

# Olivier Messiaen: religious faith and musical expression. *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*

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**Abstract:** In 20th-century music literature, Olivier Messiaen stood out in two areas: innovation in musical language and the unique reflection of religious dogma in his works. Although most of the works in his catalogue are based on subjects specific to the Roman Catholic cult, his music has acquired unique qualities, resulting from his passion for colour-sounds and *birdsong*. The study will highlight the main elements of Messiaen's language, the cultural areas of European and non-European influence, as well as the innate abilities that gave him remarkable possibilities for sonic imagination. The piano work *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus (Twenty Contemplations on the Infant Jesus)* (1944) appeared during a period of great compositional creativity, preceded by *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (1941) and followed by the *Turangalila* symphony (1948), a period culminating in the publication of the volume *Technique de mon langage musical*. Starting from the 20 symbolic “views”, Messiaen transposes into music a series of theological concepts concerning the childhood of the Saviour. This research proposes a selective analysis of the work, attempting to highlight Messiaen's compositional tendencies, which contributed decisively to the “break” with traditional intonations and rhetoric, reflecting the beliefs of modern man in the last century.

**Keywords:** religious music, theology, 20th century, Messiaen.

## 1. Introduction

We can say that Olivier Messiaen represents a pillar of 20th-century sacred music. His attraction to the religious phenomenon, manifested in a huge volume of compositions inspired by Christian theology, was discussed by the composer himself, who stated that this faith emerged gradually, first through prayer, then through the books he read<sup>1</sup>. He studied theology privately and read all the fundamental books of the Christian faith (the Gospel, the Apocalypse, then the entire Bible). Messiaen claimed that the most important message he tried to convey through music was that of faith, considering himself lucky to be

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<sup>1</sup> “I've always been a believer, pure and simple. Little by little, I've read books that strengthened my faith...” Claude Samuel (1994). *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Colour. Conversations with Claude Samuel*, Amadeus Press, Portland, p. 16.

Catholic<sup>2</sup>. Faith is one of the three elements of his creative inspiration, along with human love and birdsong.

One of the most expressive characterizations of Messiaen's relationship with the Christian faith is provided by Paul Griffith's in his article in *Grove Music Online*, where he notes that apart from the period 1945-1962, when he launched the post-war avant-garde, Messiaen devoted his creations exclusively to religious subjects (with a few exceptions). He did not claim to have any special understanding or wisdom when it came to mysticism, but wanted to faithfully present the teachings of the church<sup>3</sup>.

The choice of subjects to be treated in his works was important to the composer: while Christian ritual music focuses on the leitmotifs of the Passion and Crucifixion, he sought other aspects of theology that were equally important to be translated and transposed into music. The hardship of sinful man and earthly life was nevertheless a subject found in the orchestral works *Les offrandes oubliées* (1930) and *Eclairs sur l'Au-delà* (1991). Otherwise, his compositional catalogue focuses on glory, on the joy of being in the Divine presence. Influenced by Sunday liturgical practice, he was often preoccupied with the mystery of the Holy Sacrament<sup>4</sup>, through works such as *Le banquet céleste* (1928) for organ, *O sacrum convivium!* (1937) for mixed choir, and *Livre du Saint Sacrement* (1984) for organ. He was also drawn to the mystery of the Trinity, to which the church where he was employed was dedicated.

In general, Messiaen's compositional style, as a succession of sound blocks, apparently without a line of continuity<sup>5</sup>, creates a spatial effect, hence the references to heavenly space, the world of angels or Paradise. The composer manages to convey this elevated vision through his works, like the souls of the resurrected. The abyss is evoked not only by the deep bass sounds, but also by melodic fragmentation, in the sense of a rupture, a chasm between man and God. Although the composer is aware of and uses this “chasm” as a metaphor for the distance between man and divinity, his compositional methods and references to sacred space denote rather a fear of God and admiration.<sup>6</sup>

However, as a musician and theologian, Messiaen was more concerned with the idea of time than space. All his favourite themes are based on the encounter between the divine and the human and, therefore, on the encounter between the eternal and the temporal. We can say that Messiaen's experience of faith seems to be a naive one, based on unshakeable trust in God and the afterlife. He claimed to have no doubts and, although he was fascinated by the discoveries

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<sup>2</sup> “I have the good fortune to be a Catholic.” Claude Samuel, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Griffiths (2001). *Messiaen, Olivier*, Grove Music Online, p. 6, retrieved from <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/display/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000018497?rskey=uqn61k&result=1>.

<sup>4</sup> Known primarily as the Sacrament of Communion.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Griffiths (2001), *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Fear is used here in the sense of “fear of God”, not fear or anxiety, etc.

of astronomers and geologists regarding the history and nature of the cosmos, he was not bothered by any rational objections to his beliefs<sup>7</sup>.

## 2. Language – modes, rhythms, colours

Messiaen distanced himself from the Western tradition of composition – although he admired and taught the musical styles that preceded him, he chose a different, unique path. Griffiths points out that he admired Stravinsky – with his rhythmic propulsions and formal discontinuity (specific to the ballet *Sacre du Printemps* – a work that Messiaen appreciated). He took harmony and unresolved chords from Debussy, as well as Ravel and Dukas.<sup>8</sup> His creative uniqueness manifested itself through his separation from tradition and the expression of his unique personality.

It is interesting to note the difference Messiaen makes between what his music expresses – faith – and the language he uses – sound-colour. These two aspects, faith and the colour of sound, are interdependent – there is no sound without colour, nor faith without sound. Messiaen considered it necessary to systematise his technique, writing the two-volume treatise *Tehnique de mon langage musical* (1944) and the seven-volume *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur, et d'Ornithologie* (1949-1992). Thus, his obvious interest in unusual sounds and rhythms, as well as colour in music, found the theorisation necessary for their correct reception. We can say that this knowledge of his language and the events that influenced him in this endeavour helps us to discover the associations between the visual and auditory elements in his music, even if it limits us to the “colour palette” he imposed.

Messiaen's modes have a symmetrical construction and a limited number of transpositions; the resulting effect being called by the composer “*le charme des impossibilités*”. If the chaining of notes and the formation of a mode can be considered a common practice, the uniqueness of Messiaen's sound comes from the resulting overlaps, as well as from the chordal chains. The composer consistently stated that his mind instantly associates modes with certain colours, and that chromatic variations come from the resulting harmonies. I quote: “I quickly note down what I hear: the melody and the rhythm. I don't note the timbre. The timbre comes from a greater number of harmonics, and it is necessary to look for unusual combinations of sounds, to reinvent each moment.”<sup>9</sup> The association of sounds from nature with rigorous compositional

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Griffiths, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Bernard Gavoty (1994). *Who are you, Olivier Messiaen?*, in “Tempo”, Summer, 1961, New Series, No. 58, pp. 33-36: “I write down rapidly what I hear; the melody and rhythm. I do not note the timbre. As timbre arises from a more or less large number of harmonics it is necessary for me to seek combinations of unexpected sounds, to re-invent at each moment and for each bird.” (original quote).

techniques thus led to the emergence of works that combine sound and colour, birdsong and theological themes.

Observing European religious creation, several compositional techniques for “infusing” religious themes into musical discourse stand out:

- direct quotation from Christian liturgical music (Gregorian/Byzantine);
- composition in the style of the original music, possibly reworked or stylised;
- the use of programmatic elements with direct reference to the Christian message.

In Messiaen, these techniques are harder to find, as the composer created a musical language based on theological symbols in direct harmony with the music.

We will illustrate the relationship between theology and music in Messiaen's conception through analytical observations on the work *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*.

### **3. *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus /Twenty Contemplations on the Infant Jesus (1944)***

Olivier Messiaen's first major work for solo piano, *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* appeared during a period of great compositional creativity, preceded by *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (1941) and followed by the *Turangalîla* symphony (1948). In imagining this sound universe, which lasts over two hours, the composer relied on the virtuosity of his long-time collaborator, pianist Yvonne Loriod, who also premiered the work, partially at the end of 1944 and in its entirety in recital on 26 March 1945<sup>10</sup>.

The piano cycle *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* captures the evolution of the divine word, using Christian symbols as a theological basis. The composer provides a series of theological explanations in the introduction to the score, where he specifies the nature of these miniatures, as well as how the themes are used throughout. The title of the work has its own particularities, especially considering that the author refers to the piano miniatures as “glances”, an original concept.

The three themes found throughout the work are also presented:

- *The Theme of Divinity* – representing the Creator, “through whom all things were made”;
- *The Theme of the Star and the Cross* – two symbols of the beginning and end of the Saviour's earthly life;
- *The Theme of Chords* – fragmented or concentrated like a “rainbow”.

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<sup>10</sup> Anca Elena Păduraru (2020). *Analysis and interpretative vision in Olivier Messiaen's Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jesus*, Editura Muzicală, București, p. 107.

THÈME DE DIEU :



THÈME DE L'ÉTOILE ET DE LA CROIX :



THÈME D'ACCORDS :



Fig. 1 Olivier Messiaen, *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*, author's note

The meditation on Jesus' childhood goes through the following stages in the composer's eyes: 1. *Regard du Père* [The Father's Gaze]; 2. *Regard de l'étoile* [The Star's Gaze]; 3. *L'échange* [The Exchange]; 4. *Regard de la Vierge* [The Virgin's Gaze]; 5. *Regard du Fils sur le Fils* [The Son's Gaze upon the Son]; 6. *Par Lui tout a été fait* [Through Him All Things Were Made]; 7. *Regard de la Croix* [The Gaze of the Cross]; 8. *Regard des hauteurs* [The Gaze of the Heights]; 9. *Regard du temps* [The Gaze of Time]; 10. *Regard de l'Esprit de joie* [The Spirit of Joy's Gaze]; 11. *Première communion de la Vierge* [The Virgin's First Communion]; 12. *La parole toute-puissante* [The All-Powerful Word]; 13. *Noël* [Christmas]; 14. *Regard des Anges* [The Angels' Gaze]; 15. *Le baiser de l'Enfant-Jésus* [The Kiss of the Child Jesus]; 16. *Regard des prophètes, des bergers et des Mages* [The Gaze of the Prophets, Shepherds and the Wise Men]; 17. *Regard du silence* [The Gaze of Silence]; 18. *Regard de l'Onction terrible* [The Gaze of the Terrible Anointing]; 19. *Je dors, mais mon cœur veille* [I Sleep, but My Heart Watches]; 20. *Regard de l'Eglise d'amour* [The Gaze of the Church of Love]<sup>11</sup>.

What stands out at first glance is precisely the theological terminology and the use of concepts specific to the Christian faith as a “programme” through which the musical journey is outlined.

*Regard du Père* / *The Father's Gaze* is the first gaze of the cycle and is based on the Theme of Divinity, inspired by the Gospel according to Matthew,

<sup>11</sup> The translations were taken from Anca Elena Păduraru. It should be noted that in English, the most common translation of “priviri” is *Contemplations* – this translation has other connotations and slightly changes the perspective on the theme of the twenty miniatures.

Chapter 3, Verse 17 – the moment when the Epiphany or revelation of the Father takes place. The entire articulation is built on Mode 2.<sup>12</sup>



Fig. 2 Olivier Messiaen, *Technique de mon langage musical*, volume II, p. 50

The form of the first miniature is clearly defined, architectural stability being a concept often encountered in Messiaen's work. We thus have three distinct segments that use the same thematic material, each beginning with the Divine Motif. We can formally frame this piece in an A1 A2 Coda structure – note the use of the number 3, symbol of the Holy Trinity. The entire sound of the miniature can be described as being in a state of temporal and physical suspension. The distance between heaven and earth, between God looking down upon mankind, is achieved through the two planes, harmonically in the bass and melodically repetitive in the soprano.

The motif of Divinity has a diatonic structure consisting of repeated sounds and a minor third leap, which leads the composer to combine consonant harmonies, with the key of F sharp major being privileged.

In addition to harmony, melody is a key element: the line made up of octave leaps in a slow tempo gives the whole part a sober, meditative character. After a beginning that gives the impression of immobility, starting with measure 5, the harmonies become chromatic.



<sup>12</sup> Anca Elena Păduraru, *op. cit.*, p. 118.



Fig. 3 Olivier Messiaen, *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus, Regard du Père*, ms. 5-6

The identical repetition of the Theme at the beginning of section A2 and the Coda provides stability and perfection to the form. The Coda finally achieves a decrease in sound marked by a diminuendo that reduces the musical line to a minimum audible threshold. Thus, the “Father's Gaze” gradually recedes, along with the music.



Fig. 4 Olivier Messiaen, *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus, Regard du Père*, ms. 18-19

*Regard de l'étoile* / The Star's Gaze, the second miniature in the cycle, begins the epic thread of the Saviour's life with the appearance of the star that heralds his coming. Based on the Theme of the Star and the Cross, the piece has a dynamic character, in contrast to the first part, which invites meditation. The energetic beginning can be considered the explosion of a star in the sky, followed by the appearance of the Theme in measure 6, exposed in octaves, with the distance between the two constituent voices reinforcing the idea of the beginning and end of the Saviour's life on earth.

We observe the melodic profile of the thematic motif based on chromatic oscillations, including a reversed chromatic formula, a symbol known as the theme of the cross in universal creation.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for the piano part of 'Regard de l'étoile'. The first system is marked 'Modéré (♩=96)' and 'PIANO'. It features a dynamic range from *f* to *ppp* and *ff*. A bracketed section of eight measures is indicated by a dashed line above the staff. Performance instructions include '(comme des cloches)' and '(accords de carillon)'. The second system is marked 'Modéré, un peu lent (♩=76)'. It includes a dynamic marking of *p* and a '(rubato)' instruction. A dashed line below the staff indicates the '8<sup>e</sup> bassa (Thème de l'étoile et de la croix)'. The score uses a key signature of two sharps (D major) and a common time signature.

Fig. 5 Olivier Messiaen, *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus, Regard de l'étoile*, ms. 1-6

The composition of the miniature is arranged in a form that alternates the appearance of the star (A) with the appearance of the Theme of the Star and the Cross (B), in an alert arrangement as follows: A B A B A and Coda. We can consider the refrain A a unifying element that completes the simple, solemn sound of the Theme of the Star and the Cross.

The coda takes material from A and B, introducing a new sound that differs from previous influences, thus preparing for the appearance of the next miniature. We note the use of elements from the Theme in the first measure, followed by a conclusion with augmented fourth and fifth chords.



Fig. 6 Olivier Messiaen, *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus, Regard de l'étoile*, ms. 40-41

The third theme used throughout the cycle is the Theme of Chords, about which the composer himself states in the introduction to the score that “*The Theme of Chords* passes from one piece to another, fragmented or concentrated in a rainbow.”

Originally, this motif consisting of four chords is conceived as an evolution from consonance to an ever-increasing degree of dissonance, the first chord being created by the superimposition of perfect fourths.

Thus, the theme is used in various forms, being varied and borrowing from the expression of the structures in which it is found. To observe this, we will focus on the 17th miniature, *Regard du silence* / The gaze of silence.

Composed of a wide variety of motifs, the piece captures the colour of the music of silence, from the composer's perspective. With a bistrophic form to which an introduction and a coda are added, the mélange of motifs and themes begins with a canon in *ppp*, next to which the composer notes *impalpable* – imperceptible. Thus, the sonority of silence is achieved through music, which Messiaen describes at the beginning of the piece with the following words: “The gaze of silence: silence in the hand, an inverted rainbow... every silence in the manger reveals music and colours that are the mysteries of Jesus Christ...”

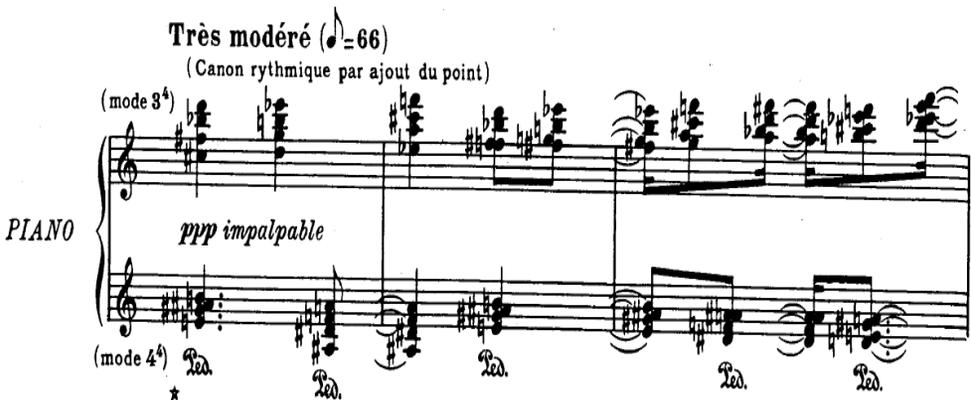




Fig. 7 Olivier Messiaen, *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus, Regard du silence*, ms. 1-5

After the introduction into the canon – note the added value rhythm, in which the two planes evolve on two different modal structures – the first stanza interrupts the silence, beginning in *ff* and subsequently bringing in the theme of chords formed of parallel fourths, recontextualised in a broader harmonic framework. The writing of this miniature subsequently varies from static moments of silence to sonic developments based on figurations that give the work a new colour.

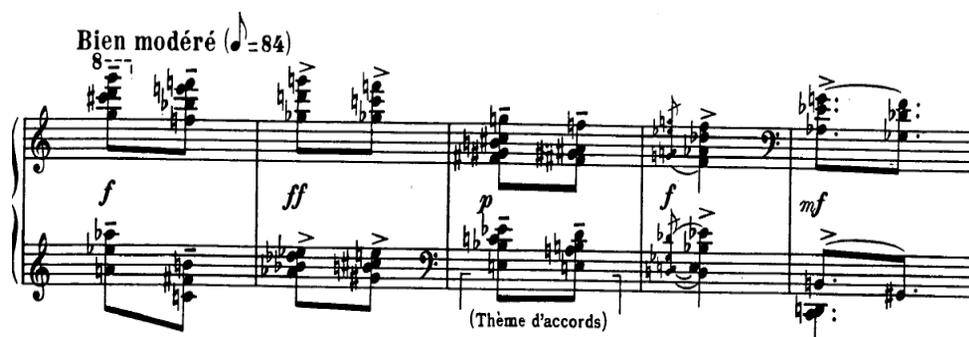


Fig. 8 Olivier Messiaen, *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus, Regard du silence*, ms. 20-24

The return of the theme of the chords in measure 53 marks the beginning of the second verse, which varies the sound material of the first movement. 15 The coda brings a new colour, as the composer states in *the Author's Note*: “alternating chords, multicoloured and impalpable music, in confetti...”. The polymodal harmonies from the Introduction are repeated, with the right hand based on mode 3 and the left hand on mode 4, resulting in a fast-paced sound spectacle that nevertheless evokes silence due to its low dynamics. Thus, we obtain the composer's overall vision of the “gaze of silence”, in which two seemingly incompatible concepts are associated: music and silence.

Modéré, un peu vif (♩=144)

*pp*

(Pédale jusqu'à la fin)

Fig. 9 Olivier Messiaen, *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus, Regard du silence*, ms. 88-90

#### 4. Conclusions

Although considered by scholars to be one of the greatest composers of the 20th century, his work being frequently performed in concert halls, Messiaen does not have a name as resonant as Arnold Schönberg or Igor Stravinsky. It can be said that the profound religiousness of his music is to blame for this misunderstanding that surrounds him. For the composer, music was a means of expressing his faith in the Divine, his main goal not necessarily being to stand out among his contemporaries, but rather to live a life of faith. As Andrew Shenton states, “Messiaen lived in a time stimulated by both politics and theology, which touched all aspects of social life”<sup>13</sup>. The chance to stand out thanks to his theological side, among the innovative composers of the period, is something unique, especially considering the social context in which he worked.

In fact, most of the visionaries of last century's music developed their own language, and we do not consider one compositional trend to be superior to the others. Through the analytical examples provided, we have attempted to contextualise the composer's theology in relation to music, his creative uniqueness being the reason for his perpetuation in the collective consciousness as a representative figure of the last century.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Shenton (2016). *Messiaen the Theologian*, Routledge, London, p. 2.

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