

# Perspectives on Contemporary Musical Practices



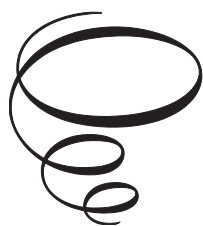
# Perspectives on Contemporary Musical Practices:

*From Research to Creation*

Edited by

Madalena Soveral

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Perspectives on Contemporary Musical Practices:  
From Research to Creation

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# FROM MYSTICISM TO MUSICAL REALIZATION: BIBLICAL SOURCES IN THE WORKS OF JOÃO PEDRO OLIVEIRA

ANA TELLES

## Abstract

A great number of João Pedro Oliveira's works composed between 1982 and 2016 are either directly or indirectly inspired by biblical sources, themes and motives. From orchestral to solo pieces, from chamber music to electroacoustic and video works, the composer's output is pervaded by such references, which inform various elements of his musical language. Thus, there is evidence of a strong and consistent link between the composer's personal mysticism and his creative process. This paper will strive to make that link evident, through an overall analysis of Oliveira's works as related to the Bible and a detailed account of some of those works.

João Pedro Oliveira (b. 1959) is one of the most prolific and well-respected Portuguese composers of our time. Besides being the author of over 100 musical works, written since 1982 in categories such as orchestral, stage, instrumental and chamber music, but also electroacoustic and video composition, he has been awarded over 50 international composition prizes, including 1st Prize at the *Concours International de Musique et d'Art Sonore Electroacoustique de Bourges*<sup>1</sup> and the *Giga-Hertz Special Prize*,<sup>2</sup> to name but two significant examples out of an impressive list.

Almost one third of his extensive musical production<sup>3</sup> refers either directly or indirectly to biblical sources, themes and motives. In fact, this choice is related to the composer's personal mysticism, of a Christian

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<sup>1</sup> France, 2002, 2007 and 2008.

<sup>2</sup> ZKM and SWR Studios, Germany, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> 32 out of 109 works.

religious nature. Oliveira (*Reply to the questionnaire drawn up by drawn up by Ana Telles, concerning biblical references in his work*, email to the author, October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017) explains the pervasive influence of the Bible in his work as a result of his own “spirituality” and his “relationship to God, life and transcendence”, which he acknowledges as important factors in his personal and creative life.<sup>4</sup> As a matter of fact, his “[...] Christian conviction (protestant by choice, but nevertheless imbued with a healthy ecumenical spirit)” (Salazar 2003, 87) has been one of the motors of his compositional activity. He considers that his music’s ultimate goal is to seek the beautiful and the spiritual, because – according to him – in God we find the purest, most extreme and sublime form of beauty; in that sense, all he does as a composer may be considered to be *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*<sup>5</sup> (Salazar 2003, 86).

In doing so, Oliveira may be considered a striking example of a tendency well defined by Luigi Garbini (Garbini 2009, 465), when considering “sacred music” in the years that followed the Second Vatican Council:

The displacement towards the private sphere of a good deal of the forms in which religiosity expresses itself has progressively brought together the interiority of the spirit and the liberty of Art, legitimizing a progressive evanescence of the contours of the sacred and inaugurating at the same time a new age of sound, of which purity does not coincide with the ‘goodness of forms’ of Pius X’s *motu proprio* [...]<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “Tem que ver com a minha espiritualidade e [a] minha relação com Deus, a vida, e o transcendente. Se essas coisas são importantes na minha vivência, é natural que se reflitam no meu trabalho e na minha criatividade.”

<sup>5</sup> “To the greatest glory of God”. A similar, but even more explicit attitude is evident in the fact that the German composer Bernd Alois Zimmerman (1918-1970) subtitled all but one of his works with the Jesuit motto O.A.M.D.G. (*Omnia ad maiorem Dei gloriam* - All for the greater glory of God).

<sup>6</sup> “Le déplacement vers la sphère privée d’une bonne partie des formes dans lesquelles s’exprime la religiosité a progressivement rapproché l’intériorité de l’esprit de la liberté de l’art, légitimant une progressive évanescence des contours du sacré et inaugurant dans le même temps un nouvel âge du son, dont la pureté non seulement ne coïncide pas avec la « bonté des formes », dont parlait le *motu proprio* de Pie X, mais recherche aussi une organisation archaïque du son qui aille de pair avec une primitivité non contaminée du rite.”

Furthermore, the same author refers to “a non-institutional type of religiosity, which encourages an approach to sacred themes as a contemplative sound space” (Garbini 2009, 466),<sup>7</sup> a view that applies accurately to Oliveira’s case.

Several authors and scholars, such as Nuno Barreiros, Alexandre Delgado and Virgílio Melo, have emphasized the impact of Oliveira’s spirituality on his work as a composer. According to Delgado (Delgado 2003, 11),

Nuno Barreiros<sup>8</sup> considered him ‘our [Portuguese] mystic’, an heir of Messiaen (an organist, like him) capable of reconciling extreme rationality with a truly religious feeling. [...] That biblical breath is reflected even in the methodic cadence of a fertile production, which reminds us of the serene confidence of the artist-artisan, who steadily pursues his mission of seeking the divine, with no arrogance, false modesty or proselytism.<sup>9</sup>

Melo (Melo 2003, 24-25), in turn, states that

Oliveira’s work is a powerful voice, not only on behalf of its musical qualities, but most of all because of the epic and contemplative breath, of great spiritual depth, that animates it. The demand for the Bible (as a kind of *lectio divina*) is essential in his artistic path, an aspect that may not be relativized in any serious reading of his work.<sup>10</sup>

As a matter of fact, Oliveira believes that the essence of the creative act is the result of an unexplainable revelation which, for the believer, comes from God (João Pedro Oliveira, *Reply to the questionnaire drawn up by drawn up by Ana Telles, concerning biblical references in his work*, email to the author, October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017); I shall return to this aspect. Several personal

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<sup>7</sup> “[...] une religiosité de type non institutionnel, encourageant une approche des thématiques du sacré comme espace contemplatif du son.”

<sup>8</sup> N. Barreiros (1928-2001), Portuguese musicologist, music critic and radio broadcaster.

<sup>9</sup> “‘o nosso místico’, herdeiro de Messiaen (organista como ele), capaz de conjugar extrema racionalidade e um verdadeiro sentimento religioso. [...] Esse fôlego bíblico reflecte-se até na cadência metódica de uma produção fértil, que lembra a serena confiança do artista-artesão, inabalável na sua missão de buscar o divino, sem arrogância, falsa modéstia ou proselitismo”.

<sup>10</sup> “[...] a obra de João Pedro Oliveira é uma voz ponderosa, não só pelas suas qualidades musicais, mas sobretudo pelo fôlego épico e contemplativo, de grande profundidade espiritual, que a anima. A manducação da Bíblia, (à maneira de uma *lectio divina*) é essencial no seu percurso artístico e tal aspecto não pode ser relativizado em qualquer abordagem séria do seu trabalho.”

factors may have forged his spiritual profile, which, in turn, relates directly to the choice of biblical texts as sources of inspiration for a large number of his compositions. Firstly, he comes from a protestant religious family and has attended different churches throughout his life. His grandfather, Luís das Neves Paiva<sup>11</sup> (João Pedro Oliveira, Email to the author, December 31st 2018), and great uncle were both pastors of the Amoreiras Evangelical Church<sup>12</sup> (João Pedro Oliveira, Personal communication to the author, on Dec. 30<sup>th</sup>, 2008), one of the largest protestant communities in Lisbon; his father, Domingos Oliveira,<sup>13</sup> played the organ in the same congregation (Fletcher 2011, 55). Secondly, the fact that João Pedro Oliveira studied the organ and served as a church organist, particularly in the US, deepened his mystical sense and made him discover the work of several composers, such as Olivier Messiaen, whose mysticism “resonated empathically”<sup>14</sup> with his own (João Pedro Oliveira, *Reply to the questionnaire drawn up by drawn up by Ana Telles, concerning biblical references in his work*, email to the author, October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017). Oliveira’s study of Gregorian chant<sup>15</sup> and medieval music theory,<sup>16</sup> albeit not for spiritual reasons, may equally have nourished his personal mysticism. In his own words, “[...] my spirituality comes from life experience, and has been nurtured by it”<sup>17</sup> (João Pedro Oliveira, *Reply to the questionnaire drawn up by Ana Telles, concerning biblical references in his work*, email to the author, October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017).

The composer has, as a consequence, developed a true fascination for the Bible. When asked which musical, literary or other art works he would take into exile, he immediately mentioned the Sacred Scriptures (Salazar, 2003, p. 101). The hermeneutical question is central for him, for he considers that “one of the wonders of the biblical text is its capacity for being interpreted in diverse ways”, an option which he associates particularly with protestant theology (Salazar 2003, 102). In fact, his specific interest in spiritual and/

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<sup>11</sup> 1904 – 1990.

<sup>12</sup> According to João Pedro Oliveira (Personal communication to the author, on Dec. 30<sup>th</sup>), several of his family members, including his mother, were active members of the Amoreira protestant community until he was born, in 1959. After that date, the elderly members kept their involvement in that community, whereas Oliveira’s parents’ bond to it was weakened, due to the fact that they moved out of town.

<sup>13</sup> 1928 – 2009.

<sup>14</sup> “ressoaram empaticamente”.

<sup>15</sup> At the *Instituto Gregoriano de Lisboa*.

<sup>16</sup> In the US.

<sup>17</sup> “[...] a minha espiritualidade vem da experiência da vida, e tem-se alentado essencialmente por isso.”.

or biblical thought is spurred by what he calls its “magic”, made evident in countless “metaphors and figures of style that render it susceptible of the most varied interpretations and ‘recreations’.” (Salazar 2003, 87-88).

José Carlos Lopes de Miranda’s essay on Liturgical Music in Portugal, during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (Miranda 2017), allows us to place Oliveira’s religious or biblical-related works into a wider national tendency. As a matter of fact, Miranda shows that, although there was a serious downturn in the patronage of liturgical, religious or biblical related music and other arts after the suppression of religious orders in Portugal in 1834, complemented – more than a century later – by the fact that the Second Vatican Council’s guidelines concerning the catholic liturgy made great genres of liturgical music obsolete (such as settings of the Mass, and particularly the *Requiem* mass, Magnificat, Credo and other liturgical or biblical texts), numerous composers active in Portugal in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century (of which he cites around 40 names) have written such works. He attributes that prolific activity to an “[...] authentic expression of the catholic subsoil of our culture”<sup>18</sup> (Miranda 2017, 464), which, in his opinion, underlies the different approaches and spiritual tendencies of individual composers, such as João Pedro Oliveira.

Furthermore, Miranda identifies two other important “musical renaissances” that may have spurred creativity in the realms of liturgical, religious or biblical related music in Portugal during the time period we are considering; the first of these occurred in the 1950s when, as a reaction to the *motu proprio* of Pope Pius X (to which I alluded earlier), Júlia d’Almendra (1904-1992) reenacted the study, practice and performance of Gregorian chant both in Fátima and in Lisbon, where a music school under the name *Centro de Estudos Gregorianos* (nowadays *Instituto Gregoriano de Lisboa*) was created. This important “musical renaissance” was complemented, in Miranda’s opinion, by the establishment and subsequent professional activity, as organist and teacher, of Antoine Sibertin-Blanc (1930-2012) in Lisbon. João Pedro Oliveira benefitted greatly from both factors, having started his musical studies at the aforementioned *Centro de Estudos Gregorianos*, where he was an organ pupil of Sibertin-Blanc.

From a broader point of view, Robert Sholl and Sander van Maas (Sholl and Maas 2017, 2) claim that, through the works of Toru Takemitsu (1930-1996), György Ligeti (1923-2006), Arvo Pärt (born 1935), Karlheinz Stockhausen (1928-2007), John Cage (1912-1992), Claude Vivier (1948-

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<sup>18</sup> “[...] *Missa e Ofício* continuam a mobilizar os criadores mais notáveis e são ainda lídima expressão do subsolo católico da nossa cultura.”

1983), John Taverner (1944-2013), Pierre Boulez (1925-2016), Jonathan Harvey (1939-2012), Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) and others, “a new space has emerged for the rethinking and the re-experiencing of ideas, affects, gestures, tones, sounds and words that have belonged, and in some cases still belong, to the domains of religion and spirituality.”

João Pedro Oliveira’s works related to the Bible may be read in this context; Carlos de Pontes Leça includes him in a group of composers (consisting of several of those already mentioned, but also some others, both Portuguese or active in Portugal) whose works, either liturgical or spiritually-inspired, reflect “personal and explicit manifestations of Christian faith” (Leça 2010, 85).

Oliveira’s works’ inner connection to the musical language, aesthetics and, particularly, spiritual attitude of Olivier Messiaen, to which I have alluded previously in this essay, deserve to be considered in detail. In fact, as an organ student, Oliveira had his first contacts with contemporary music while hearing a fellow student play *Dieu parmi nous*, by Messiaen, one of the works he later included in his own graduation recital (Salazar 2003, 91). According to him, that contact was made possible by his organ teacher, Antoine Sibertin-Blanc, who was open to recent stylistic trends in music and made sure his organ students were familiar with that repertoire, in sharp contrast with the much more conservative attitude that was then the rule in piano classes.

While other composers active in Europe in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century turned to neo-tonality, neo-modality and minimalism in their spiritually inspired music, as potent strategies against the crisis of musical modernism, “Messiaen had evolved a highly personal and controversial idiom which shocked some by its modernity, while offending others by its unabashed harmonic voluptuousness, the latter including the young Pierre Boulez [...]” (Bannister 2015, 10).

Both for Messiaen and for the Portuguese composer, the quest for Beauty and the Sublime as manifestations of God is central in their musical output; furthermore, for both composers, Beauty and the Sublime are inextricably linked; Oliveira (Oliveira, João Pedro Oliveira n.d.) states: “[...] I try to create something that may have a little glimpse of beauty.” He justifies that statement through the association of Beauty and the Sublime to God, thus it follows that any form of Art has, for him, an essentially “spiritual meaning”:

[...] in God we find the purest and most extreme dimension of the beautiful, or better said, the sublime (where the aesthetic value of the object is “subjugated” by its own dimensions, surpassing itself). If we follow this thought, we realize



that the transmission of that emotion of the “beautiful” by any form of Art will undoubtedly have a spiritual meaning which, ultimately, may spur a sweet and ephemeral moment of divine contemplation.<sup>19</sup> (Salazar 2003, 86)

The same association is made, regarding Messiaen’s music and thought, by Peter Bannister (2015, 14):

[...] Messiaen’s attempt to saving modernity from itself relies, at least in part, on insisting that the *aural* basis of music, its sensory beauty, is no mere epiphenomenon to be jettisoned in the quest for immaterial absolutes, but rather has value in and of itself, by virtue of its identity as part of Divine creation. Messiaen’s unfashionable emphasis on the significance of the beautiful in intimating Divine transcendence suggests that the beautiful and the sublime should be viewed in a “both-and” rather than an “either-or” relationship.

However, neither for Messiaen nor for Oliveira, is the idea of the Beautiful in Music confined to the renewal of practices and techniques of a remote past that does not take into account the stylistic and aesthetic developments of their own time. According to Stephen Broad (Broad 2013, 271),

Messiaen’s position is doctrinaire: he is not suggesting that the religious or sacred *might* be expressed by contemporary musical techniques, but rather that it *must* be: ‘Religious music *must* be an expression of Life’, he says: ‘This life... *calls for* powerfully original and varied means of expression’ [my emphases].

Broad claims that, by assuming such a position, Messiaen was clearly supported by the *Art sacré* movement in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, as opposed to the papal dictum of the 1950s, which favored a more traditional musical approach, one that follows the “appropriate laws of art.” (Broad 2013, 277). In positioning himself that way, he was in clear opposition to the conservative “sulpician art” (Rubin 1961, 12) in Paris, but also against

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<sup>19</sup> “[...] em Deus encontramos a dimensão mais pura e extrema do belo, ou melhor ainda, do sublime (onde o valor estético do objecto é “esmagado” pelas dimensões dele próprio, superando-se a si mesmo). Se seguirmos este pensamento, então a transmissão dessa emoção do “belo” por qualquer forma de arte, terá sem dúvida um significado espiritual que, em última instância, poderá provocar um doce e fugidio momento de contemplação divina.”

all forms of neoclassicism, whose representatives he denounced as “the partisans of fake Bach”<sup>20</sup> (Messiaen 1939).

In an analogous way, Oliveira refuses any direct return to a distant musical past, thus stepping away from several post-modernist tendencies; he actually draws a line of separation between two groups of composers of his own generation: the ones, in which he includes himself, who do not denigrate “the heritage of the recent past, namely the works of Webern<sup>21</sup> and his successors, while others refuse it, in a more or less perceptible form, preferring older models, or different aesthetics.” (Salazar 2003, 88).

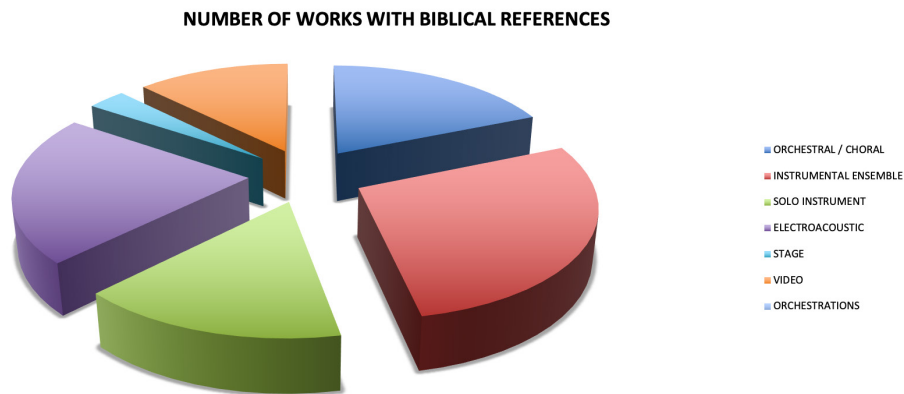


Fig. 1-1: João Pedro Oliveira: Number of works bearing biblical references (by instrumental category). Drawn up by the Author.

As Fig. 1-1 shows, almost one third of his musical works relates to the Bible. In fact, in the realms of opera, orchestral music, electroacoustic and video works, a vast majority of his compositions carry biblical references;<sup>22</sup> we may suppose that the vastness of different timbres and imagistic resources available in all these categories, necessarily or frequently associated with the use of solo voices, may account for their choice as privileged vehicles

<sup>20</sup> “[...] les partisans du faux Bach [...]”.

<sup>21</sup> The allusion to Webern must be seen in the broader context of post-serialism, as the composer himself admits in the lines that follow, to which the contribution of Messiaen’s works, particularly of the late 1940s, must not be neglected.

<sup>22</sup> Oliveira’s single opera, *Patmos* (1990), as well as seven of his eight orchestral works (written between 1991 and 2016), seven out of eleven electroacoustic works (from 1986 to 2015) and four of his five video works (from 2013 to 2016) relate either directly or indirectly to the Bible.



for biblical thought, images and metaphors. In this sense, Oliveira's works related to or inspired by Biblical texts and references may support the claim enunciated by Robert Sholl and Sander van Maas:

A contemporary spiritual music cannot be understood, as some critics suggest, as the Emperor's new clothes but as a response to post-Enlightenment secularization, as well as a reaction to, and a certain continuance of the nineteenth-century Gesamtkunstwerk (music, usually dramatic music, that ideally synthesizes other arts such that the individual arts themselves are transcended) [...]. (Sholl and Maas 2017, 2)

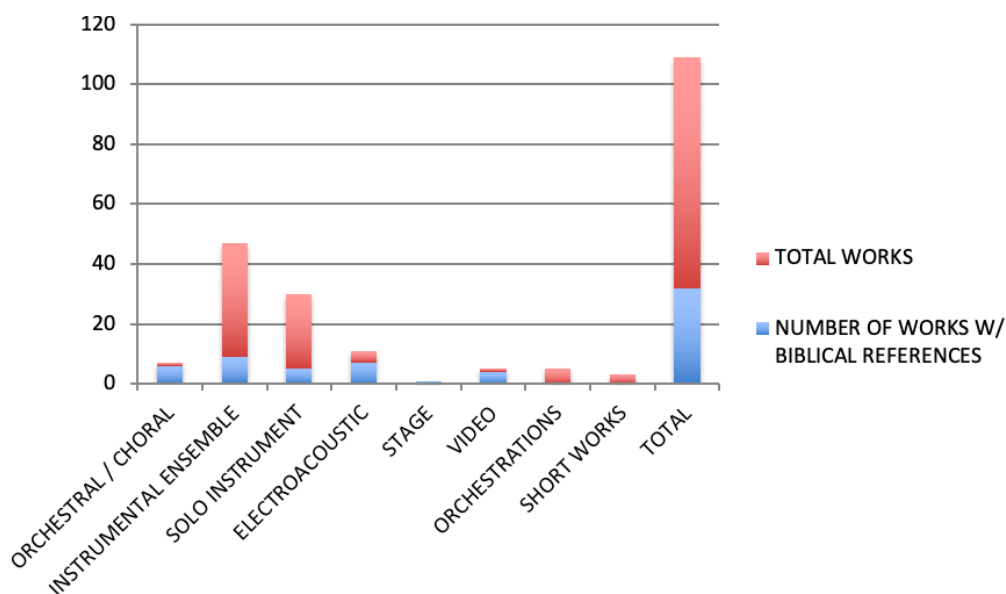


Fig. 1-2: João Pedro Oliveira: Number of works bearing biblical references (by instrumental category), as related to the remaining works. Created by the Drawn up by the Author.

Quite on the contrary, in the domains of solo and instrumental ensemble music, as an even greater majority of works is totally free from biblical connotations;<sup>23</sup> we may speculate that more limited media, as well as specific

<sup>23</sup> Only nine out of 47 works for instrumental ensemble, and five out of 30 solo instrumental pieces have biblical sources of inspiration. Furthermore, neither Oliveira's five orchestrations nor his three short works can be linked in any way to the Bible.

compositional constraints (such as particular instrumentalists' demands and performance circumstances, for example), limit the composer's desire to paint his ideally vast biblical frescoes in these genres.

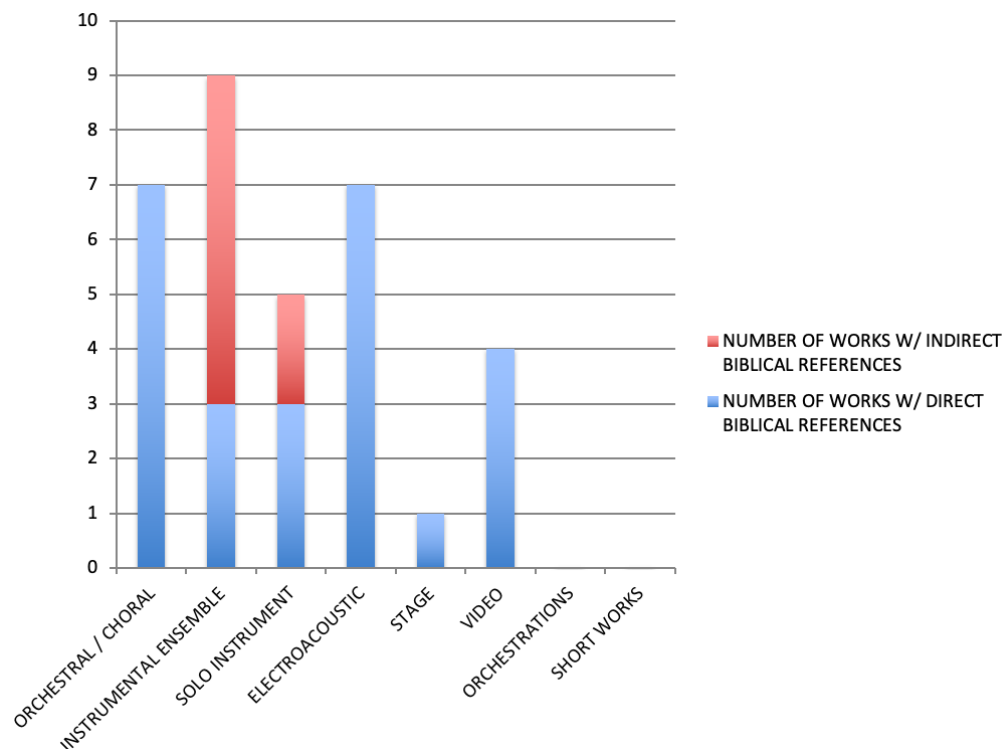


Fig. 1-3: João Pedro Oliveira: Number of works bearing direct or indirect biblical references (by instrumental category).

About one third<sup>24</sup> of Oliveira's 32 works that relate to the Bible does so in an indirect way, whereas the remaining two thirds<sup>25</sup> bear direct relationships with its texts. According to the composer, the former has a religious character; as for the latter, a biblical text is either deployed or implied. The group of nine works that are indirectly linked to the Bible may be subdivided into three subcategories, as follows:

<sup>24</sup> 9.

<sup>25</sup> 23.

1. Works inspired by literary or poetic, non-liturgical, non-biblical texts, expressing some sense of religious belief that the composer identifies with.

- *Images de la Mémoire*<sup>26</sup> is based on an excerpt from Saint Augustine's *Confessions*. According to the composer, the piece "doesn't bear a direct relationship to biblical texts, but the biblical principle is present"<sup>27</sup> (João Pedro Oliveira, *Reply to the questionnaire drawn up by Ana Telles, concerning biblical references in his work*, email to the author, October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017). *Peregrinação*<sup>28</sup> refers to the homonymic work by 16<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese adventurer and explorer Fernão Mendes Pinto (João Pedro Oliveira, Email to the author, October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017). For the composer, a "peregrination" is "a voyage through distant places, in search of some mystical or marvelous goal". But "that trip in space is not the essential one. To be a pilgrim is not so much to leave for a distant land, but to learn to find oneself and to discover the deep meaning of one's existence." Therefore, "In this piece, through sound, what we propose metaphorically is a continuous search for the path of enlightenment, what is demanded is an answer to the mystery of things and the revelation of our role in the universe" (Oliveira, *Lista das Obras com Relações Bíblicas* 2017).

- *A Escada Estreita*<sup>29</sup> is inspired by *Na Mão de Deus*,<sup>30</sup> a sonnet by 19<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese poet Antero de Quental. This work is related to specific moments of the composer's life, rather than to a biblical text (Salazar 2003, 99). Nevertheless, the sonnet interprets basic principles of Christianity (such as abandoning pride and the desire to succeed, as well as embracing humility), according to the composer's own reading of it (João Pedro Oliveira, *Reply to the questionnaire drawn up by Ana Telles, concerning biblical references in his work*, email to the author, October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017).

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<sup>26</sup> For soprano and string sextet (1992).

<sup>27</sup> "Não tem uma ligação directa com textos bíblicos, mas o princípio está presente."

<sup>28</sup> For string quartet (1995).

<sup>29</sup> For flute and electronics (1999).

<sup>30</sup> "In God's Hand".

2. Works based on Hebrew words from the Bible, relating to their specific interpretation in the text from which they were taken and the meaningful message they transmit to the composer. *Timshel*<sup>31</sup>, *Towdah*<sup>32</sup> and *Hokmah*<sup>33</sup> constitute the so-called “Contrition” cycle<sup>34</sup> (João Pedro Oliveira, *Lista das obras com relações bíblicas*, email to the author, September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2017).

- The word *Timshel* appears in Genesis 4:7, meaning “...thou mayest”; the composer came across this word which, according to him, “relates to the capacity of choice given to human beings” (Oliveira, Works n.d.), while reading John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*. In his words,

In the process of composing, we are confronted with many choices, and the final work is the result of the options we made. The same happens in life. Choices made in one specific moment influence the future of our existence. *Timshel* is a composition where I manifest joy and gratefulness for the choices I made correctly, and sadness for those where I failed. (Oliveira, Works n.d.)

- *Hokmah* comes from the Book of Proverbs (2:6) (João Pedro Oliveira, *Reply to the questionnaire drawn up by Ana Telles, concerning biblical references in his work*, email to the author, October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017) and refers to “the wisdom needed to make the right choice” (Oliveira, Works n.d.).

- The word *Towdah* appears in Psalm 50:14 (João Pedro Oliveira, *Reply to the questionnaire drawn up by Ana Telles, concerning biblical references in his work*, email to the author, October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017), meaning “praise”; it encompasses a “thanksgiving prayer for the correct choices made, and the regret and confession for the wrong choices” (Oliveira, Works n.d.).

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<sup>31</sup> For flute, clarinet, violin, cello, piano and electronics (2007).

<sup>32</sup> For flute, bass clarinet, piano, percussion and electronics (2009).

<sup>33</sup> For clarinet and piano (2010).

<sup>34</sup> “Contrição”; the composer intends to add a fourth piece to this cycle.

3. Works related to some aspect of Christian prayer or liturgy, but not directly linked to the Bible.

- *Litania*<sup>35</sup> refers to a specific genre of recitative prayer, characterized by the invocation of numerous saints, along with supplications addressed to them. According to Oliveira (Works n.d.),

In a Litania prayer, the same phrase is repeated over and over, without interruption. This repetition causes an ascending path, that increases tension and the dramatic motion in this prayer. This path leads to a higher level of spirituality, where words, thoughts, or reason make no more sense, and only faith is the engine that connects the human being and the divine.

- The title *Vox Sum Vitae*<sup>36</sup> comes from an inscription in a church bell in Strasbourg<sup>37</sup> (João Pedro Oliveira, *Reply to the questionnaire drawn up by Ana Telles, concerning biblical references in his work*, email to the author, October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017). While travelling in Germany, he was woken on a Sunday morning by the sound of church bells, announcing the early morning church service. In the piece bearing this title, vibraphone and electronics produce an illusory effect, recreating the sound of “a carillon of infinite bells” (Oliveira, Works n.d.).

- *6 Alleluias*<sup>38</sup> symbolizes joy and refers to the *organum* of the Middle Ages and the corresponding melismas.

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<sup>35</sup> For tenor saxophone, guitar and electronics (2003).

<sup>36</sup> For vibraphone and electronics (2011).

<sup>37</sup> “Vox Ego Sum Vitae. Voco vos; Orate, venite”.

<sup>38</sup> For six Iberian organs (2011-15).

WORKS INDIRECTLY LINKED TO THE BIBLE			
TYPE	DESCRIPTION	TITLE	DATE
1	Works inspired by literary or poetic, non-liturgical, non-biblical texts, expressing some sense of religious belief that the composer identifies with	<i>Images de la Mémoire</i>	1992
		<i>Peregrinação</i>	1995
		<i>A Escada estreita</i>	1999
2	Works based on Hebrew words taken from the Bible, the way in which each of these words is interpreted in the biblical text from which it was taken, and the meaningful message it transmits to the composer (“Contrition” cycle)	<i>Timshel</i>	2007
		<i>Towdah</i>	2009
		<i>Hokmah</i>	2010
3	Works related to some aspect of Christian prayer or liturgy, but not directly to the Bible	<i>Litania</i>	2003
		<i>Vox Sum Vitae</i>	2011
		<i>6 Alleluias</i>	2011-15

Table 1-4: João Pedro Oliveira: Works indirectly linked to the Bible. Drawn up by the Author.

As for Oliveira’s works that bear direct relationships with biblical texts, either deployed or implied, we may equally refine that general qualification through the definition of three different subcategories:

1. Settings of biblical texts or textual elements from biblical texts:

- *Psalmus* and *Canticum*<sup>39</sup> were composed sequentially, in 1986 and 1987, at the Stony Brook University Electronic Music Studio A; if the former uses long and plain vowels, therefore bearing a very distant (albeit

<sup>39</sup> Electroacoustic music (stereo; 1986 and 1987, respectively).

real) relationship to the text of a Psalm, the latter “uses the spoken word as compositional material” (Oliveira, Works n.d.), the text consisting of fragments from Psalm 34, in Latin.

- *A Cidade Eterna* (*The Eternal City*),<sup>40</sup> *Patmos*,<sup>41</sup> *Visão*<sup>42</sup> and *Requiem*<sup>43</sup> (along with *Íris* and *Tessares*, to which I will refer later) belong to “a group of seven works inspired by the prophecies of the Bible (Old and New Testament)” (Oliveira, Works n.d.). Written in 1988, *A Cidade Eterna* is based on excerpts from Chapters 21 and 22 of the Book of Revelation, also in Latin. According to (Melo 2003, 36), in this work, which he considers Oliveira’s electroacoustic masterpiece,

[...] the composer does not just give the listener a glimpse, as beautiful as it may be, of the city where night does not exist; the whole piece traces a progression, through a particular mixture of teleology and permanence, towards the text’s enunciation, transfigured and integrated into the electronic atmosphere.<sup>44</sup>

*Patmos*, Oliveira’s only opera, sets chapters 1 through 4 of the same Book of Revelation, but in Greek.

*Visão*, which may be considered a cantata, is based upon chapter 2, verses 28 to 32,<sup>45</sup> of the Book of Joel, in Hebrew; I shall revisit this particular work later on.

As for the *Requiem*, an extensive choral-symphonic work with soloists and electronics, biblical text sources are numerous, including Isaiah 6, 1-8; Psalm 118:26; Psalm 130; Matthew 2:9; Mark 13:8, 24; Luke 21:25-28; John 11:25-26; I Corinthians 15:52; II Peter 3:13; Revelation 4:8, 22:20 and Esdras IV.<sup>46</sup> In it, the composer chose to use Hebrew,

<sup>40</sup> Electroacoustic music (4 channels; 1987).

<sup>41</sup> Opera for soloists, choir, orchestra and electronics (1990).

<sup>42</sup> For soprano, orchestra and tape (16 channels; 1992).

<sup>43</sup> For 2 choirs, soloists, orchestra, organ, tape (6 channels; 1993-4).

<sup>44</sup> “[...] o compositor não se limita a dar-nos a visão, por bela que seja, da cidade onde não há noite.; toda a peça traça uma progressão, numa peculiar mistura de teleologia e permanência, em direcção ao enunciar do texto, transfigurado e integrado no ambiente electrónico.”

<sup>45</sup> And not Chapter 3, verses 1 through 5, as Melo indicates (Melo 2003, 30).

<sup>46</sup> For the identification of all biblical and/or liturgical text excerpts, I worked upon the information available on the composer’s website (Oliveira, Works n.d.), additional program notes provided by email (Oliveira, Unedited program notes, provided to

Greek and Latin languages, not only because of their historical biblical associations (Hebrew with the Old Testament, Greek with the New Testament and Latin as the Bible's transmission language through the first centuries of Christianity<sup>47</sup>), but also because of their specific phonetics, which acted as a stimulus for his compositional thought (João Pedro Oliveira, *Reply to the questionnaire drawn up by Ana Telles, concerning biblical references in his work*, email to the author, October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017). We must note that a turn to Hebrew and Greek languages in contemporary spiritual music happened in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for example in Dieter Schnebel's<sup>48</sup> *Missa* (1984-1987), as a way of "amplifying the diversity, despite the homologation of a dead, artificial and sacralized language such as Latin" (Garbini 2009, 473).<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, Oliveira's bold and fluid choice of biblical texts for his Requiem aligns with a tendency, after Vatican II, for "freer access to the sacred texts, detached from all confessional engagement, also marking a general distancing from the liturgical function."<sup>50</sup> (Garbini 2009, 465-466).

- *Shîyr*<sup>51</sup> sets text from Solomon's *Song of Songs*, namely 1:1,2; 5:5,6,8; 7:11-13.<sup>52</sup>

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the author by email, on October 9th, 2017) and an interview with the composer, carried out by myself, for the specific purpose of this research (João Pedro Oliveira, *Reply to the questionnaire drawn up by Ana Telles, concerning biblical references in his work*, email to the author, October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017). Further research was undertaken with the support of Professor José Carlos Lopes de Miranda (Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Braga), whom I wish to thank.

<sup>47</sup> Considering Oliveira's *Requiem*, Virgílio Melo (2003, 29) associates the three languages in question with the revelation, the transmission/translation and the ritual. He furthermore emphasizes the Hebrew matrix of both the Old and the New Testaments (Melo 2003, 25).

<sup>48</sup> Born in 1930.

<sup>49</sup> "L'hébreu et le grec amplifient la diversité, en dépit de l'homologation d'une langue morte, artificielle et sacralisée comme le latin."

<sup>50</sup> "[...] un accès aux textes sacrés plus libre et détaché de tout engagement confessionnel mais marquant aussi en général une prise de distance à l'égard de la fonction liturgique."

<sup>51</sup> For 2 sopranos, orchestra and tape (6 channels; 2003).

<sup>52</sup> About this particular work, I refer the reader to a passage from the interview which Álvaro Salazar carried out with the composer (Salazar 2003, 102-103).



2. Works based on structural operating procedures directly inspired by biblical texts and allegorical elements associated with them:

- *Tessares*<sup>53</sup> may be considered a piano concerto. While not actually being a setting of a biblical text, its inspiration is drawn from three excerpts from the Book of Revelation, cited below:

Before the throne there was a sea of glass, like crystal. And in the midst of the throne and around the throne, were four living creatures. (Revelation 4:6);

And I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar which is before God saying: Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates. (Revelation 9:13,14);

The city is laid out as a square, its length, breadth and height are equal. (Revelation 21:16).

Taking these excerpts as a starting point, according to the composer, the work “relates to the vision of the completeness of God and the creation, symbolized by the number four in the creatures around the throne, the angels and the earth, and finally by the total perfection of the Eternal City” (Oliveira, Works n.d.). Therefore, following a generative principle akin to fractal geometry, the number four has determined the construction of both the small-scale elements deployed and the overall formal scheme; in Oliveira’s words (Oliveira, Works n.d.):

*Tessares* is based on the relations existing between four intervals, each one at a specific range and between two specific notes. Each pair of notes has a function of “tonic-dominant” for each one of the four parts into which the piece is divided.

- *Pirâmides de Cristal*<sup>54</sup> follows the same generative principle and uses the same specific musical materials as *Tessares*.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> For piano and orchestra (1991, rev. 2007).

<sup>54</sup> For piano (1993).

<sup>55</sup> This work, and particularly its structural operative processes based on fractal geometrical principles, have been the object of two detailed analyses, by Isabel Soveral and Helena Santana; cf. (Soveral 2016) and (Santana 2003).

- *Íris*<sup>56</sup> is written for the same instruments that Messiaen adopted in his *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, with electronics. Through the composer's words, we may understand the relationship between the underlying biblical allegorical elements and the formal structure of the piece:

The inspiration for this piece is also from the book of Revelation from the New Testament, and relates to the vision the prophet John had of the throne of God, with the rainbow (Iris in the original Greek language) around it, and the twenty-four elders worshipping. The piece is composed itself [*sic*] of twenty-four sections that are not separated but coexist so as to form an organic whole. [...] (Oliveira, Works n.d.)<sup>57</sup>

- *Abyssus ascendens ad aeternum splendorem*<sup>58</sup> may be considered a concerto for piano, orchestra and electronics. Based on what the composer calls "Hebrew mysticism" (Oliveira, Works n.d.)<sup>59</sup>, but also on a visit to the Convento dos Capuchos, in Sintra (Portugal) and the reading of Simone Weil's works, it refers to the souls' journey from the chamber of Guf through the Seventh Heaven; according to Oliveira (Works n.d.), "Faith is the power that takes the soul in its journey from the descending of the Guf, through the earthly existence, and finally into the Limb of the Fathers." The work's formal structure mirrors this ascending progress of the soul, following the sources cited.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> For violin, clarinet, cello, piano and electronics (2000).

<sup>57</sup> Paul Rudy has produced an extensive analysis of *Íris*, including an in-depth discussion about the formal structure of the work and its biblical sources of inspiration; cf. (Rudy 2003). We should equally note that this work connects to one of Albrecht Dürer's *Apocalypse* engravings, embodying a sense of "almost frantic internal agitation", or "turmoil" that the composer tried to reproduce musically, through continuous chains of phrases and a play of "questions" and "responses" between instruments and electronics (Salazar 2003, 99-100).

<sup>58</sup> For piano, orchestra and tape (6 channels; 2005).

<sup>59</sup> In fact, we find references to the seven heavens in biblical sources such as Esdras III and IV, as well as Enoch III:71. Luke 16:22 refers to the bosom of Abraham.

<sup>60</sup> A succinct analysis of this work, relating its structural elements to the symbolic references acknowledged by the composer, has been carried out by Ana Cláudia Assis; cf. (Assis 2014).

3. Works inspired by specific biblical texts, which are not actually set but only symbolically referred to:

- *Sete Visões do Apocalipse*<sup>61</sup> consists of a series of seven organ pieces, all inspired by specific biblical texts, including three excerpts from the Book of Revelation (8:1, 10:9, 20:4);

- *Espiral de Luz / Spiral of Light*<sup>62</sup> is inspired by the Prophet Ezekiel's first vision (Ezekiel 1:4), which concerns "a fire enveloping itself"; so is *Et ignis involvens*<sup>63</sup>, the title of which quotes the same line, in Latin. This is the first work of the "Elements cycle", composed of four electroacoustic pieces and their more recent video counterparts, each focusing on one of the four elements (Fire, Earth, Water, Air), according to specific biblical allusions from the Old Testament.

- 'Âphâr<sup>64</sup> is the second piece of the Elements cycle. Inspired by Jacob's dream, as described in the Book of Genesis (28), it concerns a stairway, connecting Heaven and Earth, which grants access to infinity to those who are able to go through the difficult ascending process. The title consists of a Hebrew word meaning "dust".

- *Hydatos*<sup>65</sup> is the third piece of the Elements cycle; the title, in Greek, means "water". The work alludes to the very first verses of the Bible (Genesis 1:2).

- *Neshamah*<sup>66</sup> closes the Elements cycle; the title refers to the Hebrew word for "breath", taken from Genesis 2:7.

- *Hû yeshûphekâ rô'sh*<sup>67</sup> relates to the "first prophecy concerning Mary's maternity, as well as the impact her son Jesus would have on Humanity"<sup>68</sup> (Oliveira, Works n.d.); the biblical source of inspiration is Genesis 3:15.

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<sup>61</sup> For organ (1982).

<sup>62</sup> For string quartet (2005).

<sup>63</sup> Electroacoustic music version (8 channels; 2005) and video version (2014).

<sup>64</sup> Electroacoustic music version (8 channels; 2007) and video version (2015).

<sup>65</sup> Electroacoustic music version (8 channels; 2008) and video version (2012).

<sup>66</sup> Electroacoustic music version (stereo; 2015) and video version (2016).

<sup>67</sup> For organ (2015).

<sup>68</sup> Author's free translation.

- *Ut ex invisibilibus visibilia fiant*<sup>69</sup> is based on António Vieira's *History of the Future*, a book in which the author, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese Jesuit priest, predicts the establishment of the so-called "Fifth Empire". That empire, created in Portugal and based on tolerance, peace and faith, would be a spiritual, not material one. Vieira's assumption comes from the reading and analysis of biblical texts, such as the Books of Daniel and of Revelation, the prophecies of which he intended to reveal to those who were able to understand, as indicated in the quote that Oliveira used for the title of his work. Therefore, this piece is indirectly inspired by those biblical prophecies; its structure is generated from the initial four notes of Portugal's national anthem, which are concealed at the beginning and become apparent as the work progresses, in a musical depiction of the meaning of the title.

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<sup>69</sup> For orchestra and electronics (2010 / 2016); the second, revised and enlarged version (2016), with electronics, replaces the first one, which was about one third shorter (14' vs. 21'); cf. João Pedro Oliveira, Email to the author, October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

WORKS DIRECTLY LINKED TO THE BIBLE			
TYPE	DESCRIPTION	TITLE	DATE
1	Settings of biblical texts or textual elements from biblical texts	<i>Psalmus</i>	1986
		<i>Canticum</i>	1987
		<i>A Cidade Eterna (The Eternal City)</i>	1987
		<i>Patmos</i>	1990
		<i>Visão</i>	1992
		<i>Requiem</i>	1993-4
		<i>Shîr</i>	2003
2	Works based on structural operating procedures directly inspired by biblical texts and allegorical elements associated with them	<i>Tessares</i>	1991 / 2007
		<i>Pirâmides de Cristal</i>	1993
		<i>Íris</i>	2000
		<i>Abyssus ascendens ad aeternum splendorem</i>	2005
3	Works inspired by specific biblical texts, which are not actually set but only symbolically referred to	<i>Sete Visões do Apocalipse</i>	1982
		<i>Espiral de Luz / Spiral of Light</i>	2005
		<i>6 Alleluias</i>	2011-15
		<i>Et ignis involvens</i>	2005 / 2014
		<i>‘Aphâr</i>	2007 / 2015
		<i>Hydatos</i>	2008 / 2012
		<i>Neshamah</i>	2015 / 2016
		<i>Hû yeshûphekâ rô’sh</i>	2015
		<i>Ut ex invisibilibus visibilia fiant</i>	2010-16

Table 1-5: João Pedro Oliveira: Works directly linked to the Bible. Drawn up by the Author.

From a chronological point of view, we may notice a greater number of works directly inspired by the Bible both in the earliest and most recent stages of Oliveira’s career; on the other hand, works indirectly related to the Holy Scriptures are to be found mostly in an intermediate period. According to the composer, the explanation lies in the fact that, as he

established himself as a young composer, in the 1980s and 1990s, the connection with biblical sources was a key element in defining his own creative “terrain” (João Pedro Oliveira, *Reply to the questionnaire drawn up by Ana Telles, concerning biblical references in his work*, email to the author, October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017); given that several cycles directly linked to the Bible were conceived at that period, which at the time were left incomplete, the composer recently reworked on and completed them, which justifies the return to specific direct biblical influences in recent years. In the lapse of time mediating between the first stage of conception of the aforementioned biblical cycles and their recent additions, João Pedro Oliveira composed a series of works, such as *A Escada Estreita*, *Timshel*, *Towdah* and *Hokmah*, that intend to reflect on certain moments of his own’s life, as well as spiritual aspects somewhat distant from the direct appropriation of biblical texts; that explains why, around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Oliveira was writing works not so literally connected to the Bible (João Pedro Oliveira, *Reply to the questionnaire drawn up by Ana Telles, concerning biblical references in his work*, email to the author, October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017).

<b>BIBLICAL SOURCES (OT / NT)</b>	
GENESIS	8
PSALMS	4
PROVERBS	1
SONG OF SONGS	1
BOOK OF ISAIAH	1
BOOK OF EZEKIEL	1
BOOK OF DANIEL	1
<i>ESDRAS IV</i>	1
<i>ENOCH III</i>	1
BOOK OF JOEL	1
GOSPEL OF JOHN	1
GOSPEL OF MARK	1
GOSPEL OF MATTHEW	1
GOSPEL OF LUKE	2
I CORINTHIANS	1
II PETER	1
BOOK OF REVELATION	9
TOTAL	36

Table 1-6: João Pedro Oliveira: Biblical sources (Old Testament / New Testament).  
Drawn up by the Author.

From a thematic standpoint, most biblical references in Oliveira's works concern the Book of Revelation (nine occurrences) and the Book of Genesis (eight occurrences); the Psalms figure in four instances, whereas the Gospel of Luke is referred to twice. With one occurrence each, there are references

to the Old Testament Book of Proverbs, Solomon's Song of Songs, and the Books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Esdras IV, Enoch III, and Joel; The New Testament Gospels of John, Mark and Matthew also have one reference each, as well as the First Letter to the Corinthians and the Second Letter to Peter.

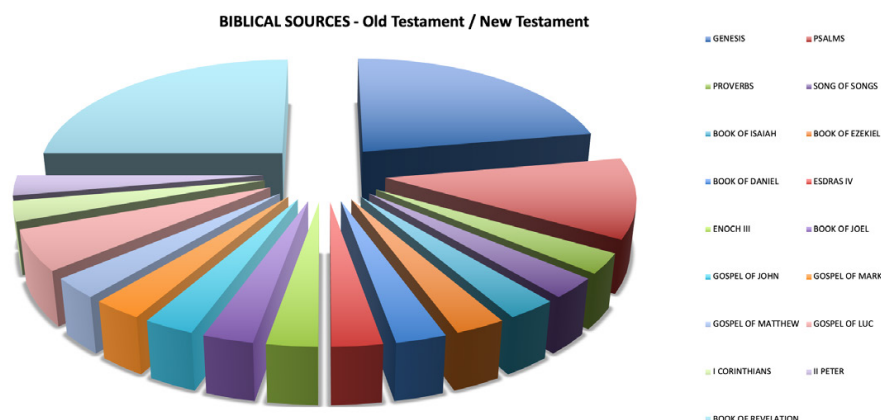


Fig.1-4: João Pedro Oliveira: Biblical sources. Drawn up by the Author.

It is clear that Genesis and the Book of Revelation stand out from all the other biblical references; Oliveira seems quite obviously fascinated by the Bible's beginning and end, the *alpha* and *omega* of the sacred scriptures. When asked about this, Oliveira (*Reply to the questionnaire drawn up by Ana Telles, concerning biblical references in his work*, email to the author, October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017) commented:

[...] On one hand, I have an interest in the beginning of things (my scientific spirit, which is very fond of astronomy and astrophysics, comes into play with that), for knowing how we appeared in the universe and how that appearance may be symbolically interpreted by the biblical texts or even other non-sacred symbolic texts. I am also interested in prophecies (speculating how are we going to move out of the universe, how it will end), as I said before. Please notice that the texts of Joel, Daniel, Ezekiel, besides the Apocalypse, are prophetic texts.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>70</sup> “[...] Por um lado, interessa-me o início das coisas (aí entra o meu espírito de cientista, amador de astronomia e astrofísica), saber como aparecemos no universo e como essa aparição pode ser interpretada simbolicamente pelos textos bíblicos ou mesmo outros textos simbólicos não sagrados.



This also explains why, globally speaking, the Old Testament occupies a place of honor among the sources alluded to. In fact, the total number of references to that ensemble of texts reaches 21, whereas only 12 for the New Testament are to be found. It seems like the composer is interested in the mystery of the former (Old Testament), not the latter:

Perhaps that corresponds to my innermost “romantic” aspect. The Old Testament has got a very special mystical quality, which is associated with a certain mystery. Besides the sacred texts of the Hebrew Torah, there is also the Talmud and many other interpretative texts. Very often, we find in those texts poetic elements that are very interesting from the standpoint of a possible musical “interpretation”. There is the idea of prophecy, or metaphor, which can be easily applied to the musical context [...], the idea of mystery, concerning things that have not yet happened, but about which there are predictive signs, and many other characteristics that make the Old Testament a very interesting text to explore.<sup>71</sup> (João Pedro Oliveira, *Reply to the questionnaire drawn up by Ana Telles, concerning biblical references in his work*, email to the author, October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017)

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E interessa-me a ideia de profecia (como vamos sair do universo, como este vai acabar) como referi atrás. Veja que os textos de Joel, Daniel, Ezequiel, para além do Apocalipse, são todos textos proféticos.”

<sup>71</sup> “Talvez seja o meu aspeto interior mais “romântico”. O Antigo Testamento tem uma mística muito especial que é associado a um certo mistério. Para além dos textos sagrados da Torah hebraica, ainda tem o Talmud e muitos outros textos interpretativos. Muitas vezes aí se encontram elementos poéticos que são muito interessantes sob o ponto de vista de uma possível “interpretação” musical. Tem a ideia da profecia, ou seja metáfora, que pode ser bem aplicada no contexto musical (veja as notas de outra obra, que escrevi recentemente, seguem abaixo), a ideia do mistério, daquilo que ainda não aconteceu, mas há indícios que virá a acontecer, enfim, muitas outras características que tornam o Antigo Testamento um texto bem interessante para explorar.”

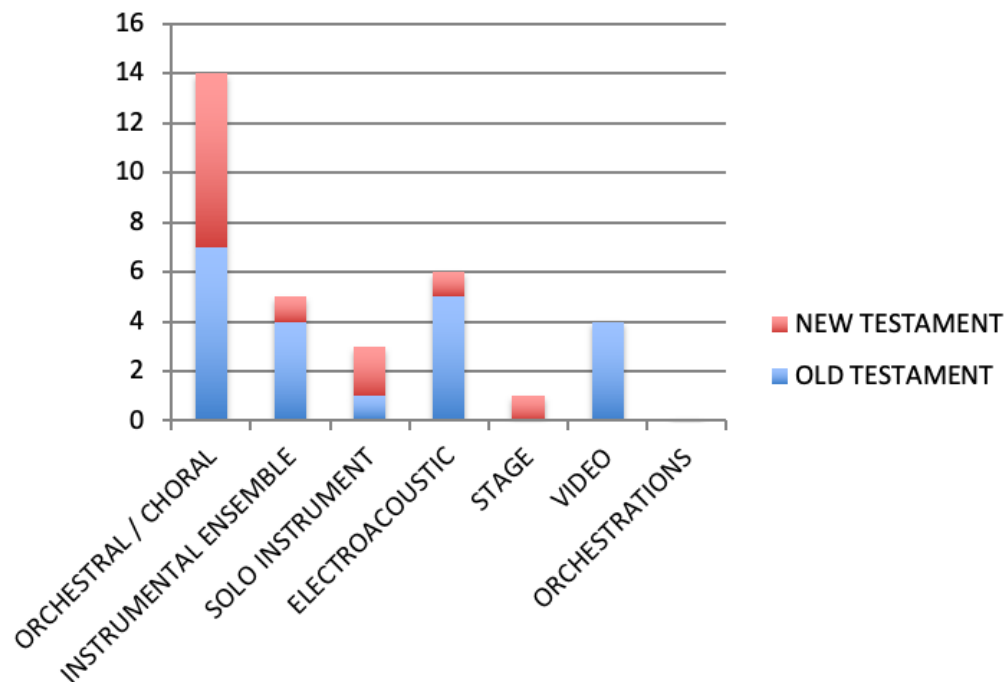


Fig. 1-5: João Pedro Oliveira: Biblical sources (Old Testament / New Testament), by instrumental category. Drawn up by the Author.

From a chronological standpoint, we may notice that, in recent years<sup>72</sup>, the Book of Genesis has become the single most important biblical source of inspiration for Oliveira's works, precisely because the cycle he named "Elements", comprising *Et ignis involvens*, *Aphâr*, *Hydatos* and *Neshamah*, as well as their respective video versions, is mostly based on it.<sup>73</sup> So is *Hû yeshûphekâ rô'sh*.

In contrast, most references to the Book of Revelation come from earlier stages of the composer's creative career. In fact, his first acknowledged work consists of a series of seven "visions of the Apocalypse", for organ, and dates from 1982. Furthermore, in the years between 1988 and 2000, he worked on a great cycle of six works mostly based on the Book of

<sup>72</sup> From 2007 onwards.

<sup>73</sup> *Neshamah* also exists in a version with live dancing, which was premiered very recently in Mexico, while this text was being written. The specific work *Et ignis involvens* is not based on the Book of Genesis, but rather on the Book of Ezekiel.

Revelation<sup>74</sup> and intended to reveal particular aspects of his own, broad definition of “revelation”: *A Cidade Eterna* refers to the perfection of the revelation; *Patmos* points out the spiritual need for the revelation; *Tessares* refers to the universality of the revelation; *Visão* concerns the timeless character of the revelation; the composer’s impressive *Requiem* points towards the inevitable physical concretization of the ideas, either prophetic or personal, transmitted during the revelation (João Pedro Oliveira, Program note provided by email, on October 8th 2017); finally, *Íris* concerns the prophet John’s vision of the throne of God and its rainbow. Having intended this cycle to be composed of seven pieces, Oliveira has had different project ideas for it. At one point, he planned to rewrite *A Cidade Eterna* as an orchestral piece that would conclude the cycle (João Pedro Oliveira, Program note provided by email, on October 8th 2017 and Comments on the first draft of this text, sent to the author by email on October 27th 2017); the work was indeed written in 1998, but because Oliveira considered it unaccomplished, he excluded it from his catalogue, having reused some of its musical material in the composition of *Shîyr*. In 2003, he announced his intention to write a second opera, based on the Book of Daniel (from the Old Testament), which he associates with the Book of Revelation (from the New Testament); this project is yet to be accomplished (Salazar 2003, 103).

Later on, the Book of Revelation has also been referred to – albeit indirectly, through Vieira’s writings – in Oliveira’s work *Ut ex invisibilibus visibilia fiant*.

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<sup>74</sup> *Visão* is based on the Book of Joel, whereas the *Requiem* uses different text sources, as we have seen.

BOOK OF REVELATION			GENESIS		
<b>Revelation Cycle</b>	<i>A Cidade Eterna, Patmos, Tessares, Visão, Requiem</i>	1988-1994	<b>Elements Cycle</b>	<i>Et ignis involvens, 'Aphâr, Hydatos, Neshamah</i>	2007-2017
<b>One previous organ work</b>	<i>Sete Visões do Apocalipse</i>	1982	<b>One later organ work</b>	<i>Hû yeshûphekâ rô'sh</i>	2015
One later ensemble work (direct link)	<i>Iris</i>	2000			
One later orchestral work (indirect link)	<i>Ut ex invisibilibus visibilia fiant</i>	2010/2016			

Table 1-7: João Pedro Oliveira: Works related to the Books of Revelation and of Genesis. Drawn up by the Author.

Several authors have noticed that the Book of Revelation occupies a central place in the composer's production. Delgado (2003, 11), for example, states that "[...] each one of João Pedro Oliveira's works is part of a mosaic at the center of which stands the Book of Revelation";<sup>75</sup> Melo (2003, 39) adds that

While centering and organizing his creativity around the Book of Revelation, a cycle of seven scores, yet incomplete, Oliveira reveals [...] the tone of his inspiration, related to Christ. As a matter of fact, the Book of *Revelation* culminates with *parusia*, the second coming of Christ.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>75</sup> "[...] cada obra de João Pedro Oliveira é peça de um mosaico em cujo cerne se encontra o livro do *Apocalipse*."

<sup>76</sup> "Ao centrar e organizar a sua criatividade em torno do livro da Revelação, num ciclo de sete partituras, provisoriamente incompleto, Oliveira revela [...] a tonalidade crística da sua inspiração. Com efeito, o livro da *Revelação* culmina com a *parusia*, a segunda vinda de Cristo."

According to the composer, the “imagistic and metaphoric” character he so admires in biblical texts is stronger in the Books of Daniel and of Revelation; that is the main reason why he has attached so much importance to their respective texts, particularly the latter. Furthermore, the Apocalypse’s dual richness, both literary and spiritual, has fascinated him over time; he associates it with an aspect of renewal, which brings along the perspective of a new universe based upon beauty, rather than with catastrophic end-of-the-world statements (Salazar 2003, 88). In that sense, we may draw a parallel with composer Sofia Gubaidulina,<sup>77</sup> for whom the Book of Revelation, seen as a “book of light” which shows Humanity an unattainable ideal (Moody and Gubaidulina 2012, 32), has been an important source of inspiration.

On the other hand, as I have already pointed out, we must not forget that, according to Oliveira, the very idea of revelation is central to the creative process itself:

I consider that the essence of the creative act, such as I conceive of it, does not exist in and of itself, but is the result of a revelation processed through our Spirit into our Mind, the origins of which we cannot determine. For the atheistic composer, that process stems from a whole life of musical experiences, an encompassing knowledge and comprehension of past and present, a mirror of life experience. For the believer, that revelation *comes from God* [author’s highlight]. Yet, there is a common characteristic to both cases: the creator’s *ego* is somehow destroyed by that revelation and must submit to it.<sup>78</sup> (João Pedro Oliveira, *Reply to the questionnaire drawn up by Ana Telles, concerning biblical references in his work*, email to the author, October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017)

This conception of the creative act is much akin, albeit expressed in significantly different terms, to that of Karlheinz Stockhausen, for whom the composer is

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<sup>77</sup> Born in 1931.

<sup>78</sup> Considero que o acto de criação na sua essência, e tal como eu o concebo, não existe por si só mas é resultado de uma revelação que se processa através do nosso Espírito para a nossa Mente, e cujas origens não podemos determinar. Para o ateu, ele é o resultado de toda uma vivência em termos musicais, todo um conhecimento e compreensão de um passado e presente, um reflexo da experiência vivida. Para o crente, essa revelação *vem de Deus*. No entanto, há uma característica comum a ambos os casos, que é o facto que o *ego* do criador é de certa forma destruído por essa revelação, tendo de se submeter a ela.

an ‘Übersetzer’ (interpreter), a ‘Radioapparat’ (radio apparatus)” [...] Stockhausen speaks of ‘cosmic rays’ that enter the rational process of composition from an incalculable dimension: ‘if, in the best moments, I use all my craftsmanship as a constructor, it is necessary that something from an unknown world enter my construction. You could certainly call this ‘something’ cosmic rays, since we have very few words for this metaphysical world. (Peters and Schreiber 1999, 108-109).

Oliveira’s words just cited were written in 1992 as program notes to *Visão*, a work taken from the Revelation cycle, on which I will focus henceforth because it embodies a significant number of features which are characteristic of Oliveira’s writing in connection to a biblical subject. As already mentioned, the text is taken from the Book of Joel, Chapter 2, Verses 28-32. The “vision” in question relates the day of the Lord’s second coming, with its apocalyptic happenings, and consists of three basic elements:

1. The “pouring” of the Holy Spirit over all living creatures:

And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh (Joel 2: 28)

And also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days I will pour out my spirit. (Joel 2: 29)

As a consequence, all living creatures will have heightened capacities (gifts of prophecy, dream, vision):

And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions. (Joel 2: 28)

2. Undreamt of, terrible, apocalyptic happenings will take place:

And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth, blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke.

The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord come. (Joel 2: 30-31)

3. Salvation will be attained by all of those who call upon God:

And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call the name of the Lord shall be delivered. (Joel 2: 32)

The work's overall formal scheme is based on biblical numbers, such as 3 and 7. Its structure is perfectly balanced,<sup>79</sup> as far as form is concerned. In fact, the piece is meant to represent an imaginary religious service, structured into seven parts:

1. An introduction, representing a call to all;
2. An invocation to those who believe;
3. A procession, as the believers enter the temple;
4. A transition;
5. The religious service itself, where the prophecy takes place;
6. A climatic section, where the processional element is restated;
7. The end of the prophecy, in the form of a quiet supplication.

If we take the introduction apart, we notice that the overall dimensions, in terms of total measure numbers,<sup>80</sup> of parts 2 and 4, 3 and 5, 6 and 7 are balanced, thus leading us to identify three formal groupings.

Another factor concerning formal balance relates to a section within part 6; in fact, the block comprising measures<sup>81</sup> 301-54 (6a), in which the processional percussive elements of part 3 are loosely recapitulated, has a duration comparable to that of the transitional part 4; their function is somewhat similar, in the sense that section 6a provides a transition from the purely climatic m. 290 (and following mm.) to the end of the prophecy, which occurs in part 7. Moreover, the text is presented at three different moments (parts 2, 5 and 7), with verses 28, 29 and 30 occurring only once, whereas verses 31 and 32 are enunciated in part 5 and reiterated in the concluding part of the form. We may equally notice that three parts of the form are quite unstable regarding their tempo changes: the transition, 4, and the two prophecy parts, 5 and 7; three other parts are quite stable (1, 2 and 3); as for part 6, it starts in a stable way, but gives way to a relative instability in section 6a.

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<sup>79</sup> Which is hardly surprising if we consider that the composer has a college degree in Architecture.

<sup>80</sup> These proportions apply more or less to the durations of the relevant parts of the form, albeit less rigorously, given tempo changes within some of those parts.

<sup>81</sup> From now on, the words "measure" and "measures" will be abbreviated ("m." and "mm.", respectively).

PART	1	2	3	4	5	6	6a	7
MS.	(Electronics 41') 1-10	11-49	50-154	155-192	193-289	290-354	301-354	355-422
Σ MS.	10	39	105	38	97	65	54	68
DURATION	1'20	2'42	4'40	2'12	5'14	3'50	2'	5'01"
COMPOSER'S DESCRIPTION	Introduction; Call to everyone	Invocation; Call to faithful	Procession; entry into the temple	Transition	Religious service; prophecy	Climax; voice withdraws, becoming chorus of voices; litany	Procession	End of prophecy; supplication
TEMPO	Quarter=60	Q=48	Q=100	Q=54/63/46	Q=72/60/76/40/63	Q=60	Q=88/50	Q=60/40/50/60
TEXT	---	Joel 2: 28-29 And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions: (Joel 2:28) And also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days I will pour out my spirit. (Joel 2:29)	---	---	Joel 2: 30-31 / Joel 2: 32 And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth, blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke. (Joel 2:30) The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord come. (Joel 2:31) And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call the name of the Lord shall be delivered. (Joel 2:32)	---	---	Joel 2: 31 / Joel 2: 32 The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord come. (Joel 2:31) And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call the name of the Lord shall be delivered. (Joel 2:32)
VOCAL WRITING	Voice starts over long note (G4)	Solo; melodic writing, "pushing" upwards, by steps. Verse 28: G4-F#5 Verse 29: G4-A5	---	---	Whispered / spoken / mezza voce / sung: c. 209-213: G4-Db5 c. 222-236 (verse 32): Eb4-E5 c. 241-289 (verse 32): both G4 and Eb4 function as "tonics"; phrases push upwards to A5	Long notes; over vowels; quarter tones	Idem	Whispered / Sung (tonics G4 and Eb4, pushing up to F5) / whispered
INSTR. WRITING	High strings; harmonics; long notes + descending figures (triplets, quintuplets)	Strings as before; enter percussion (tubular bells, tam-tams, chimes)	Strings as before; Percussion (tom-toms <i>et al.</i> ) as leader; multiplied sextuplet cells, with accentuation	Enter woodwinds brass, synthesizer, low strings; diversified percussion	Enter last arch. instr. (oboe), c. 216 = TUTTI; orchestral writing by blocks; high strings: elems. from the beginning;	coll. improv., inverse dynamic markings; orch. reduction: trumpet as soloist, synth, perc, strings	Idem, but percussion leads: TUTTI from m. 335 (antique chorus?)	Perc., high strings (m. 355-366); TUTTI without low strings (m. 367-401); perc, high strings, synth, solo trumpet (m. 402-422)

Table 1-8: João Pedro Oliveira: *Visão* – synoptic view. Drawn up by the Author.



The voice is treated in two different ways: *bocca chiusa* and actual note singing. According to Melo (2003, 33), the first procedure corresponds to a frequent gesture in Oliveira's works, used to symbolize the unspeakable. Melo (2003, 46) also remarks that the use of halftones in Oliveira's music stands for lament,<sup>82</sup> while quartertones in the context of modal, melismatic melodies as we may find in *Visão* (another key element in the composer's writing), is frequently associated with sacred manifestations. Furthermore, the composer himself affirms that this particular melody, with its quartertones, intends to recreate the "flavor" of Hebrew chant, which has not been directly cited in any way during the compositional process (João Pedro Oliveira, Email to the author, October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2017). The melody itself is, to my sense, an excellent example of Oliveira's application of the theory of melodic contours, which has been determinant for him and is described in some detail in the 2003 interview with Álvaro Salazar (Salazar 2003, 97-98). In fact, according to this theory,

One may compositionally establish a structural and auditory kinship between two musical phrases, not based on their respective harmonies or interval relationships, but also through their global melodic contour (the theory is very complex, but may be generically resumed to the frequency of upwards and downwards melodic movements and their organization). That is, two melodic phrases may be audibly related, even without being transpositions or inversions of one another, even having a substantially different intervallic internal path, as long as their ascending-descending contour is equivalent or similar.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> I would add that the association referred to is not exclusive to João Pedro Oliveira's works, but is to be found in much western art music, from Henry Purcell's *Lament*, from *Dido and Aeneas*, to J. S. Bach's B minor Mass, and many other examples.

<sup>83</sup> "Pode-se estabelecer composicionalmente uma relação estrutural e auditiva entre duas frases melódicas, não pelas harmonias ou relações intervalares que elas contêm, mas também através do seu contorno melódico global (a teoria em si é bastante complexa, mas pode ser genericamente resumida à frequência das subidas e descidas melódicas e sua organização). Ou seja, duas frases melódicas podem relacionar-se auditivamente entre si, mesmo sem serem transposições ou inversões uma da outra, mesmo tendo um percurso intervalar interno que é substancialmente diferente, desde que o contorno ascendente-descendente de ambas seja igual ou semelhante".

ms. 11-7



ms. 198-212



ms. 272-85



Example 1-41. João Pedro Oliveira. 1992. *Visão*, mm. 11-7, 198-212, 272-85 (soprano line). Extracts from the author's unpublished edition.

In the case in point, most melodic phrases depart from the same note, which we may call a “melodic tonic”. In part 2, this note is the G4, on which the voice starts in the introductory part 1; in parts 5 and 7, both the G4 and the Eb4 are used as “melodic tonics”, from which each phrase pushes upwards, in consecutive ascending gestures, the intervallic internal path of which is quite loosely similar. It is interesting to note that an architectural principle is at work in this “pushing upwards” reiterated melodic movement:

1. In part 1, the setting of verse 28 leads the listener from the G4 to the F#5, while the following verse is accompanied by a movement from the same melodic tonic up to the A5.
2. In part 5, the melodic phrases in mm. 209-13 go from G4 to Db5, whereas the first articulation of verse 32, in mm. 222-36, expands its range from Eb4 to E5. As the same verse is developed in mm. 241-89, and the formal part leads to the culminating point of the whole piece, phrases keep pushing upwards to C6.
3. As the work reaches its peaceful conclusion, in part 7, the melodic phrases start from both the G4 and the Eb4, not going over the F5.

For the composer, this constant progression towards a higher register is a way to recreate Hebrew chant, along with the quartertones deployed; for

Melo (2003, 46), and quite obviously, the ascending progression of the melodic lines is connected with an increase in tension. Symbolically, that type of phrase structure may represent constantly reiterated attempts to attain transcendence and eternity.

As for the instrumental writing, several features should be noticed:

1. The orchestra is split into blocks of similar instruments, which are treated in a similar way, often making use of homophony or heterophony. The composer therefore creates “entities” in the orchestra, as much as the chosen text depicts entities more than singular persons: “all flesh”, “sons”, “daughters”, “old men”, “young men”, “servants”, “handmaids”, “whosoever”. The collective personifications present in the text are therefore mirrored by the instrumental writing. An analogy with Darius Milhaud’s *Les Euménides*, where the single role of Minerva is split into three voices, may be considered, at this point.<sup>84</sup>
2. These groupings of instruments are homogenous and do not allow for composite timbral complexes; hence, higher and lower strings function as separate groups, being joined alternatively by the violas. Brass and woodwind are likewise treated separately, although the flutes seem to assume a particular role of some independence. The percussion section is treated separately, as we will see.
3. Orchestral groups intervene progressively, like the characters of a theatre play entering the stage one after another. From the standpoint of the musical language, there are some “generative” recurring elements, or modules, such as descending motives or eight-notes quintuplets, which seem to characterize each one of the “entities” represented. Given the work’s program, such an analogy with the world of Theatre in no way seems too far-fetched.
4. The orchestra builds up progressively, operating through a kind of density modulation, which is an important procedure for the composer, stemming directly from his experience as an organist (Salazar 2003, 91).

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<sup>84</sup> The composer does not acknowledge a conscious approach to this example, but he accepts the possibility of an unconscious analogy (Oliveira 2017f).

The musical score is for a large orchestra and includes vocal parts. It is divided into two systems. The first system (measures 286-290) includes woodwinds (Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Bass Clarinet, Bassoon, Cor Anglais, Trumpet, Trombone, Tuba), strings (Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, Contrabasso), percussion (Tam-tam, Glock), and vocal parts (Soprano Solo, Violin I, Violin II). The second system (measures 291-295) continues the orchestration with similar instruments. The score features complex rhythmic patterns, dynamic markings (f, mf, p, ff, pp), and articulation marks. The vocal parts have lyrics in Portuguese: "som w ha w ha" and "ym - ma - let". The percussion parts include "Tam-tam" and "Glock".

Example 1-42. João Pedro Oliveira. 1992. *Visão*, p. 28, mm. 286-290. Extract from the author's unpublished edition.

5. The orchestral *tutti* is therefore reserved only for the climatic moment of the piece, in the last section of part 5 and into part 6; after that, a global decrease in orchestral density is evident (thus creating a symmetrical reaction to the global densification movement of the beginning). Two *tutti* moments deserve special attention: the first one coincides with the climatic m. 290 (see musical example 1-42), which lasts for 15 seconds and happens after the first complete setting of the prophecy (verses 31 and 32); at that moment, which almost coincides with the work's Golden Section<sup>85</sup>, all instruments intervene in a kind of controlled improvisation, or an outburst of self-contained activity; at this point, the high percussion instruments and the strings' harmonics symbolize a "certain idea of ethereal, scintillating 'brightness' [...] as if, after the prophecy, the sky would open up, letting divine brightness shine inside the church"<sup>86</sup> (João Pedro Oliveira, Comments on the first draft of this text, sent to the author by email on October 27th 2017). Whereas one orchestral group (woodwinds) performs a global *decrescendo*, another group (composed of trumpet and strings) plays *crescendo*, and yet another one (synthesizer and percussion) keeps the *ff* dynamic marking throughout; the general effect is constant, as if the opposite directions taken cancel out each other. The second of those moments occurs in m. 335 (part 6; see musical example 1-43); there, the *tutti* seems to hold the quiet and neutral role of the former chorus, which comments upon the action that took place just previously.

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<sup>85</sup> In terms of measure numbers, this episode is located at point 0.68 of the piece, whereas the Golden Section is placed at 0.618; the difference, 0.062, seems negligible.

<sup>86</sup> "Na realidade é para simbolizar uma certa ideia de "brilho" etéreo, com cintilações. [...] Imagina que após a profecia, se abre o céu e o brilho divino entra na igreja. É essa a ideia."

32

Example 1-43. João Pedro Oliveira. 1992. *Visão*, p. 32, mm. 332-337. Extract from the author's unpublished edition.

6. The oboe, which is normally the first orchestral instrument to be heard in a concert, since it is the one that provides the A to which all other instruments will tune up, is quite metaphorically the last to join in, on m. 216 (more or less halfway through the piece, which is 422 mm. long); are not the first supposed to be the last, according to biblical-Christian thought?<sup>87</sup>

7. The trumpet, apocalyptic instrument *par excellence*, which the angels of the Book of Revelation sound while they break the seventh seal (Revelation, 8-11), is the one orchestral instrument to be individually handled by the composer. In fact, it seems to replace the voice at the moments where it withdraws, in parts 6 and 7.

The image shows a page of a musical score for strings. At the top, it is labeled 'SOPRANO SOLO' and 'Voice with amplification'. The score is for measures 4 to 10. The instruments listed are Violins I (1-3, 4-6, 7-8, 9-10), Violins II (1-3, 4-6, 7-8), and Violas (1-3, 4-6). The notation includes various rhythmic values, dynamic markings (p, mf, pp, pppp), and articulation (gliss, pppp, p). The score is written in a complex, modern style with many slurs and ties.

Example 1-44. João Pedro Oliveira.1992. *Visão*, p. 1, mm. 4-10 (strings). Extract from the author's unpublished edition.

8. The violins almost constantly deploy high harmonic partials (see musical example 4); (Melo 2003, 46) associates that feature, in Oliveira's works, with transcendence. However, that is not exclusive to this composer's music; we may think, for example, of the Prelude

<sup>87</sup> Again, this particular feature has not been consciously acknowledged by the composer (Oliveira 2017f).



from Wagner's (Wagner 1982, 1, 6) *Lohengrin*, where four solo violins, soaring in ethereal harmonics in a very high register, set the stage for the vision of the Holy Grail surrounded by angels, itself an image of ultimate redemption and transcendence.

9. Furthermore, the strings frequently deploy long, sustained notes, particularly at the moments where the voice intervenes with text, as if to depict the static attention given by the community to the prophet's voice. In this particular case, a connection with Karlheinz Stockhausen's work *Trans* may be established, as acknowledged by the composer (João Pedro Oliveira, Comments on the first draft of this text, sent to the author by email on October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2017). However, within this static framework, particular moments of intense activity do occur.

10. As for the percussion (to which the synthesizer is often linked), the writing for these elements is extremely refined in terms of rhythm, dynamics and accentuation (see musical example 1-45). In this sense, the percussion seems to occupy a role comparable to that of the strings in a classical orchestra, with the corresponding virtuosity. In particular, the ensemble of drums holds an especially important role, leading the processional elements, as we have seen. Their multiplied sextuplet rhythms, with differentiated accentuation, may constitute an example of "periodicity associated with ineluctability" which, for Melo (Melo 2003, 46), is characteristic of Oliveira's musical language.

The image shows a musical score for percussion, labeled 'PERC' on the left. It consists of four staves: I (Bongos), II (Tom-toms), III (Bass drum), and IV (Timpani). The music is written in a complex, rhythmic style with many sextuplets (groups of six notes beamed together) and dynamic markings such as *sf* (sforzando) and *p* (piano). The score is numbered '80' at the top left.

Example 1-45. João Pedro Oliveira. 1992. *Visão*, p. 5, mm. 80-5 (percussion). Extract from the author's unpublished edition.

As usual in Oliveira's works, the electronics component merges with the instrumental writing. In fact, the composer states that, in order to avoid sterile electronic sounds and the mere imitation of instruments, he has sought to write "instrumentally" for electronic media, in a way in which "the sounds"



gesture and movement may have a ‘human’ and natural character”<sup>88</sup> (Salazar 2003, 95). As a result, the electronic component magnifies and multiplies the voice and the orchestral groupings. As a mere example of the first type (not even to speak about timbre or pitch extensions made possible by this media), in the culminating point of the form, the voice becomes a chorus, through electronic processing; as for the drums’ processional sections, their interventions alternate with similar ones expressed by the electronics, thus being constantly perpetuated, even while temporarily inactive.

To conclude, I should stress the importance of biblical sources and references in Oliveira’s musical output, having tried to place this tendency in the context of a resurgence of liturgic, religious and biblical music in Portugal in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but also in the broader context of spiritual contemporary western art music, particularly through the evident connection of the composer’s output, as well as of his artistic and spiritual endeavors, with Olivier Messiaen, among others (Gubaidulina’s, Stockhausen’s and Zimmerman’s approaches share common traits with Oliveira’s). The Portuguese composer’s biblical works tend to make extended use of a vast array of resources, including voices, full orchestral ensembles, electronics and video productions; in that sense, they align with a tendency referred to by Sholl and Maas, as I have noted. Elements of balance within his production, with regard to the distribution of works with biblical implications throughout his career, have probably not been planned as such, but exist, nevertheless, and are quite revealing of his own personal and spiritual path. A clear preference for sources related to the beginning and ending of the Universe, namely the Books of Genesis and of the Revelation (not excluding some other prophetic texts), should be explained not only by the intrinsic characteristics of the biblical texts in question, but also by the composer’s affinities with the fields of astronomy and astrophysics. The analysis of one concrete work related to the Bible, *Visão*, provides a glimpse into significant aspects of Oliveira’s musical language, structuring principles and meaningful compositional procedures that may be found in other works of his, particularly those which refer to the Sacred Scriptures.

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<sup>88</sup> [...] o gesto e o movimento dos sons têm que ter um carácter “humano” e natural [...].

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