

## The Musical Depiction of Chaos and Creation in Jean-Féry Rebel's *Les Éléments*

Noémi KARÁCSONY<sup>1</sup>, Ignác Csaba FILIP<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** *The Creation of the Universe is a theme that inspired artists and musicians throughout the ages. However, it was not only the idea of creation that aroused the interest of these artists, but also the existence of Chaos, which is believed to have preceded the act of creation. In the France of Louis XIV, arts and music were profoundly influenced by Classical Antiquity, as proven by the artworks of this era. Artists and composers sought to depict the creation of the Universe, often resorting to the theory of elements – however, this was subordinated to the ideas of the Catholic doctrine. An interesting musical representation of Chaos and the creation of the Universe belongs to Jean-Féry Rebel (1666-1747), who played an important part in the evolution of the French Baroque. In the simfonie nouvelle for orchestra *Les Éléments* (1737-1738), the composer evokes the state of chaos that preceded the act of creation, using certain harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic constructions. The entire work reflects the aesthetic ideal of the French Baroque, that approaches art as harmonious imitation of nature. In Rebel's work the primordial elements gradually become distinct, each receives a clear musical and rhythmic profile, allowing them to be easily identified throughout the work. Rebel also associates these elements to certain dances, as can be observed in the musical numbers that follow the Chaos, the fluidity and grace of the music reflecting the balanced and refined dance movements of the period. Rebel's musical evocation points to future representations of this theme, at the same time containing several features that prove the composer's visionary musical imagination.*

Key-words: *French Baroque, Chaos, mythology, elements, harmony*

### 1. Introduction – Chaos

Throughout history, for various cultures cosmogonic myths represented an expression of *hierophany*, acts through which the sacred manifested, but also offered modalities through which man could depart from the profane, striving to

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<sup>1</sup> PhD, Transilvania University of Braşov, Faculty of Music. [noemi.karacsony@unitbv.ro](mailto:noemi.karacsony@unitbv.ro)

<sup>2</sup> PhD, Transilvania University of Braşov, Faculty of Music, [f\\_ignac@unitbv.ro](mailto:f_ignac@unitbv.ro)

find explanations and a deeper meaning for human existence (Eliade 2017, 52). Comparing the cosmogonic myths of various peoples, the recurrence of a common theme may be observed: the creation of Earth and its various forms of life from the primordial Chaos, the monstrous fecundity of the first deities, and the cristalization of harmonious forms, followed by the emergence of order that ends all chaos. Romanian historian of religions, Mircea Eliade speaks about a mythical time, when creation had not yet fixed its norms, and absolut freedom manifested on all levels of reality, concretized in the form of the fluid monstrous beings, created in the beginning of the world (Eliade 2017, 94-94).

Along the ages, cosmogonic myths inspired numerous artists and the visual representations that deal with aspects related to the creation of the Universe and its various forms of life were widespread. Furthermore, the emergence of harmony from Chaos is an idea that can be associated with the process of music composition, especially within the Baroque and eighteenth-century Classicism.

The idea that the creation of the Universe was preceded by a state of chaos is shared by philosophers of the Classical Antiquity, while other philosopohical orientations mention the existence of a Void that existed before creation and will last after the dissolution of the Universe (as explained by Hindu philosophies). The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were strongly influenced by Classical Antiquity, French art of this period reflecting the aesthetic ideas of ancient Greek and Roman art and culture: the importance of harmonious forms and clear structure, simplicity, proportion, and the predominance of reason over the senses. Although referred to as Baroque, from a stylistic point of view the French artworks created beginning with the second half of the seventeenth-century display precisely this predilection towards the above mentioned ideals of Classical Antiquity, distancing from the Baroque features that characterize European art of the period. The evolution of French arts and music followed a different trail, anticipating the Neoclassicism of the eighteenth-century. In this sense, referring to Baroque Music, Jean-Jacques Rousseau would write in his 1768 *Dictionnaire de Musique* that “*Baroque music is that in which Harmony is confused, and loaded with modulations and dissonances, the singing is harsh and unnatural, the intonation difficult, and the movement limited*” (Rousseau 1768, 40).

French music from the first half of the eighteenth-century suggests the influence of Classical Antiquity, but at the same time certain theories of the ancient Greeks regarding the creation of the Universe and its constituting elements are mirrored in several creations, such as the opéra-balet *Les Éléments* (1721), by André Cardinal Destouches and Michel Richard de Lalande, or the *simfonie nouvelle* for orchestra *Les Éléments* (1737-1738) composed by Jean-Féry Rebel. The

perspective of these composers suggests the union between the concepts of the ancient philosophers and the ideas promoted by the Catholic Church, all poured into the clear, balanced, and harmonious forms inspired by Classical Antiquity.

## 2. Creation of the Universe and the Nature of Matter Explained by the Ancient Greeks

In his *Theogony* Hesiod mentions the existence of Chaos, that preceded the creation of the Universe. The Greek poet describes the birth of Chaos, followed by the birth of the Earth (Gaia) and Eros:

*„Chaos was born first and after it came Gaia  
the broad-breasted, the firm seat of all  
the immortals who hold the peaks of snowy Olympos,  
and the misty Tartaros in the depths of broad-pathed earth  
and Eros, the fairest of the deathless gods; (...)"*

(Hesiod translated by Athanassakis 2004, 35).

Neither the origin of Chaos nor the process through which it was created are explained, Chaos representing the dark void between Gaia and Tartaros (Athanassakis 2004, 35). It is interesting to note the apparition of Eros alongside the primordial elements, which could suggest the important part it played within the process of Creation. In her turn, Gaia gave birth to the sky, Ouranos, but the idea of harmony and order was only introduced to the Universe with the birth of Aphrodite: the hateful dominion and unmeasured fecundity of Ouranos were stopped by Cronos, who castrates him, and from the remains of his sexual parts mixed with sea foam Aphrodite was born (Eliade 2011, 226-227). Eliade considers that the birth of Aphrodite could suggest the emergence of a new dominion, characterized by order, balance, and hierarchy, as it was imagined and revealed by the Greek spirit (Eliade 2017, 95).

## 3. The Theory of Elements in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century France

The interest of ancient philosophers in explaining the particular features of matter led to the emergence of several theories regarding the four primordial elements: earth, air, fire, and water. Pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles writes

about “roots” (*rhizomata*) from which all the structures of this world are formed (Wallace 1911, 344-345), but the term *element* (*stoicheion*) was not used until Plato, who employed it in his work *Timaeus*, and later by Aristotle. The theory of the four elements had a powerful impact on the philosophical concepts of the following eras.

During his reign, Louis XIV was often depicted in various forms, portraying various figures of the ancient mythology and history: the god Apollo, Roman emperors, or even Alexander the Great. In the ballets the king would dance the leading roles, embodying Apollo, Neptune, or the Sun. The use of elements inspired by the Greek and Roman tradition is related to the idealization of the king and his regime, but at the same time it suggests the influence of Classical antiquity on French art, as well as the fondness of these artists for simplicity and clarity (as mirrored in the artworks of Classical antiquity).

Theories regarding the creation of the universe were subordinated to the Catholic doctrine during the reign of Louis XIV. Nonetheless, ideas inspired by the theory of elements persisted, as suggested by Jean-Féry Rebel’s *Les Éléments*, in which the creation is imagined as a process where these essential elements are organized and harmonized, resolving the dissonances associated with the primordial Chaos.

#### 4. Jean-Féry Rebel: *Les Éléments* (1737)

Disciple of J. B. Lully (1632-1687), Jean-Féry Rebel (1666-1747) played an important part in the evolution of the French Baroque. His compositions are rich in complex rhythmic elements and novel harmonic constructions, the Italian style harmoniously mingling with the distinctive features of French music, thus giving birth to a unique style.

Rebel was first violonist of the *Académie royale de musique*, membre of the ensemble *Les Vingt-quatre violons du Roi*, and in 1716 he was elected *Maître de Musique*. Court composer of King Louis XIV, Rebel receives in 1726 the title of Chamber Composer of the Royal Cabinet. He composed works in numerous genres, preferring the instrumental compositions, such as the sonata or the ballet. Among his most important and known works are *Les Caractères de la danse* (1711), *La Terpsichore* (1720), or *Les Éléments*. In his works, Rebel strives to create a perfect symbiosis between music and dance, the combination between rhythm and movement endowing the dances in his works with a particular character (Burgess 2018, 105).

#### 4.1. Tone clusters and dissonances for the representation of Chaos

Rebel uses the French violin clef (the use of the G clef on the first line of the staff) to write *Les Éléments*, a characteristic of a great deal of French instrumental music of that period and a practice that died out soon after Couperin's death (Tunley 2004, 13). *Les Éléments* begins with the seven notes of the D harmonic minor scale sounded simultaneously (Fig. 1): a sustained, static chord, followed by the pulsating repetition of this construction, representing the I Chaos (the prolonged whole note diminished to quarter and eighth notes in the  $3/2$  metre). In his work about clusters, Henck refers to this chord as an orchestral diatonic cluster (Henck 2004, 52-54). After the diatonic cluster employed in Heinrich Biber's *Battalia à 10* (1673), Rebel's is one of the earliest examples of tone clusters in Western music.

The image shows a page of a musical score titled "I. Cahos." for Jean-Féry Rebel's "Les Éléments". It features four staves: 1. Violon (Violin), 2. Violon (Violin), Flûtes Haute Contre et Taille (Flutes, Hauts Contres, and Tailles), and Clavecin (Cello). The music is in 3/2 time. The first measure shows a sustained chord of the seven notes of the D harmonic minor scale (D, E, F, G, A, B-flat, C-sharp). The score includes dynamic markings such as "fort. doux.", "fort.", "très lent.", "Modérez", "doux.", and "insensé".

Fig. 1. Jean-Féry Rebel "Les Éléments  
Le Chaos" (m. 1-4)  
The tone cluster employed for the evocation of Chaos

The use of this tone cluster for the evocation of Chaos is not surprising: the seven notes sounded simultaneously create a dissonance that asks for resolution and the harmonious organization of the constituting elements.

Starting from the note c-sharp, the discourse ascends in a gradual progression (c-sharp, d, e, f, g, a b-flat – in Figure 2) that culminates with another dissonant chord: c-sharp, e, g, b-flat), that will resolve on the D minor chord:

Fig. 2. Jean-Féry Rebel – « Les Éléments »  
Le Chaos (m. 6-9)

The static cluster in the opening first measure (Figure 1) creates the impression of immobility: chaos is *static*, while creation means *movement*, suggested by the pulsating repetition of the dissonant chord (in Fig.1 – the inception of creation) and the ascending progression in Figure 2. Gradually the musical discourse becomes fluid, the eighth notes creating the sensation of flow and movement. Tone clusters, unlike most linear dissonances, are essentially static and of foremost importance is the sound mass, rather than the individual pitches (Reisberg 1975, 355). Rebel's choice of using a tone cluster for the representation of Chaos, anticipating future musical techniques, proves that he was a visionary for his epoch. In his dissonant chord, the composer shifts the focus from the importance of the individual sounds, highlighting instead features related to timbre, texture, and dynamics. The border between sound and noise fades, the immobile and chaotic state before Creation is evoked.

In the *Avvertisement* that precedes his *symphonie nouvelle*, Rebel states that his desire was to depict the confusion that reigned between the elements before the act of creation set an order among these (Rebel 1737, 5). To make each element easier to be recognized within this chaotic state he employed certain timbres, along with rhythmic and melodic particularities, in order to set each element apart from the others. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cahos Rebel presents the four elements (Rebel 1737, 5): *Water* is represented by the flutes, playing descending and ascending melodic movements that evoke the babble of flowing of water:



Fig. 3. Jean-Féry Rebel – “*Les Éléments*  
*Le Chaos: Water*”

*Fire* is represented by the quick and sharp bow movements and bravura passages of the violins:



Fig. 4. Jean-Féry Rebel – “*Les Éléments*  
*Le Chaos: Fire*” (second evocation)

*Air* is represented by the long high notes and trills, played by the piccolos:



Fig. 5. Jean-Féry Rebel – “*Les Éléments*  
*Le Chaos: Air*”

*Earth* is represented by the bass instruments, playing jerked (accentuated) long notes:



Fig. 6. Jean-Féry Rebel – “*Les Éléments*  
*Le Chaos: Earth* »

In the following chaoses these four themes, corresponding to the four elements, return and are subject to further developments. The 7<sup>th</sup> chaos, lacking the harmonic and rhythmic peculiarities of the previous chaoses, suggests the order associated with creation, also underlined by the long D Major Cadence – a contrast to the dissonance the work began with.

#### 4.2. The Elements and Dance

The following sections of the work comprise various dances and other pieces, some of which also bear the name of a certain element. However, the evocation of the elements is not as bold or as clear as was their presentation within the Chaos section. The association of the elements with certain dances may be explained through the particular features of the dances. Thus, the Earth is associated with the *loure*, a French dance of slow or moderate tempo (also known as *Gigue Lente*), characterized by an accent placed on the first beat. The intervention of the flutes (*Air pour les flutes*) evokes another element, the Water (as marked by the composer in the score).

Fire is associated with a *Chaconne*, a lively and fiery dance that originated in Spain. The musical form of the chaconne undergoes continuous variation, thus making the association with fire even more comprehensible, while the repeating bass pattern suggests the presence of the element Earth.

Air is associated with a piece called *Ramage*. The word *ramage* may refer to the song of birds in the branches of the trees, as the timbres chosen by the composer also suggest: violins and piccolos. This section is followed by *Rossignols*, indicated to be played by flutes, violins, and basso continuo, which further points to the relations between air and nature.

The Provençal dance *Tambourin* is associated by Rebel with the element Water. The original dance uses small flutes, however in his version Rebel assigns an important part to the bassoon (despite also employing the flute).

Dance seemed to contain the essence of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French music, offering composers an ideal model regarding construction, ornamentation, rhythmic suppleness, and expression. According to Tunley, in the seventeenth century it was believed that by dancing gracefully, “one could catch something of that celestial harmony which ennobled the spirit of those who took part.” (Tunley 2004, 8). Rebel’s representation of the elements through the use of certain features related to melody, rhythm, or timbre may point to the eighteenth-century perspective regarding dance as means of expressing character and imitating nature through movements (Burgess 2018, 104).

## 5. Conclusions

Rebel's contribution to the evolution of French music and dance influenced composers such as Jean-Philippe Rameau, who strove to evoke the birth of the four elements from Chaos in the overture of his opera *Zaïs* (1748). At the same time, *Les Éléments* points to Haydn's masterpiece *The Creation*, which also begins with a representation of Chaos, evoked through a unison C note played by the orchestra. However, Haydn refers to the process of Creation as presented in the Bible, the Book of Genesis. From a musical point of view, in Haydn's work Chaos is rather related to the harmonic vacuum (as suggested by the unison C) and the use of other musical conventions than those established during his time.

Rebel's depiction of Chaos and Creation, mirrors the ideas of the Classical Antiquity regarding the theory of elements and the creation of the universe. *Les Éléments* reflects to a certain extent the aesthetic ideal of French Baroque, that refers to art as harmonious imitation of nature. The structure of the work is balanced and clear, mirroring an equally balanced musical content, drifting further away from the violent articulation of inner passions, which characterizes Italian works of the epoch. The musical discourse is fluid and reflects the grace of dance movements, the entire construction mirroring the balanced and refined French spirit, as McClary observes: "*French music almost always implies the dance, and the rhythmic patterns of the surface are keyed to kinesthetic movements of arms and feet, to regular alternations between motion and the restoration of equilibrium*" (McClary 2000, 94-95).

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