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A Short Religious Study of John Coltrane's *Meditations*: "The Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost"

INTRODUCTION

Meditations by John Coltrane is an approximately 40-minute-long, 5 movement suite which features the personnel Coltrane had been employing for his "classic quartet" (a name given by jazz critics) endeavors since 1962, with the addition of a few first timers. The "CQ" rhythm section considsts of pianist McCoy Tyner, bassist Jimmy Garrison, and drummer Elvin Jones. The album was recorded almost one year after the infamous A Love Supreme album. Both albums were recorded at Rudy Van Gelder's studio in Englewood Cliffs, NJ, one of the most used jazz recording studios in history, and featured the same personnel. The track listing as follows: 1. "The Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost", 2. "Compassion", 3. "Love", 4. "Consequences", and 5. "Serenity." Besides featuring the "CQ" the record marks the first appearances of tenor saxophonist Pharaoh Sanders and drummer Rasheed Ali, with John Coltrane. Meditations was recorded on November 23rd, 1965. Coltrane was 39 years old.

THESIS STATEMENT

This paper will explore the first movement of John Coltrane's *Meditations suite* for the sole purpose of discovering and revealing the ways in which the musical content directly relates to specific religious and otherwise spiritual ideas that are seemingly represented by the music.

BACKGROUND

Before delving into the technical aspects of the music, it may be of value to become aware of a few details, specific to Coltrane's personal life, that arguably directly influences the characteristics and importance of the album at hand. *Meditations* would turn out to be the second to last album ever recorded with the "classic quartet" rhythm section, and is the first appearance of Rasheed and Pharaoh

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with Coltrane, so in terms of Coltrane's life trajectory, this album serves as a conclusion with certain musicians and a new exploration with others, coinciding simultaneously. Also, it is one of the few instances where Coltrane experimented with playing with two drummers at the same time.

It is understood that during his self-imposed heroin withdrawal period, which began approximately one month after being fired from Miles Davis' band, Coltrane began a process of spiritual and personal growth which would become a pivotal transitional period of unmeasurable value. In the liner notes of *A Love Supreme*, Coltrane states that, in 1957, "I experienced, by the grace of God, a spiritual awakening which was to lead me to a richer, fuller, more productive life. At that time, in gratitude, I humbly asked to be given the means and privilege to make others happy through music." In the one year's time that Coltrane took to kick his addiction, the man changed, evolved, and began a shift towards a more conscious and spiritual lifestyle. As stated by Ben Ratliff of the New York Times, a long time and revered jazz historian and critic for the Times, Coltrane presented "a completely new version of himself with a new speed and sureness." He was re-hired by Davis one year later.

While there is no actual proof to the extent of which Coltrane's post-heroin-withdrawal-period affected his musical endeavors, looking at the album titles recorded in the three year period with the "classic quartet" following the withdrawal-period, a religious/spiritual theme is being heavily explored: A Love Supreme, featuring works such as "Dear Lord" and "Amen", Ascension, Meditations featuring works such as "The Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost" (suggests the Holy Trinity), "Love" (the essential message of Christ), and "Consequences" (for those that don't follow the teachings of Christ) Selflessness (a spiritual teaching), Transition (to enlightenment, or mortality to immortality), and Om (a sacred symbol and verbal expression of creation)³. Coltrane is even quoted on the back of Meditations, saying "I believe in all religions."⁴

THE WORK

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As stated by saxophonist and lifetime Coltrane historian and protégé, Dave Liebman, "The compositions (of *Meditations*) themselves have very definite musical intentions in both their outstanding sense of lyricism and how specific intervals were used to create various moods." Liebman goes on to say that "by and large the melodies are extremely diatonic, while the harmonies played by the bass and piano are non-tonal, as are the improvisations." Liebman is pointing out that the works portray and embody the idea of chaos vs. order; a phenomenon that exists within all of nature; a concept paramount to the understanding and study of religion and spirituality. (I WILL BACK THIS UP)

Another overarching phenomenon that occurs on this record specifically, which helps to distinguish it from others of this time period is the use of two of the same instruments. It is known that Coltrane was also pushing what was possible within himself and within his conception of musical expression, however, the specific choice to have multiples of the same instrument is specific to Meditations. As quoted by Nat Hentoff, Coltrane states that

"There are always new sounds to imagine; new feelings to get at. And always there is a need to keep purifying these feelings and sounds so that we can really see what we've discovered in its pure state. So we can see more clearly what we are. In that way, we can give to those who listen the essence, the best of what we are. But to do that at each stage we have to keep cleaning the mirror."

Coltrane goes on to say "I feel...the need for more time, more rhythm all around me. And with more than one drummer, the rhythm can be more multi-directional."

It is evident that Coltrane was inclined to experiment with some new techniques, and how they manifest in the actual work offers an opportunity to understand Coltrane and his music even more in depth. A glimpse into the tonal characteristics the suite as a whole reveals to us specific musical devices employed through each of the 5 movements, that when analyzed not only further expound on the profound level of expression and interpretation that has already been introduced, but that offer a more direct understanding of the pieces themselves as they relate to the whole, and as they express their own

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individual essence. This paper, however, will focus on just the first movement of the *Meditations* suite: "The Father, The Son and The Holy Ghost." I will explore how the musical content of this movement directly relates to the themes of the movement as a whole by means of technical and contextual analysis. As far as I am aware, no one else has done this sort of analysis with this specific movement of this specific work. Understand that the intention, focus, devotion and commitment each musician is bringing to this event is of irreplaceable importance when analyzing the theoretical components of the work.

CONTENT OVERVIEW

A brief summation of what is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost as it is widely understood: The Father, being God, the creator, the universal mind/power, and such widely accepted embodiments of a higher or super-power from which there is all, and is itself all. The Son, being Jesus Christ, (and/or perhaps as some may choose to interpret it, any human being willing to take on the "path" and/or teachings of Jesus as it may be understood on a personal and/or religious-based level). For the purpose of emphasizing certain arguments, however, I will be referring to the Son as Jesus Christ. The Holy-Ghost is the most elusive and ethereal of the holy-trinity, as I understand it. It is like a guide; a mediator between God/God-Son and man; a non-physical communicator, which prompts an individual to live their life according to their highest goal or destiny to become united with God.^{8,9}

CONTENT

I will first outline all of the technical components that occur in the work, and then explain how they translate programmatically. I am omitting the in-depth analysis of the content that occurs after the exposition (as is will be realized), for interests of time, and because I did not find that that content contributed any substantial evidence to support my thesis statement.

"The Father, The Son, and The Holy Ghost," which interestingly adheres to basic sonata form

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arrangement, is approximately 13 minutes in duration (this piece employs a three movement sonata form which is significant in that this piece features three components, as evident in the title. More explanation of the significance of "three" to come). The piece begins immediately and aggressively, and opens with Pharaoh trilling a perfect 5th, from Ab to Eb, which he continues to do for the first 2 minutes (and then again during the last 2 minutes). The rhythm section, which is further amplified energetically and dynamically by the fact that two drummers are playing at the same time is at once propelling a massive energetic continuum of sound, which continues to sustain itself for the entire movement. There is no clear tonality being defined in this activity, and it's seemingly sporadic and chaotic nature might constitute it as both dissonant and consonant, both neutral and also specific in that it is not specifically anything in particular (significance of this idea to come).

The melody on the other hand, which enters at around 45 seconds, being played by Coltrane, is clearly implying very specific major keys by means of the "one-two-three" or "do-re-mi" stepwise scaler melodic pattern. Note the following details in regards to this: Coltrane further clarifies each tonality he is exploring with this shape by playing the fifth degree of which ever major key he is expressing as a "pick-up" to this three note shape. In music, the five-to-one chord movement is the clearest demonstration of the transition or resolution to a new key. Also, note that this shape is even further melodicized by means of the repetition of certain notes within the shape. For example, Coltrane might play (in terms of scale degrees) 5>1>1>1>2>2>2>3>3>3>1. We'll call this overall theme the basic idea. Coltrane moves this basic idea in only two ways for the next minute and a half before improvised solos begin to occur. He moves the shape in minor thirds going downward (or major sixths going upward), and in perfect fourths going upward (or perfect fifths going downward). As you will read later, I have addressed the two variations of each interval that the pattern travels, because there are specific ways in which each of those intervals affects the human condition.

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Key Movement of Coltrane's Pattern:

$$Db > Gb > Eb > C > F > D > G > C > A > Gb > Eb > C > A > D > G > E > Db > Bb$$

Having an idea of the overall shape of the piece as whole, even though we will not be studying the majority of it, may be of value in understanding the portion we are looking at. An exposition of the above content lasts for the first 1:50, at which point we have a transition to the development section, by means of the playing of fragments of the basic idea in the key of B Major by Coltrane. The development begins at about 2:20 with an improvised solo by Coltrane, which lasts until about 6:30. There is still no tonality being defined by the rhythm section. Around 6:30, Coltrane passes the baton to Pharaoh who proceeds to begin his solo by screaming into the saxophone while simultaneously making sounds with the instrument itself. This cacophony lasts until about 10:30, at which point Pharaoh resumes his trilling (Ab to Eb), for about 30 seconds before Coltrane re-enters. This 30 seconds serves as the re-transition, because after it, Coltrane restates the basic idea using the same formula he used earlier to move the pattern through various tonalities. The last minute and a half of the piece, which I consider the recapitulation, features the rhythm section and Pharaoh doing what they did for the first two minutes, before fading into nothing.

ANALYSIS

There are three components to the exposition section: what the rhythm section is doing, what Pharaoh is doing, and what Coltrane is doing, (again, the number "three" is present). I view the rhythm section's presence as the embodiment of the Father, Coltrane's presence as the embodiment of the Son, and Pharaoh's presence as the embodiment of the Holy-Ghost. Also, the number "3" is a recurring component, which has much significance.

First, and by first I mean not only because it is is the first thing we hear, but because it symbolizes an interpretation of the first event in the universe's history if you will, the unrelenting, conjuring of energy, color, sound, and power, amidst no fixed tonality, which is being channeled by the

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rhythm section. Entering as if it carries a pre-existing propulsion, embodies the essence of the Father, or God. God, at its essence, is an infinite and omnipresent entity if you will; meaning that it has no beginning and no end. It can also be seen as neither good nor bad, neither in favor or not in favor of things as they occur. IT/HE/SHE is a neutral force, that is all, within all, and for the sake of semantic argument, also outside of all. The immediate entrance of this expression symbolizes the timeless nature of this phenomenon: it is at it is, and it has always been that way. There is no beginning and no end to this all encompassing, all purveying, and at the same time un-seen, source of all creation as we know it. The bible describes God's omnipotence in stating "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" and God's omnipresence in the idea that "God is spirit;" spirit as we know it, is not created nor destroyed, but is a timeless phenomenon.

Now, although Pharaoh starts playing before Coltrane, I will address the significance of Coltrane's contribution to the exposition before Pharaoh's, as it is directly correlated with the idea of the Son. I am doing this because although as stated earlier the three elements of the Holy Trinity exist in eternal conjunction with each other, the relationship between Father and Son lays the foundation for all work to be done by man in understanding and embodying this relationship, (where-in the relationship between man and Holy-Ghost comes into play). In temporal terms, first came the Father/Son, then the Holy-Ghost. To help understand this, entertain the following Bible passage from John 8:58: "There was a time when he (Abraham) was not. But there was never a time when the Son of God was not. In the time before Abraham, in the eternity before time (John 1:1), He still was. No word which expresses becoming can be used of His existence. He is the I AM, present equally in the human 'was,' and 'is,' and 'is to come.'"12

The harmonic and melodic content Coltrane is implementing is of interesting significance in how his presence is directly correlated with the idea of the Son. The pattern he repeats modulates by

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means of real-transposition, meaning that he is transposing the entire motif into a new key, as opposed to just diatonically within the key of the original motif. Let's examine the motif itself: the "one-two-three" (do-re-mi) of the major scale. First, but not foremost, I'd like to point out that this 3 note melodic shape is one of utmost clarity, directness, and simplification of tonality. It may be difficult to find an example of a simpler melody that undeniable outlines a tonality (or at least expresses the feeling of that tonality). Next consider the minimum number of notes required to create a recognizable melody. Of course it is arguable that recognizable melodies can be made from only one or two notes, or any number of notes for that matter. (When it comes to perception of music, art, or any human construct for that matter, there is infinite room for interpretation). However, (and this is not the most important proof of how Coltrane is musically expressing the idea of Jesus/the Son), this simple motif (which as stated earlier does include the 5th of the major scale as it's pick-up), feels and sounds very much child-like. In fact, this exact three note pattern is used in countless children's songs and nursery rhymes. "Are you Sleeping," "Frère Jacques," and "Row-Row-Row Your Boat" are just a few perfect examples of this. (There are so many others).

The significance of the nursery-rhyme/children's song aspect of Coltrane's melodic shape: The reason why it is so appropriate that Coltrane "chose" this shape to play is because one of Jesus' main teachings, and to some is considered one of the most important, is the idea that in order to ascend, in order to transcend the suffering of the human condition, and in order to love oneself and others from a place of true compassion, he said: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Coltrane is preaching this very idea in through this innocent melody. Further, he is playing it amidst the unrelenting chatter coming from the rest of the band. This represents the idea that we must, and can trust that no matter what the illusions that society has cast upon human-kind are, and no matter what distractions come our way we must continue to be as

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little children in terms of how we treat our relationships and how we love, (relationships include those with our own selves, with others, with God, etc..).

Now, as if that wasn't enough, we have the symbolism and the numerological significance of "123." First, and most obvious, "123" is the symbol of the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit¹⁴ (or Holy Ghost, as it applies here). In a way Coltrane is satirically referencing the very theme of the piece itself within his own part. Interestingly, this makes complete sense considering that the Son is an embodiment of the Father; a microcosm, if you will. Therefore it is reasonable to think that all that is "contained" within God is also contained with Jesus; hence, Coltrane's expression of the Trinity itself. In addition, besides "123" occurring three times in the bible¹⁵, we have this interesting occurrence: "At twenty five kilometers of Lisieux, in a small village of Low Normady, Dozule, the Christ appeared from 1972 to 1982 to a mother of family, Madeleine Aumont. In one of his messages, Jesus recommends to build a Glorious Cross at the limit of the territory of Dozule, on the High Knoll. The arms of the Cross (the orient to the occident) must have each 123 meters, and its height, 6 x 123 meters."

One more quick point on Coltrane's contribution here. The intervals that he is moving the melodic shape with offer some interesting ideas to ponder. First let's look at the minor third, or major sixth interval he uses. First I'd like to point out that we are dealing with "the minor third, the interval that expresses all the sorrow and sadness of human life" To entertain the idea that in the quest for spiritual growth we must always be dealing with and confronting our fears, insecurities, and lack of our connection with love, we can see that this process is one that catalyzes some of our most painful feelings. To come face to face with ourselves is arguably one of the hardest things to do, and I feel that it is an important aspect of the path and teachings of Jesus; this idea of growing closer and closer to God, which requires the breaking down of pre-conditioned beliefs and perceptions; never an easy thing

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for any human to do. Even the Buddha taught that life is suffering.

At the same time, the inverse of that interval (a major sixth) is considered by "musician, composer, acupuncturist, author, researcher, healer, teacher, "bioenergetician" and martial artist" ¹⁸ Fabian Maman to be "the sweetest interval," ¹⁹ and that "this interval is generally used in children's lullabies. The sixth interval seems to carry no weight, no tension, no stimulation and no emotional heaviness. The sixth interval creates a feeling of total opening, of offering yourself to the universe, contrary to the third interval, which is contained." ²⁰ Interesting, that sweet, children's lullabies is referenced here, as if to further cement the child-like nature of Coltrane's contribution. But, more-over, the idea that this interval carries no emotional heaviness and creates a feeling of offering oneself is like a manifestation of the un-bias, compassionate, selfless nature of Jesus. So while we have the evidence that self-transformation can be and will be painful, we also see the inclusion the idea of not taking this process too seriously or personally (also can be compared once again to being child-like about things).

The perfect fifth or perfect fourth interval which the second of the two intervals used in the transposition of Coltrane's motif, is of significance as well. Maman says the perfect fourth interval "gives a strange impression that is like awakening after a dream." Often we hear stories of the "enlightenment' process being as such, as if the individual awakens from a deep sleep, and realizes their true unity with God. Maman goes on to describe the perfect fifth interval as the one that "expands in all directions and provokes the widest movement of energy in space." So, when we look at all these components we see an interesting premise. The minor third/major sixth aspect gives us the idea of a child-like approach to the self-realization process; one which does include pain in the transformational process, but is one that can be approached neutrally, innocently, without attachment and as a service to a greater good or higher power. The perfect fourth/fifth aspect gives us the idea of how it feels to realize one's own progress in this regard, and how the affect of it is one that expands our consciousness

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in all directions.

Musically, this can be interpreted as exactly what is occurring in that we can see the sequential movement of Coltrane's pattern in this way: Groupings of the pattern moving in minor thirds/major sixths, and then a shift up a fourth/down a fifth. The minor third/major 6th movement signifies a period of time where things are happening, and the perfect fourth/fifth movement signifies the arrival at a new stage, or new beginning of this process to occur all over again.

In the interest of time, and in allowing you, the reader, to further consider and investigate these synchronicities, I will move on to Pharaoh's contribution now. Pharaoh's fast moving, aggressive perfect fifth shape that he plays for nearly a total of one third of the piece, (one third: yet another example of "three" or the division of one into "three"), is of pertinent significance. Keep in mind that in my opinion, Pharaoh is executing this shape as fast as humanly possible (as fast as he could do it at that time), in order to create the affect of two notes happening at once. The Pythagorean Tuning system, which the roots of Western "just intonation" are stemmed, is "a system of musical tuning in which the frequency ratios of all intervals are based on the ratio 3:2, found in the harmonic series." This ratio is expressed sonically as a perfect fifth.

Now, there are several facets of the 3:2 relationship worth noting. Keep in mind that the significance of these examples depends on the idea that Pharaoh is the embodiment of the Holy-Ghost on this recording. First, and again, not foremost, is the significance of the following Bible passage, from none other than John 3:2: "He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him." This passage suggests an interpretation of the Holy-Ghost identity: the idea that man can perform "miracles" if God is present and active within him, and the idea that man can trust to be led by this "knowing" within him of God, and of God's omnipresence in his comings, goings. and doings.

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Now, to isolate the numbers three and two, and relay their individual significance and how they work together, (as compared to the perfect fifth interval, which features the relationship of two individual pitches). "God is described, in the very beginning of the book of Revelation, as a Being 'which is, and which was, and which is to come." This describes the omnipresence of God. As for the number two, it is said that "God the Father and God the Son (Jesus Christ) compose a single Godhead." When we combine the analysis of the religious significance of these two numbers, we achieve the idea of an omnipresent relationship between Father and Son, the summation of which gives us the idea of the Holy-Ghost, or how man relates to and finds solace and meaning in this relationship in his own life. To me, Pharaoh is expressing this bridge between God/God-Son and man, by creating and sustaining a perfect fifth on his horn.

SUMMARY & CONCLUSION

It is important to point out, that I am not stating that Coltrane or any of the musicians, producers, or contributors to this recording session intentionally decided to employ any of the devices that have been discussed, nor am I stating that any of the people involved with this recording session even thought about how they would musical create the theme(s) of this piece in any way. What I am proposing is that, the evidence of the direct religious and spiritual significance of what did go on in the studio that day is worth exploring and acknowledging, if for no other reason other than the sheer coincidence of it all. Even if an observer chooses to label the relationships present within this information as purely happenstance, the innocence of that in itself, and how these things happened in an un-planned and unintentional way is precisely why it is so interesting. The fact that there is so much that can be de-coded, and so much significance within something that does not on the immediate surface, obviously portray the information, might suggest some interesting conclusions.

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In closing I'd like to ask that the reader listen to the music being discussed here, and contemplate this ideas described. If nothing else it will stimulate their mind towards the path of self-discovery. Even if the reader feels that the philosophical correlations to the music discussed in this paper are nothing more than coincidental or fabrications of the truth, I ask that you give the information a chance to sink in, before dismissing it. Here are two quotes by John Coltrane which offer some final insight into his approach and conception of music and life.

"Over all, I think the main thing a musician would like to do is give a picture to the listener of the many wonderful things that he knows of and senses in the universe. . . That's what I would like to do. I think that's one of the greatest things you can do in life and we all try to do it in some way."²⁸

"My goal is to live the truly religious life, and express it in my music. If you live it, when you play there's no problem because the music is part of the whole thing. To be a musician is really something. It goes very, very deep. My music is the spiritual expression of what I am - my faith, my knowledge, my being."²⁹

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ENDNOTES

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²³M.L. West, *The Babylonian Musical Notation and the Hurrian Melodic Texts*, *Music & Letters*, Vol. 75 (2), (Oxford, England, U.K: Oxford University Press, May 1994), 161–179.

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