Rwanda.

The music manifests as coiling, winding arabesques sounding on different iterations of the Cornet⁴. The rapid melodic figurations have a singing quality, and the vocal line is made more robust through the halo of vibrant overtones wafting through the air in its wake.

⁴ The Cornet consists of Flute 8', Flute 4', Nasard 2^{2/3}', Flute 2', and Tierce 1^{3/5}'. I have included extra 8', 4', and 2' stops for aural padding, and Larigot 1^{1/3} for extra color, which Florentz specifies.

III. Harpe de Marie (*Arganona Mâryâm*): a sacred dance *Harp of Mary*

The third movement of *Laudes* is the first of the three successive “pieces mariales” in the work, movements that focus solely on Mary. The mood of this movement is joyful, evoking images of Mary dancing at the occasion of the Annunciation. The title *Arganona Maryam* is shared with a popular Ethiopian Orthodox prayer book dedicated to Mary.

The opening section is a dance trio between a drum (the left hand), a vocal flute melody (right hand) and the *begenä* (pedal), [a ten-stringed instrument native to Ethiopia and related to the lyre](#). The sound of the instrument is characterized by a bending of the pitch at the beginning of the pluck and an intense buzz due to the way the strings vibrate against mechanisms on the resonating box.⁵ Florentz achieves this unique sound quality by specifying an odd registration in the pedal that includes the Voix Humaine and mutations.

Parallel figurations on a flute introduce the next section, in which we hear the Ethiopian Magnificat for the first time, on a reed in the left hand. The opening text, *Watibye Mâryâm ta'abbio nefsiye*⁶, is penned underneath the melody notes of the chant incipit. The Magnificat theme is then presented a second time, enhanced with insistently repeated thirds. The non-aligned figurations in the right hand and pedal represent the [washint \(a type of flute\)](#) and the [chordophone](#), respectively.

A sudden trumpet call halts the revelry, and for the first time in the movement there is stillness. Florentz termed this section a double recitative, given its two melodies (born out of musical material from the right hand flute melody of the first section), first on the softer Sesquialtera, then on a louder plenum sonority. Upon the conclusion of the plaintive melodies, a new dance begins, which the composer imagined might accompany a solemn procession. The left hand pentatonic ostinato in parallel fourths imitates the [ikembe, a type of lamellaphone from Burundi](#).⁷ The right hand reprises the original flute melody of the opening dance. The pedal alternates between the registration of 16' + 1' and 1' alone, altering the listener's perception of the pedal melody.

The left hand and pedal drop out suddenly, leaving the flute suspended in a high trill. The trill gives way to a “mixture ostinato,” in which lower-pitched stops are successively stripped away from a hysterical seven-note whirlwind, leaving only the mixture by the end.

⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ye_F2JKJVOK&ab_channel=Karibuni
<https://www.michiganradio.org/post/east-lansing-artist-puts-modern-twist-ancient-ethiopian-music>

⁶ Which Florentz heard and learned from Abba Pietros de Hailu' in Rome

⁷ The recording that influenced Florentz to imitate this tradition:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4XimEHwHHEQ&ab_channel=martinradio

The movement closes with a coda that takes place in a dreamworld. A cluster chord on a flute sonority (what would be the Septième and Larigot on an organ equipped with both stops) rains over the texture, accompanied by incipits of the earlier drum figuration. Another cluster joins the first, and as the texture swells. The addition of the Tierce creates the familiar fuzzy sound of the *Ondulation*, and a whole-tone figuration represents the last flitting movements of the dance.

IV. Chant des fleurs (*Mâhlêta segê*): a meditation *Song of the flowers*

The fourth movement is the midway point in *Laudes*, serving as the anchor between the first three and last three movements. It acts as an aural palate cleanser, consisting of hypnotic repetitive figurations. The texture of the movement consists of long sustained pedal tones underpinning oscillating tremolos played by the hands. The Ethiopian title references a marriage prayer intoned to the Virgin Mary. The French title is a play on words: The manual parts could represent flowers trembling in a field when rustled by the wind as well as the trembling of believers when they experience a holy vision. Bourcier specifically references purported visions of the Virgin Mary at Kibeho in Rwanda in the early 1980s (around the same time as the conception of *Laudes*). These trembling images are linked: flowers are often included in art depicting visitations from Mary, symbolizing believers after conversion.

A further play on words in the title is the double-meaning of the French word of *fleurs* as parts of an airplane turbine. Jean-Louis Florentz made sketches of this movement (as a standalone work) in 1973 following a flight on a Boeing 727. Florentz wrote in his memoirs that the musical content was directly inspired by the PW JT8D-7 and JT8D-9, turbofan engines that were hallmarks of the Boeing 727. Florentz was transfixed by the sonic overtones created by the engines, particularly at takeoff, and he would intentionally sit at the back of the plane in order to facilitate the best aural experience for himself. The hum of a plane engine includes both low rumbling and high resultant pitches, and this is the soundscape Florentz constructed through the registrations specified in *Chant des fleurs*. The right hand oscillations sound at 8' pitch, while the left hand, placed in a lower range on a secondary manual, plays on the Nasard $2^{2/3}$ and the Tierce $1^{3/5}$. The resulting pitches of the left hand are an octave + a fifth and two octaves + a third above the fundamental, so the left hand notes actually sound higher than the right hand notes. The harmonics are also coupled down to the pedal, whose local registration consists of the lowest sounding stops. Together, the high harmonics and the low rumbling pitches in the pedal form a sense of stasis in the texture, yet a stasis charged with the tension of two different tuning systems comingling. The interaction of the pitches in the manuals results in many instances of thirds and sixths, important symbolic intervals in *Laudes*. The thirds and sixths also create the impression of rapidly moving chords, reminiscent of a more familiar tonal language, but rapidly shifting and dissolving into the atmosphere.

V. Pleurs de la Vierge (*Lâhâ Mâryâm*): a canticle
Tears of the Virgin/Lamentations of Mary

The fifth movement paraphrases the Fifth Sorrowful Mystery of the rosary: The Crucifixion and Death of Christ. The entirety of *Laudes* was conceived around the Fifth Sorrowful Mystery and Mary's role as an intercessor, but *Pleurs de la Vierge* speaks most directly to the imagery of Good Friday and the tears Mary sheds on behalf of the crucified Christ and for humanity, specifically for Ethiopia and the persecution of its people.

The movement consists of miniature musical vignettes from Burundi, Ethiopia, and Togo. Florentz does not quote any one extract verbatim, rather, he imitates the overall mood, sentiment, and texture of the material. The vignette that opens the movement is based on an extract from field recording on a 1968 LP entitled *Burundi: Musiques traditionnelles* (Ocora). The recording consists of two girls singing a traditional joyful greeting (which is the translation of *akahézé*)⁸, which manifests as an intricate duet with the voices interweaving. Florentz renders the greeting as a repeating melodic line on a soft reed with interjections on a secondary manual, followed by a faster, more angular motive that does not align metrically.

The second vignette is the depiction of the Golden-Breasted Starling, represented through the gap registration of the Flute 8' and the Tierce 1^{3/5}. The Golden-Breasted Starling is common in Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, and northern Tanzania. The tender falling thirds that comprise this section do not represent the call of the Starling (a technique oft employed by Florentz's teacher Messiaen); rather, the melody represents instead the movements of the bird, flitting around and metrically irregular. The pedal gently rocks between two notes in the style of a berceuse.

The next extract is a rain dance from the Kabiye people of Togo. The sample recording is from *Musique Kabré Du Nord-Togo* (Ocora, 1960)⁹. The texture at first consists of separate 8' flutes for right hand, left hand, and pedal, making it difficult to distinguish aurally between melodic lines. The effect is that of rain blurring visibility across an exterior space. Slowly shifting chords on the Voix Celeste prepare for a new pedal entrance, this time on a solo mixture. Piercing clusters slice into the texture, evocative of so-called "weeping statues" of the Virgin Mary. The mixed imagery of rain, tears, and blood highlight the sorrow motif of the movement.

Following a return to the original rain dance material, the opening *akahézé* comes back, transposed up a third and truncated. The angular theme closes out the movement.

⁸ Recordings of the Salutations on *Burundi: Musique traditionnelles*:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Sr9oG9JB7w&ab_channel=VariousArtists-Topic
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hGBxV5a_ZMw&ab_channel=ContainYrBrain

More on the Akahézé:

<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/emt/article/view/30278>

⁹ Recording of Kabiye rain dance here at 22:32:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8EAeWhAgX8&t=2242s&ab_channel=MrKolshack

VI. **Rempart de la Croix (*Hasura masqal*): a procession** *Rampart of the Cross*

The sixth movement is the symbolic and theological heart of *Laudes*, according to Bourcier. While the other movements focus on Mary, Mother of God, *Rempart de la Croix* focuses on God himself. The corresponding magico-religious prayer *Hasura masqal* contains the names of the five nails used in the Crucifixion, and the whole movement is a musical representation of a depiction of a cross formed by the intersecting words PATER NOSTER (Our Father).

The first section is a procession based on the music for a coming-of-age dance of the Gidole people in southern Ethiopia, near the border of Kenya. Florentz borrowed the material from a field recording released on the 1972 LP *Ethiopian Urban And Tribal Music: Gold From Wax* (Lyricord)¹⁰. The hypnotic theme of the *Fila flute* dance, three descending chords, underpins the melody, which is borrowed and expanded from the opening flute melody in *Harpe de Marie*. The section that follows is a plaintive recitative, a vocal-sounding reed with a ghost-like flute following at the interval of a parallel third, creating a false harmonic above the melody.

The flute continues on after the recitative is over, only to be interrupted by a thunderclap on full plenum that transports us to another world. An expansive texture: low rumbling in the pedal and a massive chord on the Voix Celeste support a new melody, which unfolds in parallel fourths in both hands, one hand on 8' foundations, the other playing at the pitch of the Septième (one octave and a seventh higher). The melody is from adapted from the Nuba people, who reside in the mountains of Kordofan (in Sudan). Alongside the Ethiopian Magnificat, this melody is the longest and most substantive in *Laudes*, and according to Florentz, it represents a “new Magnificat:” Mary’s understanding of the Passion. The “Nuba” theme will be interchangeable with the Magnificat from this point onward.

A Burundian berceuse (lullaby) follows the Nuba theme. Soft celestes accompany a lightly ornamented vocal melody on the Cornet. Bourcier says the exact berceuse cannot be traced to an original source from Burundi because melodies of this style are extremely prevalent in the culture. The Berceuse occurs three times, each time with an earlier melody interspersed: first a *petit Ghidolé en canon* (the first theme of the *Fila flute dance*), then the Nuba theme, and an angular section on the plenum (like the thunderclap from before). The final Berceuse is followed by a reprise of the *Fila*. The music fades away in a gradual decrescendo, the procession disappearing off into the horizon.

¹⁰ <https://www.forcedexposure.com/Catalog/johnson-ragnar-ethiopian-urban-and-tribal-music-mindanoo-misturu-gol-2cd/SR.434CD.html>
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3xTj-sP8Q4&ab_channel=Anonymous-Topic

VII. ...Seigneur des Lumières (*Agzi abahêr zabarhânât*): a hymn Lord of Lights

The ellipses in final movement's title connects it to the first movement, "Dis-moi ton nom..." The answer to "Tell me your name..." is "...Lord of Lights." The nine-part structure of the movement is a "fantasy-hymn," a "rhapsody on vocal themes," according to the composer. The Ethiopian title is a prayer contained in the *Harpe de louange (Inzira Sibhat)* as well as in *Prières de l'aurore* (prayers at dawn).

The work as a whole, and in particular the final movement, is connected to the twelfth chapter of the Gospel of John, in which Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. After teaching the crowd of Greeks who have gathered around Him, Jesus calls out: "Father, glorify your name!" A voice responds from heaven, like the thundering voice of a terrifying angel, saying, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." The first section of "...Seigneur des Lumières" depicts this scene. In the opening recitative, Florentz spells out the names of God from the Language of Jacob in a similar fashion to the incantations from the first movement, through a planned system of Morse code, duration, and dynamics. The incantations are interrupted by two statements of the "cloches lointaines" (faraway bells), representative of the Virgin Mary and of the *Ondulation* leitmotif, and reminiscent of the fuzzy final bell peals in the first movement. The final incantation swells in volume, culminating in huge *fff* chords. These thunderclaps represent God's terrifying response and the light that Jesus references in his parting words to the Greeks before going on his way. Michel Bourcier adds that the note "G" represents light, and it is heard in three octaves here, including as the top note of the chords.

Following the massive chords, the Magnificat returns anew, with "G" sustaining above it. It is combined with the "Adaré" theme, which will be discussed shortly. Following another thunderstrike, a section labeled "*comme un glas*" begins. This section is the seventh and final instance in *Laudes* of the *Ondulation de Verseau*, and the notes of the primary chord are based on the "accord-cloche" established at the end of the first movement. The fundamental notes are replicated in the corresponding mutation pitches, and the vast pitch structures oscillate to and from the neighboring notes above and below. This time, the Ge'ez symbols for the names of God are encoded into the rhythmic patterns. Following the *glas* section, we hear an incantation taken directly from the first movement, heard twice. It is a premonition of the final coda.

After the incantation, the "Chant Adaré" (mentioned earlier) appears in full. Bourcier explains that "Adaré" is another name for the Harari people, Muslim Ethiopians who live in the Harari Region of eastern Ethiopia. The ornamented melody oscillates between monody, two, and three voices tightly bound in tessitura. It imitates the style of [chant-singing practiced by the Harari](#), but it is also reminiscent of an earlier improvisation by the composer in the 1970s in the style of Charles Tournemire. Following the "chant adaré," the bright, high-pitched texture melts into dream-like atmosphere similar to the double-recitative from *Harpe de Marie*, with sustained

notes in the pedal and a chord held on celestes (this time by an assistant). Instead of a clear melody, the other manual part features the drum motive from the beginning of *Harpe de Marie*, played at the interval of a 9th.

The seventh and most joyful section of ...*Seigneur* is preceded by an energetic ramp-up, denoted by a flurry of 32nd-notes on the page. After the ramp-up has swelled to full volume, the pedal features a short incipit of the *Magnificat* in slow note values, repeated twice in the passage. The manuals accompany with an ecstatic rhythmic pattern, meant to imitate the parallel-fourths texture of the [Hongahonga Lele by the Zaramo people from Tanzania](#). The section culminates with the final *Magnificat* statement on full organ, the hands in octaves.

A coda follows, consisting of the incantations from *Dis-moi ton nom...* The three iterations of the incantation represent the Sign of the Cross given by the priest at the end of the Mass. *Laudes* ends with a giant chord spread out over several octaves. A Latin inscription accompanies the chord:

Finita oration, fit fragor et strepitus aliquantulum.

The prayer having been finished, let there be a certain uproar and commotion.¹¹

This is the final thunderclap, the final flash of light. It is also an “invitation to the voyage.” The chromatic notes of the chord, played on full organ, generate a similar kind of instability produced by the *Ondulation* technique: a sense of movement and vibration through the noise. Through this effect, Florentz again references an airplane motor – an incomprehensible blare of sound. Bourcier likens this concept to the Christian directive to “go out into the world,” and the lack of conclusiveness in the final chord speaks to the infinite nature of God’s love.



Jean-Louis Florentz (1947-2004)

¹¹ Translation graciously given by Dr. Aaron James, Toronto, ON



Jean-Louis Florentz



Michel Bourcier

<http://www.orgues-chartres.org/michel-bourcier/?lang=en>



1988 Birouste Organ at Plaisance-du-Gers

http://orgue-plaisance-gers.fr/pages/1_grand_orgue.php#rubrique_1

Harpe de Marie



Arganona Mâryâm: Abba Giyorgis of Sägla is traditionally credited with writing this hymn of praise to the Virgin Mary in the fifteenth century. Venerated as a saint, Giyorgis of Sägla was a major fifteenth century author of religious texts written in Ge'ez, the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox church. He is depicted in the illumination above. (Credit: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/733038>)



Begena harp

By Daderot - Own work, CC0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=54623739>

Pleurs de la Vierge:



Golden-breasted Starling

Credit: Niall D. Perrins, 2014, Yabello area, Ethiopia.