

OLIVIER MESSIAEN
Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus



MORTEN HEIDE

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CD 1 (60:33)

1	I	Regard du Père: Extrêmement lent. Mystérieux, avec amour	7:50
		Contemplation of the Father	
2	II	Regard de l'étoile: Modéré	3:11
		Contemplation of the star	
3	III	L'échange: Bien modéré	3:50
		The interchange	
4	IV	Regard de la Vierge: Bien modéré	5:45
		Contemplation of the Virgin	
5	V	Regard du Fils sur le Fils: Très lent	7:46
		Contemplation of the Son upon the Son	
6	VI	Par Lui tout a été fait: Modéré, presque vif	12:23
		By Him everything was made	
7	VII	Regard de la Croix: Bien modéré	3:59
		Contemplation of the Cross	
8	VIII	Regard des hauteurs: Vif	2:40
		Contemplation of the heights	
9	IX	Regard du temps: Modéré	3:01
		Contemplation of time	
10	X	Regard de l'Esprit de joie: Presque vif	10:08
		Contemplation of the Spirit of Joy	

MORTEN HEIDE, piano

CD 2 (75:20)

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|----|-------|---|-------|
| 1 | XI | Première communion de la Vierge: Très lent | 7:43 |
| | | The Virgin's first communion | |
| 2 | XII | La parole toute-puissante: Un peu vif | 3:01 |
| | | The all-powerful Word | |
| 3 | XIII | Noël: Très vif, joyeux | 4:38 |
| | | Christmas | |
| 4 | XIV | Regard des Anges: Très vif | 5:07 |
| | | Contemplation of the Angels | |
| 5 | XV | Le baiser de l'Enfant-Jésus: Très lent, calme | 12:36 |
| | | The Kiss of the Infant Jesus | |
| 6 | XVI | Regard des prophètes, des bergers et des Mages: Modéré | 3:24 |
| | | Contemplation of the Prophets, Shepherds and Magi | |
| 7 | XVII | Regard du silence: Très modéré | 5:52 |
| | | Contemplation of silence | |
| 8 | XVIII | Regard de l'Onction terrible: Modéré | 7:36 |
| | | Contemplation of the dread Unction | |
| 9 | XIX | Je dors, mais mon cœur veille: Lent | 10:30 |
| | | I sleep, but my heart keeps watch | |
| 10 | XX | Regard de l'Église d'amour: Presque vif | 14:53 |
| | | Contemplation of the Church of love | |

Olivier Messiaen — the Tradition-Conscious Innovator

The French composer, organist, music teacher, and ornithologist Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) was a master of musical modes, rhythms, birdsong, and timbres. He adored symmetry and would have found it fitting that his earthly life, which began eight years into the 20th century, also ended eight years before the century's conclusion. Olivier Messiaen was born in Avignon as the eldest son of Pierre Messiaen and Cécile Sauvage. His father was an English teacher and a translator of English literature, most known for his French translations of Shakespeare's complete works. His mother was a poetess, and she wrote her melodious and symbolist poetry collection *L'Âme en Bourgeon* (*The Soul in Bud*) while expecting Olivier. The collection, comprising twenty poems, was dedicated to her son. It revolves around her experience of pregnancy and motherhood, prophetically suggesting that Olivier Messiaen would become something extraordinary. She was certain she was expecting a son and equally convinced that he would become an artist. However, a poet he did not become; that role was taken on by his younger brother, Alain. In one of Cécile Sauvage's poems, the first stanza reads:

*Enfant, pâle embryon, toi qui dors dans les eaux
Comme un petit dieu mort dans un cercueil de verre,
Tu goûtes maintenant l'existence légère
Du poisson qui somnole au-dessous des roseaux.*

*Child, pale embryo, you who sleep in the waters
Like a little dead god in a glass coffin,
You now enjoy the gentle existence
Of the fish slumbering below the reeds.*

Later in the same poem, she describes how she surrounds her child:

*Je suis autour de toi comme l'amande verte
Qui ferme son écrin sur l'amandon laiteux,
Comme la cosse molle aux replis cotonneux
Dont la graine enfantine et soyeuse est couverte*

*I am around you like the green almond
That closes its casket around the milky kernel,
Like the soft pod with cottony folds
Whose infantile and silky seed is covered.*

(Translation: Morten Heide)



Messiaen with his parents in 1910.

Messiaen referenced his mother's significance throughout his life, particularly emphasising that *L'Âme en bourgeon* was crucial to his personality, life trajectory, and artistic development. Messiaen was convinced that a person's personality is shaped from conception. That Messiaen became a composer was almost predestined in his mother's poems. In the interview book *Olivier Messiaen: Musique et couleur* (1986) with Claude Samuel, Messiaen recounts how his mother had poetic intuitions and, before his birth, wrote: "I suffer from a distant music unknown to me" ("Je souffre d'un lointain musical que j'ignore") and "Here's all the Orient singing within me / With its blue birds, with its butterflies." ("Voici tout l'Orient qui chante dans mon être / Avec ses oiseaux bleus, avec ses papillons"). Cécile Sauvage could not have known that Messiaen would later in life become an ornithologist and let the song of birds inspire his compositions, that the rhythms of India would form a rhythmic foundation in much of his music, or that he would come to love Japan.

In 1909, the Messiaen family moved from Avignon to Ambert, and during World War I, Messiaen's father and uncle were called into military service. From 1914, Olivier lived with his brother, mother, and grandmother in Grenoble, located in the former Dauphiné region. It was in

the alpine landscape of Dauphiné that Messiaen's love for nature was founded. Later in life, Messiaen built a house in the Dauphiné mountains where he spent his summer vacations and composed the majority of his music.

While the family lived in Grenoble, Messiaen taught himself to play the piano. Already in 1917, he wrote his first composition for piano, *The Lady of Shalott*, based on a drama by Tennyson. Every year for Christmas and his birthday, he wished for and received opera scores by composers such as Mozart, Gluck, Berlioz, and Wagner. He read them all at the piano and sang all the roles. He also acquired piano scores and particularly highlights Debussy and Ravel, stating that the impressionistic music did not seem at all modern to him.

Messiaen grew up in a literary home. He learned to read early and recounts how, before turning 15, he had "devoured about four thousand books." From his father, he inherited a love for Shakespeare's plays, which he performed as puppet theatre for his brother, taking on all the roles himself. He created decorations and placed colourful cellophane paper against the window to produce various lighting effects. Later in life, Messiaen developed a fondness for stained glass windows and their dazzling effects, which he used to describe his own music. Regarding the stained glass windows, he mentioned that the detailed colourful catechism they represent up close disappears when viewed from a distance. All the colours then merge into one brilliant hue, whose purpose is no longer to represent or instruct, but to dazzle. About Shakespeare's dramas, he said, "The climate in these dramas, voluptuous streams of images of terror and poetry, is the climate in my music."

From his mother, he inherited a love for poetry, fairy tales, and the supernatural. In Brigitte Massin's interview book *Olivier Messiaen: une poétique du merveilleux* (1989), she eventually leads Messiaen to deviate from his eternal mantra "Je suis né croyant" ("I was born a believer"), which he repeated throughout his life. Messiaen admits that his childlike fascination with the enchantment of fairy tales made him receptive to the biblical miracle stories, eventually leading him to general Bible reading until he ultimately realised that he was profoundly devout.

Messiaen could undoubtedly have become a writer if it weren't for the gift he received at the age of 10. The

family had moved to Nantes after the war, and it was there that Messiaen received his first formal piano and harmony lessons. His harmony teacher, Jehan de Gibon, gifted him the score of Debussy's opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Messiaen tells Claude Samuel how "a provincial teacher had placed a veritable bomb in the hands of a mere child. For me, that score was a revelation, love at first sight; I sang it, played it, and sang it again and again. That was probably the most decisive influence I've received."

In 1919, Pierre Messiaen secured a position in Paris, and at just 11 years old, Olivier Messiaen gained admission to the Paris Conservatoire. Among his teachers there were Maurice Emmanuel (music history and Greek metrics), Marcel Dupré (organ), and Paul Dukas (composition). He also received instruction in timpani and percussion, which is clearly audible in many of Messiaen's orchestral works, where percussion holds a prominent place. Lessons with Emmanuel sparked an interest in Greek rhythms and exotic modes, which would later prove crucial to the musical language Messiaen developed. Emmanuel had composed six sonatinas for piano; the second, subtitled 'Pastorale' (1897), is full of stylised birdsong, and the fourth, titled 'in various Hindu modes' (1920), is an example of his eclectic academic interests. Both directly foreshadow Messiaen's compositional future.

While still a student, Messiaen wrote *The Celestial Banquet* for organ (1928), eight *Preludes* for piano (1929), and *Diptych* for organ (subtitled 'Essay on Earthly Life and Blessed Eternity,' 1930). Messiaen's *Preludes* – an impressive work by a 20-year-old – show a clear influence from Debussy but can also be heard as a synthesis of all the many impressions gathered during his years at the Paris Conservatoire. In all three works, Messiaen consistently employs his so-called "modes with limited transpositions" ("modes à transposition limitée"); modes that he would use in virtually all his works up to and including the *Pentecost Mass* for organ (1950).

In 1930, Messiaen left the conservatoire with five first prizes. The following year, he became the youngest person ever appointed as the principal organist at the church of the Holy Trinity in Paris, where he remained until his death 62 years later. Despite many years of faithful service, Messiaen only published a single true liturgical work: the motet *O sacrum convivium!* (1937). His works with Christian titles should be seen as

meditations. He emphasises that they are not mystical but theological. His aim was to convey the theological truths of the Catholic faith.

Throughout his life, Messiaen was deeply rooted in his Catholic faith. This was reflected in his meticulously thought-out music, which predominantly carried a mystical-religious perspective and content. Messiaen publicly stated his purpose for composing on several occasions. To Claude Samuel, he said:

The first idea I wanted to express, the most important, is the existence of the truths of the Catholic faith. I have the good fortune to be Catholic. I was born a believer, and the Scriptures impressed me even as a child. The illumination of the theological truths of the Catholic faith is the first aspect of my work, the noblest, and no doubt the most useful and most valuable – perhaps the only one I won't regret at the hour of my death.

Already in 1944, when Messiaen was 35 years old and published his first treatise *Technique de mon langage musical* (*Technique of My Musical Language*), he described in the first chapter what he was seeking:

One point will attract our attention at the outset: *the charm of impossibilities*. It is a glistening music we seek, giving to the aural sense voluptuously refined pleasures. At the same time, this music should be able to express some noble sentiments (and especially the most noble of all, the religious sentiments exalted by the theology and the truths of our Catholic faith). This charm, at once voluptuous and contemplative, resides particularly in certain mathematical impossibilities of the modal and rhythmic domains. Modes which cannot be transposed beyond a certain number of transpositions, because one always falls again into the same notes; rhythms which cannot be used in retrograde, because in such a case one finds the same order of values again – these are two striking impossibilities.

The two statements above nicely encapsulate the consistency with which Messiaen, throughout almost his entire life, remained faithful to his religious and artistic convictions.

The breakthrough came in 1935 with the organ work about the birth of Christ, *La Nativité*. From here, his style began to change, particularly in the rhythmic domain, as a result of his investigations into rhythm that had captivated him for a long time. The subtitle, 'Nine Meditations for Organ', reveals the contemplative nature of Messiaen's philosophy, which would later reach its climax in *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* (*Twenty Contemplations on the Infant Jesus*).

In 1932, Messiaen married the violinist and composer Claire Delbos, with whom he had a son, Pascal, in 1937. Their happy marriage took a tragic turn: towards the end of World War II, she began to show signs of mental disturbance, and after an operation in 1949, her behaviour became increasingly unpredictable. In 1953, Claire Delbos was admitted to a nursing home where she remained until her death on 22 April 1959.

When World War II broke out, Messiaen joined the army as a medical auxiliary. In May 1940, he was captured and taken to the prisoner-of-war camp Stalag VIII-A in Görlitz. Here, Messiaen met three musicians for whom he wrote his *Quartet for the End of Time* for clarinet, violin, cello, and piano, one of the masterpieces of the 20th century. The quartet premiered in January 1941 in the camp, performed for both prisoners and guards.

In March 1941, Messiaen was released and returned to Paris, where on 17 April, he was appointed as a professor of harmony. Until 1978, Messiaen held two more professorships at the Paris Conservatoire: from 1947 in musical analysis, aesthetics, and rhythm, and from 1966 as a professor of composition. Many composers studied under Messiaen, but he always declared that his task as a teacher was to help each student discover their individual talent and musical language. Boulez, Stockhausen, Xenakis, Benjamin, and Murail, to name a few, all studied with Messiaen, but their music sounds neither like his nor like each other's.

Shortly after his appointment at the Paris Conservatoire, Messiaen met the young student and virtuoso pianist Yvonne Loriod (1924-2010), who would later become his second wife in 1961. She was an incredibly talented pianist, who at the age of 14 had already played both volumes of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, all of Mozart's piano concertos, Beethoven's 32 piano sonatas, as well as romantic works by Chopin and



Messiaen and Loriod, around 1944.

Schumann. A special connection formed between the two. Yvonne Loriod whole-heartedly sympathised with Messiaen's music, quickly becoming an outstanding interpreter of it. Messiaen found in her a fascinating musical talent and muse. This resulted in a life-long creative partnership, where virtually all of Messiaen's works had the piano as a soloist; these works were dedicated to Yvonne Loriod. Messiaen described Loriod to Antoine Goléa in *Rencontres avec Olivier Messiaen* (1960) as "an exceptional, sublime, brilliant pianist, whose existence transforms not only the composer's creative way of writing but also their style, worldview, and mindset." To Claude Samuel, he said, "I was [...] able to allow myself the greatest eccentricities because to her anything is possible."

Up until 1940, the piano played a less significant role in Messiaen's production, with organ works taking center stage. However, after Messiaen encountered Loriod's unparalleled piano skills, his focus shifted, and his writing style became notably virtuosic. Messiaen's piano writing was not only inspired by Loriod's transcendental abilities but also by a deep admiration for the virtuoso piano tradition that Messiaen attributed to composers such as Rameau, Scarlatti, Mozart, Chopin, and, ultimately, Debussy, Ravel, and Albéniz. Particularly, Albéniz's piano suite *Iberia*, which he regarded as a "masterpiece", had a significant influence on Messiaen's writing style. Like Scarlatti, Albéniz heavily employed *acciaccatura* (a chord that simultaneously

contains a dissonance and its resolution) in *Iberia*. Messiaen developed this technique further. He viewed his "cluster chords" as one of his most important innovations in piano composition.

Messiaen told Claude Samuel that "the piano, which a priori appears to be an instrument devoid of timbres, is precisely, due to its lack of personality, an instrument that promotes the search for timbre because the sound does not come from the instrument but from the performer. It is therefore as expressive as its performer. And because I loved the piano and played it a lot, I was led not to create melodies of timbre but melodies of complex timbres."

With Yvonne Loriod's presence in Messiaen's life, he first created *Amen visions* (1943) for two pianos, where the first part is written for Loriod. This was followed by *Three Small Liturgies of the Divine Presence* (1944) for solo piano, ondes martenot, celesta, female choir, percussion, and string orchestra, as well as the over two-hour-long suite for solo piano *Twenty Contemplations on the Infant Jesus* (1944). Both of these works were Messiaen's last actual religious pieces for over 15 years. However, with the shift in focus from organ to piano, Messiaen brought the religiously inspired music out of the church and into the concert halls.

Morten Heide



Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus Twenty Contemplations on the Infant Jesus

There was war in Europe, and France was occupied by Germany when Olivier Messiaen began composing his largest work to date, *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*, on 23 March 1944. At the end of August, the Allied forces liberated Paris, and the composition of the work was completed on 8 September 1944.

Messiaen's titles are not always easy to translate accurately. "Regarder" can mean both "to observe" and "to see". However, the word "regard" in this work implies not just fleeting observations but also – and especially – contemplation and meditation. Therefore, I have chosen to translate the title of the work as *Twenty Contemplations on the Infant Jesus*.

Maurice Toesca was a contemporary French writer who, along with Messiaen, had been invited by Radio France to collaborate on a radio play describing the birth of Christ through words and music. The radio play never materialised as Messiaen went far beyond the proposed framework. Toesca had only written *Les douze Regards (The Twelve Contemplations)*, and Henry Barraud from Radio France realised that Messiaen's music would never work well as background music for a radio play.

But the work was completed, and on 26 March 1945, it premiered at Salle Gaveau in Paris, performed by the pianist Yvonne Loriod, to whom the piece was dedicated. She was only 21 years old at the time. *Twenty Contemplations on the Infant Jesus*, like *Three Small Liturgies*, received a mixed reception in the French press initially. However, public opinion eventually turned overwhelmingly in Messiaen's favour, and today *Vingt Regards* is widely regarded as one of the central piano compositions of the 20th century. A true masterpiece!

Twenty Contemplations on the Infant Jesus presents an entire world of expressions, from the meditative to the explosive, from the exquisitely pleasing to the wildly brutal. Messiaen's monumental work for solo piano can be regarded as a sonic art exhibition, where twenty paintings depict different aspects of the childhood of Jesus: Some of the paintings are breathtakingly beautiful, while others depict harsh images of life's great questions and theological depths. The music is a clear amplifier of the biblical stories and

Christian theology. A feat for the pianist and a captivating musical journey inward for all.

The work can also be experienced as an incomparable depiction of the Christmas narrative and its significance, completely free from clichés about hay and straw. Even considered as a Christmas work, it can be listened to throughout the year. One does not need to be a believer to have a great experience listening to the piece. The listener, like with all other music, can listen to the work without preconceptions – either one movement at a time or in one stretch. However, one will undoubtedly find other ways into the music and its many layers if one gains insight into Messiaen's symbolism and intentions. For Messiaen will always communicate something to us, but what?

Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus is filled with symbolism, numbers that Messiaen attributes specific meanings to, melodic references to other works, and, most importantly, five recurring themes (leitmotifs) that help the listener navigate this enormous piano suite. Three of the five leitmotifs are highly symbolically charged and are worth knowing and listening for (see the listening guide). Additionally, understanding the structure of the piece is intriguing. But first, let's see what Messiaen himself wrote in the preface to the work:

Contemplation of the Infant-God in the manger and Gazes cast upon him: from the ineffable Gaze of God the Father to the multiple Gaze of the Church of love, passing through the incredible Gaze of the Spirit of Joy, the very tender Gaze of the Virgin, along with the Angels, the Magi, and immaterial or symbolic creatures (Time, the Heights, Silence, the Star, the Cross).

The Star and the Cross share the same theme because one marks the beginning and the other the end of Jesus' earthly time. The *Theme of God* is obviously present in 'Contemplation of the Father', 'of the Son', and 'of the Spirit of Joy', in 'By Him everything was made', in 'The Kiss of the Infant Jesus'; it is present in 'The Virgin's first communion' (she carried Jesus within her), it is glorified in 'the Church of love', which is the body of Christ. Not to mention the birdsongs, carillons, spirals, stalactites, galaxies, photons, and the texts of Dom Columba Marmion, St. Thomas [Aquinas], St. John of the Cross, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, the Gospels, and the missals that influenced me. A *Chord Theme* travels from one piece to another, fragmented or concentrated in a rainbow; see also

rhythmic canons, polymodality, non-retrogradable rhythms enlarged in both directions, progressively accelerating or decelerating durations, asymmetric enlargements, changes of register, etc. – The piano writing is highly exploratory: inverted arpeggios, resonances, different characteristics. – Dom Columba Marmion (*Christ in His Mysteries*) and following him Maurice Toesca (*The Twelve Contemplations*) spoke of the contemplations of the shepherds, the angels, the Virgin, the heavenly Father; I took the same idea, treated it somewhat differently, and added sixteen new contemplations. More than in all my previous works, I sought here a language of mystical love, at once varied, powerful, and tender, at times brutal, with multicoloured arrangements.

It's a hefty chunk, and it branches in many directions, so let me explain the essentials before presenting each movement. Dom Columba Marmion was a Benedictine abbot and one of the most influential Catholic authors in the 20th century. He greatly influenced Messiaen, particularly through his collection of instructive sermons titled *Le Christ dans ses mystères* (Paris 1919, *Christ in His Mysteries: Spiritual and Liturgical Conferences*, 1931). This collection, covering the liturgical year with 20 lectures, aligns with the number of movements in *Vingt Regards* and the poems in Cécile Sauvage's *L'Âme en bourgeon*. Messiaen's work mirrors Marmion's book with its intricate structure of vertical and horizontal threads and the symmetrical structure in Marmion's book is echoed significantly in *Twenty Contemplations on the Infant Jesus*. Many of Marmion's observations have direct parallel reflections in Messiaen's work. All of this and much more has been excellently explained by Siglind Bruhn in her book *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation* (2007, also available in French and the original German edition).

In *Twenty Contemplations on the Infant Jesus* there are five recurring themes, or leitmotifs. The **Theme of God**, from which the *Theme of Love* arises, is noted in F# major and consists rhythmically of three short note values followed by two long ones:



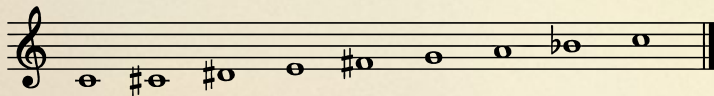
The entire 1st movement, 'Contemplation of the Father,' is one long presentation of the *Theme of God*, the most important leitmotif of the work. It appears again in its entirety in a varied form in the 5th movement, 'Contemplation of the Son upon the Son.' In the 20th movement, 'Contemplation of the Church of love,' the *Theme of God* is presented for the third and final time in its entirety, in an extended form in the second part of the movement, serving as an ecstatic apotheosis to the entire work. Fragments of the *Theme of God* also appear in the movements representing each of the three persons of the Trinity. Additionally, it is hinted at in the 19th movement: 'I sleep, but my heart keeps watch.' The movements with the *Theme of God* can be marked as follows:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20

Seen in this way, it becomes clear that the numbering of the titles is not arbitrary. The eight movements with the *Theme of God* frame four groups, each consisting of three movements focusing on symbolic beings, the immaterial, or the non-divine. I will return to these movements below.

Messiaen typically notates his music with local accidentals rather than key signatures. The exception is movements with six sharps as key signatures, which are usually identified as F# major. F# major triads often appear in these movements, especially in the first inversion with A# doubled as the top note. However, the movements notated with six sharps are by no means tonal but rather modal (like most of the other movements).

Messiaen employs seven "modes of limited transposition". The first mode is the whole tone scale (which can only be transposed once before the tones repeat, i.e., it has two possible transpositions, denoted as mode 1¹ and 1²). The second mode is a scale consisting of alternating semitones and tones. It has three transpositions and is Messiaen's favourite. F# major triads are included in the first transposition of the second mode, 2¹, shown here (assuming Bb and A# are enharmonically equivalent):



Messiaen himself refers to these limitations on the number of transpositions as "the charm of impossibilities." The seven modes of limited transposition each have their own character and timbre, which listeners with very little musical experience can recognise after just an hour or two of listening.

Robert Sherlaw Johnson mentions in his biography *Messiaen* (1989) that F# major, especially in connection with mode 2, is used to express "the mystical experience of a superhuman love." This is supported by Siglind Bruhn (2007: 48) where she argues that Messiaen's point in notating with six sharps is symbolic rather than practical.

The leitmotif, which Messiaen calls the **Theme of Love**, looks like this:



The *Theme of Love* concludes with two F# major chords with added sixths, forming a perfect visual symmetry on the piano, akin to the F# major scale when extended to the third A# above the octave (Illustrations from Bruhn, 2007: 47-48):



recapitulation (with contrasting elements), and coda/synthesis. According to Bruhn, the exposition consists of the first five movements, where all essential elements of the entire work are presented. The development consists of seven contemplations, which Messiaen dedicates to shedding further light on individual aspects or groups of symbols. He strategically positions them at odd-numbered points, thereby emphasising the composition's perfectly symmetrical structure:

6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20

Four of the movements (underlined above): 7 – 11 – 15 – 19, refer in various ways to the child in the crib (see analysis below) and are numerically equidistant. Central among the seven movements constituting the development section is the 13th movement, 'Christmas.' The remaining two movements, 9 and 17, explore the mystery of Incarnation and are symmetrically positioned on each side of the 13th movement. They both challenge aspects of what it means to be human: time and communication. Using subtle musical devices, they ask us to imagine a world where time and communication have more than one dimension.

The work's recapitulation or contrasting movements consist of even-numbered movements:

6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20

These six contemplations create contrast within the cycle, and their purpose is not further exploration of the primary musical or theological material. Movements 6 and 20 constitute the codas or syntheses of the work. The 6th movement looks back in time to the creation of the world, while the 20th movement looks forward to the Christian community, which began to emerge 30 years after the birth of Jesus.

Regardless of how one chooses to analyse the musical form(s) of the work, it quickly becomes apparent that Messiaen has succeeded in thinking holistically, and that this ambiguity can be interpreted as a symbol of the equal importance of all elements in relation to God. All of this may not necessarily be relevant to the experience of Messiaen's work, but it is also not insignificant, as Messiaen himself wished that the listener would also be interested in the formal aspects of his music.

Twenty Contemplations on the Infant Jesus is full of **numerical symbolism**, which both gives the work structure and form and contributes to the narrative. **Three** represents the Trinity, and in *Vingt Regards*, three is a frequently occurring number. All canons are for three voices, several movements operate with three concurrent musical layers, and three-voice chord progressions as well as the 3rd mode are used to express the divine. However, Messiaen only directly refers to the symbolic use of the number twice: in the 5th movement: "Three sonorities, three modes, three rhythms, three superimposed musics," and in the 20th movement: "Three presentations of the *Theme of God*."

Where three represents the divine, **four** represents the human aspect. The 4th movement is aptly titled 'Contemplation of the Virgin,' and the 16th movement (4x4) 'Contemplation of the Prophets, Shepherds, and Magi.' Messiaen employs the 4th mode and four-voice chord progressions to express the human aspect.

In his studies of Indian rhythms, Messiaen learned that **five** is the sacred number for the Hindu five-faced god Shiva, a kind of "Christ figure" capable of conquering death. Every fifth movement represents a person in the Trinity: 1 (the Father), 5 (the Son), 10 (the Spirit of Joy), 15 (the Kiss of the Infant Jesus, as the visible manifestation of the invisible God), and 20 (the Church of love, which is an extension of Christ).

God created the world in **six** days through the Word: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Therefore, the 6th movement is 'By Him, everything was made,' and the 12th movement is 'The all-powerful Word' (2x6).

Seven is a sacred number and a symbol of completeness and divine rest, as God rested on the seventh day. 'Contemplation of the Cross' is the 7th movement, because Jesus' death on the cross restored the order disrupted by original sin. 'Contemplation of the Angels' is the 14th movement (2x7) because the angels are "beings already confirmed in grace."

The organ work *La Nativité* (*The Nativity*) from 1935 consists of **nine** movements symbolising motherhood and the nine months of pregnancy. Similarly, 'Contemplation of Time' is the 9th movement, for as Messiaen explains, God is eternal, meaning time does not exist for God. However, by making Himself human through the nine months of pregnancy, God enters into a relationship with time, and the second person of the Trinity



becomes temporal. 'Contemplation of the dread Unction' is the eighteenth movement (2x9). Messiaen explains in his *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur et d'Ornithologie, volume II*: "Divinity is spread on mankind by Christ, the only Son of God: this awe-inspiring unction, this choice of a certain flesh by the terrible Majesty suggests both the Incarnation and the Nativity."



Listening Guide and Musical Analysis

In the score, each of the twenty contemplations begins with a short text, a programme, that expresses the theology of the movement. In the preface, Messiaen adds detailed information about each movement. These prefatory commentaries are sometimes quite technical, sometimes surreal. I have chosen to let Messiaen speak without editing, as I quote his commentaries on the twenty contemplations (*in italics*) with my additional remarks following.

I Regard du Père — Contemplation of the Father

Complete presentation of the Theme of God.

And God said: "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased."

This is all about fatherly love. The entire movement is noted in F# major and is in the 2nd mode, the symbol of God's love. The movement's extremely slow and steadily pulsating semiquaver triplets give an impression of superhuman calm, the passage of time, and God's eternity. Each triplet starts with a chord in the low register, followed by a similar one in the middle register, and finally an octave in *ppp* in the high register. The final 22 beats of the movement fade from *ppp* to near-silence, creating a seemingly endless continuation that suggests that the Father's gaze remains constant, even as listeners shift their focus to other contemplations.

II Regard de l'étoile — Contemplation of the star

Theme of the Star and of the Cross.

Shock of grace... the star shines naively, surmounted by a cross...

The movement commences with the shock of grace, which, throughout five bars, expresses both the proof of grace it is that God has taken on human form to draw humans closer to Him, and the shock that God chooses to sacrifice this man on the cross. The movement is filled with encoded messages. According to Bruhn (2007: 152), Messiaen's commentary speaks of a contrast between the physical and the metaphysical distance. Stars

are material but unattainable bodies for humans, yet still visible. The cross, as Messiaen speaks of it, is not the physical wooden cross on which Jesus was crucified but the metaphysical cross that hangs above the star, right from the day Jesus is born in Bethlehem, and which, as a spiritual reality, determines his entire earthly life and destiny. The visual representation of the cross hanging above the star is symbolised in the *Theme of the Star and of the Cross*, where the cross motif of the first four notes form a leaning cross as a representation of the pain it was for Jesus to carry this metaphysical cross throughout his life:



(Illustrations from Bruhn 2007: 154-155.)

The movement has a three-part structure. After the initial shock of grace and the sound of bells, the entire *Theme of the Star and of the Cross* is presented, plain and in unison four octaves apart, reminiscent of liturgical singing. Another shock of grace is followed by the *Theme of the Star and of the Cross* once more, this time as an ornamented variation. After a third shock of grace, the *Theme of the Star and of the Cross* does not follow, as we might now expect. Its third manifestation is only completed in the 7th movement, 'Contemplation of the Cross', emphasising, in both a symbolic and structural manner, that the order of the world was restored only with the crucifixion of Jesus.

The meaning of the three mysterious chords in the coda becomes clear when we discover, in the 9th movement, 'The Contemplation of Time,' that they form the basic element upon which its rhythmic three-part canon is constructed, symbolising timelessness. Later in the cycle, these three chords transform into the Christmas bells in the 13th movement, 'Christmas.' (See illustration on page 41).

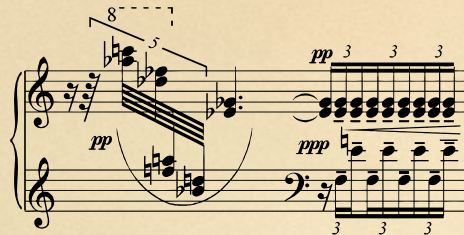
III L'échange — The interchange

Descending in a sheaf of sparks, ascending in a spiral; an awesome human-divine exchange; God becomes man to make us gods...

God is the line of alternating thirds: that which does not change, that which is very small. Man is the other fragments that grow, grow and become enormous, following a process of development that I call "asymmetric enlargement."

A series of musical growth processes express spiritual transformation here in one long and mighty crescendo. Messiaen employs these growth processes as a musical device when he wishes to convey transformation, God's creation through the power of the Word or, as in this case, the interchange between Christ's divine and human nature when the Word becomes flesh. These growth processes are so frequent in the cycle that the principle deserves a more detailed description; they also appear in movements 6, 10, 14, and 20.

In the first two bars, the four components, which are the building blocks of the movement, are presented, each representing aspects of "the terrible exchange" alluded to in the title. These two bars are subsequently repeated 11 times, and with each repetition, some tones remain constant while others change with the same ascending or descending intervals.



In the first bar: the descending and throughout the movement unchanging thirds represent the eternal and unchanging God's descent to earth, but according to Bruhn (2007: 158) the steeply descending motif also symbolises "God's self-humiliation in his earthly Incarnation."

The second component, the octave motif in the bass, begins on an E and grows in strength and range. After 11 chromatic changes, the octave motif concludes on an E, which is the tonal center of the movement and a note with certain divine symbolism ("God is [...] that which does not change"). (Illustrations on this and previous page from Bruhn 2007: 159.)



As Bruhn points out (2007: 161), we can see this "first bifurcation as the example Jesus provides for humankind, as an exceptional man's development beginning and ending in the unchangeable, eternal, and by implication divine E."

Interestingly the first bar consists of seven beats and three segments, thus underlining Messiaen's play with numbers: seven plays an important part in the Book of Revelation and points towards the human fate on Judgment day. This is combined with number three which symbolises the Trinity. The second bar consists of four beats and four segments, thus underlining the human part of the human-divine exchange.

The second bar consists of the 3rd and 4th components, both of which are variable: the 3rd component "spirals upward" and, together with the 4th component, expresses "the terrestrial response, humans' spiritual development in their attempt at an imitation of Christ" (Bruhn 2007: 162). Amid the multitude of changing tones in the 4th component, one tone remains constant: E, thereby signalling the intangible but reliable and constant presence of the Creator among His creatures.

After a triple repetition of the initial octave motif in mighty octaves, the extensive transformation fittingly concludes with a twelve-tone figure and a syncopated E, as if to assure us of God's eternal and unwavering presence.

IV Regard de la Vierge — Contemplation of the Virgin

Innocence and tenderness... the woman of Purity, the woman of the Magnificat, the Virgin gazes at her Child...

I wanted to express purity in music: it required a certain strength – and above all a lot of naivety, childlike tenderness.

Among the five movements comprising the exposition of the cycle, only the fourth expresses human presence in the first hours of the Infant Jesus. A lullaby in an uneven rhythm conveys the Virgin Mary's love for the Infant Jesus. With its tonal recollections from the 'Contemplation of the Father,' the continually repeating A# (the "pitch of love") in three octaves, and harmonies resembling the "chord of love," the mother's love for her child becomes an expression of God's love for humanity.

The lullaby is interrupted by rapid figures in the high register, perhaps expressing the Virgin Mary's suppressed unease as she senses her son's foreordained death. The lullaby's calm monotony returns but is interrupted by a powerful chromatic motif around the note C# in the middle of the keyboard. This motif is reminiscent of one from the third movement of *Visions de l'Amen*, 'Amen de l'agonie de Jésus,' where Messiaen portrays Jesus on the Mount of Olives at the moment when he comprehends his destiny but is terrified by the extent of the suffering that awaits him. In this context, we can interpret the chromatic motif as an expression of the Virgin Mary's agitation, foreboding, and realisation of the fate to which the Infant Jesus is subjected. Her excitement ends abruptly with a scream in the high register of the piano, followed by a cluster of notes on the four lowest keys. Every time Messiaen uses tone clusters in the deepest range of the piano in the work, it symbolises reverence or awe: "Thy will be done!"

The second half of the movement returns to the lullaby but at a slower tempo than before and with an added treble voice that closely resembles the chromatic motif. While the Virgin Mary looks at the Infant Jesus, she can no longer shake off the anxiety caused by her premonition of Jesus' suffering.

V Regard du Fils sur le Filis — Contemplation of the Son upon the Son

Mystery, rays of light in the night – refraction of joy, the birds of silence – the person of the Word in a human nature – the marriage of human and divine natures in Jesus Christ...

This obviously concerns the Son-as-Word contemplating the Son-as-Infant-Jesus. Three sonorities, three modes, three rhythms, three superimposed musics. Theme of God and rhythmic canon achieved by adding a dot in one voice. Joy is symbolised by bird songs.

The movement that concludes the exposition is a variation of the first movement; the entire *Theme of God* is heard again, but this time in the middle range of the piano. Alongside this expression of God's love, two additional musical layers in the same bright register represent Jesus' two simultaneously identical and different aspects: Layer 1 consists solely of triads in *pp* in mode 6³, symbolising Jesus' divine nature or the Son-as-Word, looking down at the Son-as-Infant-Jesus. Layer 2 comprises only of four-note chords in *ppp* in mode 4⁴ and represents Jesus' human nature. Both layers begin simultaneously and share the same rhythm: Messiaen's rhythmic signature. (Figure from Bruhn, 2007: 53).



In layer 2, all note values are 1/2 times longer than in layer 1, causing them to diverge rhythmically from the second chord onward. We observe how four symmetrical rhythms (Messiaen calls them "non-retrogradable rhythms"; i.e. a sequence of durations that is identical when read in reverse) are followed by a rhythm with progressively longer note values approaching a hypothetical infinity. Messiaen uses this rhythmic signature when he wants to musically demonstrate that an eternal and divine being enters into humanity's temporally defined life.

Twice during the movement, the mystical music in layers 1 and 2 is interrupted by lively birdsong, sounding simultaneously with the *Theme of God*. It's nature's finest musicians breaking into jubilation because God's love is manifesting in the Incarnation of the Son.

the number 7 in this passage can be interpreted as a reference to the Book of Revelation, which tells of an impending doomsday and frequently features the number seven. Hence, this passage serves as a reminder of the possible inclination towards sin that can emerge when obedience clashes with the pursuit of personal desires.

The deceleration leads to a powerful climax: the *Theme of God* is heard three times in *fff* in different keys over thundering rumble ("the face of God behind the flame and the boiling"). Each key represents one of the three possible transpositions of the 2nd mode; the modal symbol of God's love is thus heard in all its three guises. After each presentation of the *Theme of God*, the *Theme of Love* is heard. Messiaen demonstrates musically that God communicates with His creatures without them being able to see Him. He does so with love and a conviction that His plan for creation will bear fruit.

In the coda, notated in F# major, we first hear how "Creation resumes and sings the *Theme of God* in a canon of chords." Then, the *Theme of Love* in the left hand is repeated 25 times under a pedal point on C# in the right hand, a descending chromatic sequence, and individual notes (D# F# A# and C#) that are emphasised, creating the impression of the "chord of love." It seems as if Messiaen wants to convey that creation, whether it is the universe's or that of the Jesus child, is a result of love.

A final passage, structured and rhythmic as in the fugue's interlude, again expresses God's invisible presence: the first three chords of the *Theme of God* are played *ff* in demisemiquavers, while a chord taken from the thunderous rumble in the climax is repeated in *pp*. They symbolise respectively "the infinitely small, the infinitely large." The numbers are indicative of Messiaen's fondness for prime numbers: the *Theme of God* is heard first as three, then five, seven, and finally eleven demisemiquavers, while the chord in *pp* is repeated first 31, then 29, and finally 23 times. Messiaen ends the movement with the fugue theme in stretto between the hands, and a mighty accelerated arpeggio followed by a long fermata.

VII Regard de la Croix — Contemplation of the Cross

Theme of the Star and the Cross.

The Cross says to Him: You shall be priest in my arms...

In the 2nd movement, after the third shock of grace, the *Theme of the Star and of the Cross* was omitted. It gets its complete third presentation here, this time in four-part octaves and four times as slow as in the 2nd movement. Messiaen thereby demonstrates that after the announcement of the star, it required a cross on Golgotha to fulfil Jesus' destiny because, as Jesus proclaimed on the cross before His last breath: "It is finished!"

Beneath the theme, we hear sighing chromatic chords. Jesus groans over the suffering fate already assigned to Him from birth. Between each half-phrase, we hear twice A \flat minor chords with an added sixth, reminiscent of the "chord of love." This seems to convey the idea that the crucifixion itself signifies a profound manifestation of divine love.

In the 5th movement we saw how Messiaen uses the 6th mode to represent the divine, while the 4th mode is used to represent the human aspect. The same applies in the 7th movement, where the passages between the six half-phrases of the theme, as well as the movement's last two chords, consist of precisely the 6th mode in the right hand and the 4th mode in the left: the cross gazes down on the Infant Jesus to finally embrace Him.

VIII Regard des hauteurs — Contemplation of the heights

Glory in the heights... the heights descend upon the manger like the song of a lark...

Birdsongs: nightingale, blackbird, garden warbler, chaffinch, goldfinch, cetti's warbler, serin, and especially, the lark.

This isn't about the exact transcription and faithful reproduction of birdsong, which occupied Messiaen from the 1950s. Rather, it is a musical metaphor for jubilation. Nature expresses its joy over the birth of Jesus and God's grace. Simultaneously, the birdsong expresses God's presence in nature, echoing the phrase, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth!"

IX Regard du temps — Contemplation of time

Mystery of the fullness of time; Time sees being born within it the Eternal One...

Short, cold, strange theme, like the egg-shaped heads of de Chirico; rhythmic canon.

Messiaen attempts, through two alternating themes, to express partly the paradox that He, who is eternal, can simultaneously be born in Time and become temporal, partly the difference between time, as we humans experience it, and eternity. The first theme is homophonic and consists primarily of octaves and fifths, with its basic form incorporating two symmetrical rhythms. It expresses time as we humans, with many variations, experience it: always rapidly progressing, with apparent repetitions indicating that we are confined within a framework of limited possibilities. (Illustrations from Bruhn, 2007: 204-206).

The image shows a musical score for a single melodic line on a treble clef staff. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The music is divided into two main sections. The first section consists of three measures of music, each containing a chord of two notes (an octave and a fifth). Below these measures are three rhythmic markings: $\frac{2}{16}$, $\frac{1}{16}$, and $\frac{2}{16}$. A double-headed arrow spans the first two measures, and another double-headed arrow spans the last two measures, indicating a symmetrical rhythmic structure. The second section is more complex, featuring a series of chords and intervals. Below this section are four rhythmic markings: $\frac{4}{16}$, $\frac{2}{16}$, $\frac{2}{16}$, and $\frac{4}{16}$. A long double-headed arrow spans all four of these markings, indicating a symmetrical rhythmic structure for the entire second section.

The second theme is a three-voice rhythmic canon whose chords in *pp* consist primarily of tritones and augmented and diminished octaves. Its upper and middle voices originate from the coda in the 2nd movement. It follows a strict pattern, thereby expressing subordination to divine rules. This theme expresses eternity. Bruhn writes (2007: 203) that to imagine "the fullness of time is like attempting to establish contact with one of Chirico's empty faces. [...] humans cannot understand the beginning and end of time, much less its nature or its radical negation."

X Regard de l'Esprit de joie — Contemplation of the Spirit of Joy

Violent dance, intoxicated sound of horns, transports of the Holy Spirit... the joyful love of the blessed God in the soul of Jesus Christ...

I have always been struck by the fact that God is happy – and that this ineffable and continuous joy inhabited the soul of Christ. That joy, for me, is a rapture, an intoxication, in the wildest sense of the term.

Form: An oriental dance in the extreme bass, in unequal neumes, like plainchant.

1st development on the Theme of Joy. Asymmetric enlargement. A kind of hunting tune in three variations. 2nd development on the Theme of Joy and Theme of God.

Restatement of the oriental dance, extreme high and extreme low registers played together. Coda on the Theme of Joy.

The Spirit of Joy responds to the events in Bethlehem and can hardly be interpreted as anything other than the third person of the Trinity: the Holy Spirit. Like the 8th movement, the 10th movement expresses joy, and in this central movement, Messiaen wishes to draw attention to an often overlooked characteristic of God,

"that God is blissful." The movement is framed by two dances as the musical manifestation of ecstasy and rapture. The fast semiquavers, the notes of which all derive from mode 4², symbolising the Infant Jesus, evoke – as Robert Sherlaw Johnson points out in his biography of Messiaen – associations with the much slower gradual *Haec dies* for Easter Sunday. (Figure from Bruhn, 2007: 63).



The semiquavers are interrupted 16 times by violent outbursts in quavers. It is natural to interpret these violent outbursts as the biblical cymbals mentioned in the final Psalm 150 of the Bible, which says, "Praise him with loud cymbals. Praise him with reverberating cymbals."

The following section presents the *Theme of Joy* three times; seven ascending notes from the Mixolydian mode, first from B \flat , second from G, and third from E, but incomplete. Precisely the note E builds a bridge and takes on a special meaning for the following third section, where Messiaen's musical growth processes again express spiritual transformation in one long and mighty crescendo over twelve bars of five quavers each. The only thing that remains unchanged is the last note in each bar in both hands: the note E, thus symbolising the eternally unchanging: God. After the twelve bars and a short wave-like movement over the pedal tone E, five bars follow where the note E gains increasing importance, and in the last bar, it is played in five descending unison octaves across the entire keyboard. The number five, along with the note E, takes on a special meaning here. The number five is a numerical symbol of Christ, in memory of the five wounds he received at the crucifixion. Five is also the number of letters in the Greek acronym ΙΧΘΥΣ (IKhThUS), representing his name and mission: Jesus (I) Christ (X), God's (Θ) Son (Υ), Savior (Σ). In Christianity, five is also used as a symbol for the combination of 2+3, often illustrated in church art with an upraised hand with three extended

fingers as a symbol of the Holy Trinity. The bent fingers, the ring finger and the little finger, represent the two sides of Christ, the human and the divine side.

Now follows the central fourth section of seven in this movement, which is thematically unique in the cycle and illustrates the "intoxicated sound of horns." Given its central position in the cycle and Messiaen's fondness for symmetry, it can be assumed that this section holds special significance. The majority of the section is in quintuple meter, and already in the third bar, the rhythm of 2+3 semiquavers is clearly heard, pointing to the presence of Jesus as the sum of the two. Tonally, the music is in the 2nd mode, symbolising God's love. Thematically, the section bears some resemblance to the *Theme of Love*, which also ends with a falling fourth, symbolising God's love. But why does Messiaen call it a hunting song?

According to Aloyse Michaely ("Verbum Caro," 1983), the answer must be found in the juxtaposition of Jesus' birth and the Christian myth of the hunt for the unicorn, as depicted in much medieval church art. The unicorn can only be captured if it encounters a virgin; then it will immediately leap into her lap and can be caught. The unicorn symbolises Jesus' Incarnation in the Virgin Mary's womb, thus either the Annunciation or the Nativity.

In the world of art, the Virgin Mary is often depicted sitting in a garden surrounded by a wall, the "Hortus conclusus," which symbolises her impenetrable virginity. In her lap, a unicorn resides. Outside the wall stands the archangel Gabriel, disguised as a hunter, blowing a horn and holding four hunting dogs on a leash, which chase a unicorn into the Virgin Mary's arms. In the background, symbols of the Trinity are often seen: a dove symbolising the Holy Spirit, God in heaven sending the little baby Jesus down from the heavens, in a halo, carrying a cross. The four dogs are most commonly named after the four divine attributes that led to the Incarnation, mentioned in Psalm 85:10: "Gracious love and truth meet; righteousness and peace kiss." Appropriately, Messiaen's hunting song resonates in four-part chords. When Messiaen calls this section a hunting song in a movement that describes the contemplation of the Spirit of Joy, it must be to draw a parallel to art's description of the myth of the maiden and the unicorn and to express joy over the Annunciation and the birth of the Infant Jesus.

In the fifth section, the *Theme of Joy* is heard at the beginning and end, now in mighty bell-like chords with rhythmic alterations of the 5th and 6th notes, as if to express the rapture of the Spirit of Joy. The *Theme of God*

XI Première communion de la Vierge — The Virgin's first communion

A painting where the Virgin is depicted kneeling, folded into herself in the night – a luminous halo crowns her womb. Eyes closed, she adores the hidden fruit within her. This takes place between the Annunciation and the Nativity: it is the first and greatest of all communions.

Theme of God, gentle volutes, in stalactites, in inner embrace. Reminder of the theme of 'The Virgin and Child' from my Nativité du Seigneur. More enthusiastic Magnificat. Special chords and values in pairs, the deep pulsations representing the heartbeat of the Child in his mother's womb. Theme of God fades into silence.

After the Annunciation, Mary adores Jesus within her... my God, my son, my Magnificat! – my love without the noise of words...

Infinite tenderness, the Virgin's adoration of the child she carries within her. Twice a cluster of the deepest notes on the piano are heard as an expression of awe. Her joy, elation and praise come to life in the middle section, where the *Theme of God* is performed with enthusiastic rhythms, reminiscent of the hunting song in the 10th movement. The following contrasting progression of chord pairs, gradually extending, signifies spiritual transformation or development. During the final five chord pairs (performed in gradually slower arpeggios), you can hear the deep pulsations in the bass that express the heartbeat of the Jesus child. In the concluding meditation, the *Theme of God* is fragmented, and silences emerge from it, as if to convey that words are insufficient to express the Virgin's emotions: "my love without the noise of words...". Tenderness in the inner embrace's last divine third.

XII La parole toute-puissante — The all-powerful Word

Monody with deep percussion.

This child is the Word which sustains all things by the power of His speech...

As Messiaen writes, Jesus is, first and foremost, the incarnate Word. However, understanding the significance of "the Word" lies beyond human comprehension. The second part of Messiaen's text conveys a sense of obligation, a covenant, to stand by one's word.

A simple, continuous fortissimo monody in octaves over a rhythmic bass ostinato, which, according to

Messiaen, should sound like a tam-tam, expresses both the creative power of the Word and awe. This rhythmic ostinato, hammered 21 times, consists of one of Messiaen's "non-retrogradable rhythms" (i.e., symmetrical rhythms; see movement 5). In semiquavers, it consists of values 3–5–8–5–3, thereby evoking associations with the Fibonacci series, where each number is equal to the sum of the two preceding numbers. Each ostinato is separated by seven semiquaver rests. When Messiaen uses the number seven in a prominent manner, it often points either towards the apocalypse in the Book of Revelation or the sum of 3+4, symbolising the meeting of the trinitarian and the temporal.

This movement does not employ any of Messiaen's seven modes. Its sole connection to the cycle's religious symbols lies in the ostinato's tone cluster and its symmetrical rhythm. The tone cluster was first introduced in the middle of the 4th movement, 'Contemplation of the Virgin.' The tone cluster's most powerful manifestation is in the 12th movement, where it is played incessantly in fortissimo throughout the movement. By repeating the ostinato of 'The All-powerful Word' 21 times (which equals 3x7), Messiaen suggests that the Word not only creates but will also judge at the end of time.

In this movement, the monody exists in two different registers: in the deep register, it is often palindromic in both rhythm and pitches, consisting of very large intervals, which express the divine. In the middle register, the intervals are small, a feature which since the 17th century has been interpreted as an expression of the human aspect. This mid-register monody is surrounded each time by a D in octaves preceded by a descending cascade of notes, as if it were the divine force descending into a world of human existence and impermanence.

XIII Noël — Christmas

A carillon – The Christmas bells declaim with us the sweet names of Jesus, Mary, Joseph...

This movement is a rondo, expressing carefree and exuberant joy over the annually recurring earthly festivities. In the four refrains, you can hear the Christmas bells and a deep tone cluster, which convey a sense of awe. The conclusion of the refrain's bells consists of three chords which are a variant of the three chords we first heard in the mysterious coda of the 2nd movement, and which later symbolised eternity in the rhythmic canon of the 9th movement. (Illustration from Bruhn, 2007: 209)



2. mvt.: coda



9. mvt.: rhythmic canon



13. mvt.: Christmas bells

The middle section expresses the more gentle and contemplative aspect of the Christmas celebration, emphasising that by His birth, the baby Jesus becomes part of the Holy Trinity. This section primarily uses the 3rd mode, a mode Messiaen doesn't employ as frequently in *Vingt Regards* and which underscores the numerical symbolism present in this section. The number three is also reflected in the three bars, each consisting of three quaver rests, contributing to the meditative mood in the middle section.

XIV Regard des Anges — Contemplation of the Angels

Scintillations, percussions; powerful breath in immense trombones; Thy servants are flames of fire... – then the birdsong that engulfs the blue sky, – and the amazement of the angels grows: – for it is not with them but with the human race that God has united Himself..

In the first three stanzas: blaze, rhythmic canon, and fragmentation of the Chord Theme. 4th stanza: birdsongs. 5th stanza: the amazement of the angels grows.

Messiaen's angels are not like the often winged putti we've seen become increasingly cute and chubby since the Renaissance, and which are often confused with cherubim.

Messiaen's angels are awe-inspiring, like fiery flames, and they play on massive trumpets. In the preface to his *Quartet for the End of Time*, Messiaen quotes the beginning of the 10th chapter from the Book of Revelation, which describes such an angel:

Then I saw another powerful angel come down from heaven. He was dressed in a cloud, and there was a rainbow over his head. His face was like the sun, and his legs were like columns of fire. [...] Setting his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land, he shouted in a loud voice as a lion roars. [...] He swore an oath by the one who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and everything in it, the earth and everything in it, and the sea and everything in it: 'There will be no more delay.'

Angels are God's messengers. They are immortal, self-assured, and independently judgemental beings. They regard the baby Jesus, but as pure as they are, they are displeased that God has humbled Himself by allowing the Incarnation to happen among humans instead of among the angels. To them, it is degrading to have been bypassed.

The first part of the movement begins with a description of these angels. It is sparkling and radiant music, featuring the *Chord Theme* in its purest form and percussion effects in the piano's extreme registers. Following this is a three-voice rhythmic canon in tritones over Messiaen's rhythmic signature (see the 5th movement). It appears three times in progressively longer developments, expressing the angels' growing understanding that the eternal has manifested itself among the temporal. Each instance of the rhythmic canon is followed by a slow, majestic theme in the left hand, representing the massive trumpets played by the angels. This section also gets longer with each repetition. The trumpets sound to convey that, despite their growing understanding, the angels are still seized by amazement.

In the middle section, the bird song takes over and "engulfs the blue sky," once again expressing nature's joy at the Word becoming flesh. Beneath the bird song, alternating variations of the initial musical depiction of the angels and their growing understanding are heard in the left hand. At the end of the movement, the growing intervals in a long crescendo reflect the angels' increasing astonishment that "it is not with them but with the human race that God has united Himself..."

XV Le baiser de l'Enfant-Jésus — The Kiss of the Infant Jesus

At every communion, the Infant Jesus sleeps with us near the door; then He opens it onto the garden and rushes in radiance towards us to embrace us...

Theme of God as a lullaby. Sleep – the garden – arms outstretched towards love – the kiss – the shadow of the kiss. An engraving inspired me, depicting the Infant Jesus leaving his Mother's arms to embrace little sister Thérèse [of Lisieux]. All of this is a symbol of communion, of divine love. One must love in order to love this subject and this music that seek to be as tender as the heart of heaven, and there is nothing else.

F# major dominates this movement, which is the most programmatic in the work. As seen in Messiaen's commentary, he provides descriptive words for each section of the movement. "Sleep" is the first 62 bars or 7 minutes in this recording – the *Theme of God* as a lullaby. Then, the tempo increases as the Infant Jesus awakens and opens the gate to the garden (i.e., the world). The tempo increases even more in "arms outstretched towards love," as if to express the baby Jesus, who comes to meet us, quickly and "in radiance" (we recall the radiant star above Bethlehem, heralding the beginning of Jesus' journey in this world). The sighing figures in the music give the outstretched arms a double meaning: the result of the loving eagerness of the baby Jesus to rush out into the world to embrace humanity is that he will later hang with outstretched arms on the cross at Golgotha.

Communion (i.e., the Eucharist) is etymologically related to union (i.e., community) and is often used in several languages as a metaphor for communication. In the Eucharist itself, Jesus opens the door to human understanding of and communion with God. The movement is characterised by the 2nd mode as a symbol of God's love and by the "chord of love," which concludes all the phrases of the main theme.

XVI Regard des prophètes, des bergers et des Mages — Contemplation of the Prophets, Shepherds and Magi

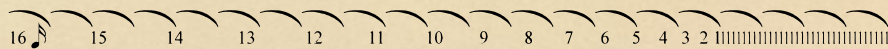
Exotic music – tam-tams and oboes, a grand and nasal concert...

The movement is framed, like the 18th movement, by palindromic structures, where the ending is a mirror reflection of the beginning. In the left hand, this structure is built over the notes A–D#–G# in the deepest

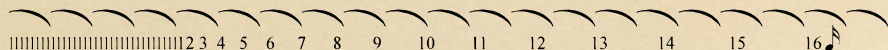
register of the piano, which, at the beginning of both movements, accelerates from semibreves to semiquavers. In this movement, we can interpret it as a countdown to Jesus' birth. The deep A in the chord symbolises awe, while the interval structure of the chord is drawn from the coda in the 2nd movement, 'Contemplation of the Star,' where it had a prophetic role. Thus, there is something timeless and prophetic in the chord structure, and the passage can be interpreted as the prophets who have, at all times, foretold the coming of the Messiah.

In the 16th movement, this initial accelerando simultaneously undergoes a long diminuendo from *fff* to *p*; at the end the process is reversed. With the decreasing intensity of the proceedings, it seems as though Messiaen wants to prepare and emphasise the humility in the scene expressed in the central part of the movement: the three groups of men around the baby in the manger in the stable in the small village of Bethlehem. At the same time, the right hand plays a stable progression of four chords a total of 21 times (3x7 – numbers representing the Trinity and completeness). This stability, together with the left hand's accelerando, can be interpreted as God's continuous communication with His prophets at all times, and that one can rely on His unchanging guidance and assistance. Graphically, Bruhn (2007: 246) has illustrated the framing structure of the movement as follows:

mm. 1-21



mm. 71-94



In the titles, the 16th and 18th movements are polar opposites: the 16th movement includes people of flesh and blood – the prophets, shepherds, and wise men; the 18th movement is about immaterial and symbolic elements. In our time, the prophets are rarely included in the imagery of Christmas. However, it was quite

different in the 13th century. The prophets gathered around the manger bear witness to and confirm the Jewish prophecies about the birth of the awaited Messiah, who will save the world. The shepherds represent ordinary people whose humble existence Jesus shares from the moment of His birth. Conversely, the wise men are an expression of the exalted and educated individuals. They also represent ethnic groups other than the Jewish and thus other regions of the world, signifying a global perspective. All of this is reflected in the music.

After the initial prophetic passage, a three-note figure is heard repeatedly: C–B–A... sometimes ending with the notes D♯–C♯. This represents the shepherds playing their shawms. Their music is as simple as the humble people they are.

The wise men, on the other hand, express themselves with a different level of complexity. Their music consists of three segments, three melodic ideas, and predominantly three layers. The wise men came from different regions, and although they express themselves differently, they do so in perfect harmony when they worship the baby Jesus in the manger. One of them expresses himself with the notes C–C♯–C–A. When the shepherds' shawm music returns in parallel thirds, it is accompanied by these four notes in the bass.

The closing course of the movement, symmetrical to the opening and increasing in intensity, expresses both the renewed prophetic power that has arisen with the birth of Jesus, and the increasing understanding of the three groups after the incarnation's fulfilment. It also conveys their growing self-confidence, now that the news of God's love for humanity can spread to all nations. The coda's three notes C♯–C–A in *fff* and octaves, starting in the middle register and moving to the extreme ranges of the piano, are derived from the wise men's music and triumphantly emphasise that the news of the incarnation can now reach from the stable to all corners of the world.

XVII Regard du silence — Contemplation of silence

Silence in the hand, inverted rainbow... each silence of the cradle reveals music and colours that are the mysteries of Jesus Christ...

Polymodality, rhythmic canon by adding the dot, special chords, Chord Theme. The entire piece is rigorously crafted for the piano. At the end: alternating chords, multicoloured and intangible music, in confetti, in light gemstones, in interlocking reflections.

The music emerges from silence and begins to move in various ways: weightless, jumping, fast, sliding, undulating movement. Finally, the music fades away and becomes silence once more. Many believers seek silence to hear the voice of God. Messiaen appears to have tried to capture the unfathomable mystery of the divine will in musical figures, a mystery people can only approach in silence.

This movement is related to the 5th movement, where Messiaen spoke of "refraction of joy, the birds of silence." In both movements' commentaries, Messiaen describes extraordinary forms of light and the mystery of Jesus Christ. Messiaen's rhythmic signature can also be heard in this movement as a rhythmic canon, where one voice plays half a time slower than the other. Here, it's the 3rd mode over the 4th mode, the divine over the earthly, or as argued by Bruhn (2007: 213): "the child in the manger and the birth of the good news of human redemption."

XVIII Regard de l'Onction terrible — Contemplation of the dread Unction

The Word takes on a certain human nature; the dreadful Majesty chooses the flesh of Jesus...

An old tapestry depicts the Word of God in battle in the guise of Christ on horseback: one only sees his two hands on the hilt of the sword he brandishes amidst flashes of lightning. This image influenced me.

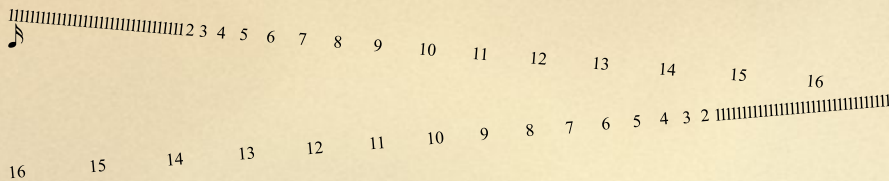
– In the Introduction and Coda, gradually longer note values superimposed on gradually shorter note values, and vice versa.

Christ is a title that emphasises the special dignity of Jesus. "Christos" means "the anointed one" in Greek and is a translation of the Hebrew word "Messiah" with the same meaning. This unction referred to in the movement's title was a ritual reserved for priests, kings, and select prophets. Jesus was to become all three, hence the necessity for this unction.

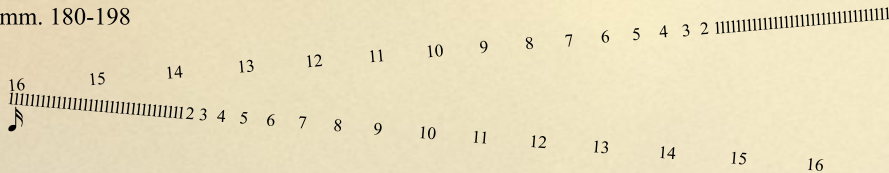
Anointing was also used in connection with burials. Gospel texts tell us that in the days before his death, a woman anointed Jesus with oil, and in the Gospel of Mark 14:8, Jesus says about the woman's deed, "She has done what she could. She poured perfume on my body in preparation for my burial." So, Jesus is anointed as a king with the special task ahead that he must die. It is this purpose of the Incarnation that the movement seeks to express. The fact that God decides to send his son to humanity, knowing that he will later die on a cross, is what makes the unction awe-inspiring and dread.

The anointing is also the very incarnation as the divine consecration in which the Word, with the help of the Holy Spirit, anoints Jesus with divinity immediately after John the Baptist has baptised him in the Jordan River. John the Baptist, who was a contemporary prophet, can be interpreted as present in the opening of the movement together with Jesus. The left hand rises from the lowest notes of the piano in an accelerating motion; perhaps another countdown, this time to John the Baptist's meeting with Jesus and the baptism.

mm. 1-19



mm. 180-198



Simultaneously, the right hand descends from the highest register in a decelerating progression, as if it were Jesus descending into the Jordan River. This juxtaposition of upward acceleration and downward deceleration also resembles the prophecy told by John the Baptist, which, in the King James Version of John 3:30, reads: "He [Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease."

Both progressions are abruptly interrupted when both hands meet in the middle of the piano. The meeting of the hands can be seen as an expression of the moment when the prophet John the Baptist meets Jesus, who is baptised (and thus anointed), and where John the Baptist's mission is fulfilled, after which he is abruptly written out of history, one head shorter. (Illustration of the framing structure from Bruhn, 2007: 246)

The old tapestry that Messiaen mentions is from the extensive Apocalypse Tapestry in Angers, France, dating from the late 14th century and listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site. The Book of Revelation, which the tapestry illustrates, presents itself as a prophecy, and the author, the Apostle John, describes himself as a prophet. The text is predominantly allegorical, making it well-suited for visual reinterpretation. The tapestry is titled *Le Verbe de Dieu charge les bêtes* (*The Word of God Charges the Beasts*). The Bible verse illustrated by the tapestry is Revelation 19:11-14, which reads:

Then I saw heaven standing open, and there was a white horse! Its rider is named Faithful and True. He administers justice and wages war righteously. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many royal crowns. He has a name written on him that nobody knows except himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called the Word of God. The armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure, follow him on white horses.

In the 16th movement, it was the prophets from ancient times who gathered around the crib. The Book of Revelation points to a future long after Jesus' death on Golgotha and indicates the presence of yet another prophet in the work: the Apostle John. In the 18th movement, John the Baptist and the Apostle John are present at the beginning and end of the movement, respectively, in the palindrome sequences that frame it. These sequences build on the same interval structure of a fourth over a tritone as in the 16th movement. The end of the 18th movement is a perfect mirror image of the beginning in terms of notes and rhythms. However, the dynamics are not reversed but form, in both sequences, a long forward crescendo. This makes



the beginning of the 18th movement all the more powerful in its forceful collapse, just as the mirrored coda feels all the more powerful in its vast unfolding. In the ending of the movement, the hands begin their movement from the center of the piano. According to Bruhn (2007: 251), their movement in opposite directions can be heard as an expression of the prophetic task assigned to the Apostle John after Jesus' death.

With his apocalyptic visions, this task extends far into the future and prophetically foretells the end of time.

The framing passages surround a kind of rondo whose primary elements express the scene illustrated by the tapestry. The powerful brass chorale, sometimes illuminated by subsequent flashes, consists of parallel fifths and octaves. It expresses the divine power, He who is "Faithful and True." The flashes are followed by three broken triads, which sound belligerent in their execution. Other rapid passages express pursuit and flight. Characteristic of the chorale is that it is transposed three times, first up by four semitones, then up by eight semitones, and finally transposed up by 12 semitones, ending in the same key as at the beginning. The three different keys are also the three possible transpositions in the 2nd mode. The *Theme of God* in the 6th movement and the hunting song in the 10th movement undergo the same transpositions, also in the 2nd mode, the modal symbol of God's love.

XIX *Je dors, mais mon cœur veille* — I sleep, but my heart keeps watch

Love poem, a dialogue of mystical love. Silences play a significant role in it.

It is not an angel's bow which smiles – it is the sleeping Jesus who loves us in his Sunday and gives us forgetfulness...

This movement is the most mysterious of all the movements in *Vingt Regards*. Initially, the ear is bathed in pure F \sharp major chords for about a minute and a half, as if to emphasise that God's love is the only thing that matters. The "chord of love" opens and closes several phrases. The *Theme of Love*, first heard in the 6th movement, is developed over an extended period in the middle section with a total of nine entries. The first two chords of the theme are substituted with a descending three-note group and its repetition. In the coda, pauses alternate with fragments of melodic motifs. Finally, silence prevails.

The reference to an angel with a bow is Messiaen's paraphrase. In a liner note, he writes that the piece can also be explained by another image of mystical love taken from Francis of Assisi's *Fioretti* (*Little Flowers*). The monk Francis prays for a foretaste of the bliss of eternity, after which an angel appears with a violin in his left hand and a bow in his right: "The angel drew his bow across the strings and produced a sound so beautiful that if he had continued, one would have died of joy."

XX Regard de l'Église d'amour — Contemplation of the Church of love

Grace makes us love God as God loves Himself; after sheaves of sparks in the night, spirals of anguish, here come the bells, the glory, and the kiss of love... all the passion of our arms embracing the Invisible...

Form (the development precedes the exposition):

Development: First theme in non-retrogradable rhythm, expanded to the right and left; it is divided by sparkling figurations in opposite sheaves. Three statements of the Theme of God separated by asymmetric enlargements. Development of the third melodic theme [Theme of Love]. First theme with sheaves of sparkling figurations, then a new asymmetric enlargement. Bell ringing forming a dominant pedal and recalling the chords of previous pieces.

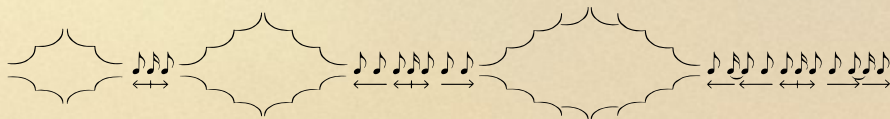
Exposition: a complete statement of the Theme of God, as a glorious fanfare. Long coda on the Theme of God – the triumph of love and joy, tears of joy.

This grand concluding synthesis is a festive and solemn consummation of the work with percussion, bells, birdsong, and fanfares, a magnificent development of the *Theme of Love*, and the glorification of the *Theme of God*. The movement is spurred by three concepts: joy, transformation, and especially God's love.

The title of the movement points to the future after the birth of Jesus; the beholder of the Infant Jesus is here the Christian congregations, the Christian church, which only began to emerge at least 30 years after Jesus' birth through preaching. For Messiaen, the Church is not so much the institution itself as the manifestation of God's love in the form of a community. The Church is thus defined through the transmission of the good news about the Incarnation of the Word from one Christian to the next; a horizontal reflection of what was given from above. Figuratively, the pole and crossbeam of a cross can describe it.

The same imagery can describe Messiaen's opening sentence. Instead of the well-known commandment in the Gospel of Mark to "love your neighbor as yourself," Messiaen tells us that we must "love God as God loves Himself." The first commandment is theoretically possible for all humans, while the second, by virtue of God's boundless and superior ability to love, is an unattainable ideal for humans. Only through God's grace do we manage to "love God as God loves Himself." Grace being the unmerited favour or divine love and

blessings that God bestows upon individuals, regardless of their deserving it. The vertical pole of the cross can figuratively be seen as God's love for us and our love for Him. The horizontal crossbeam symbolises human love for one another. All of this, Messiaen has tried to express in the beginning of the movement with various reflections and symmetries, as illustrated by Bruhn (2007: 269):



Both hands first execute a fast, arched passage in opposite directions in the same rhythm, thus being a vertical reflection of each other. At the same time, the passage in each hand is tonally symmetrical around a central axis. The passage occurs three times and is extended each time with new tones in the middle of the passage, increasing the range. What is not evident from the above graphic is that the left hand is a "lesser" reflection of the right: whereas the right hand primarily plays perfect fourths, the left hand goes through a series of intervals that are less "perfect" than the right hand's – as if to express that our imitation of God's love for Himself is incomplete and insufficient in all its unattainability. The perfect horizontal symmetry, on the other hand, can express the transmission of the good news about the Incarnation of the Word from one Christian to the next and that we humans are capable of loving our neighbour as ourselves.

In between each of these passages, a rhythm in octaves is heard, which is only symmetrical on the horizontal, rhythmic plane. These interpolations are repeated twice, but each time, the rhythm is extended with new notes at the beginning and the end. The octaves are only performed in the left hand and, therefore, do not have a vertical reflection. Similar to the horizontal symmetries of the arched passages, this can express humans' transmission of the good news about the Incarnation of the Word from one Christian to the next.

When the same passage returns later in the movement, the octaves in the left hand have received a vertical reflection in the right hand, appearing as a reminder of the false reflection that humans' unattainable imitation of God's love for Himself must always be.

A fragment of the *Theme of God* is heard three times in the beginning, as if in a tonal cadence: the first time in B major, the second time in D \flat major (which is enharmonically equivalent to C \sharp major), serving as the subdominant and dominant to F \sharp major, respectively. The third fragment "disappoints" by being in F major. Only in the latter half of the movement is the complete *Theme of God* unfolded in the tonic, F \sharp major. Both the fragments and each subphrase of the complete *Theme of God* conclude with a deep E followed by the cycle's symbol of awe: the lowest A on the piano surrounded by chromatic tones. As we have seen in several movements, the recurring E symbolises God's dependable presence throughout. Messiaen might be emphasising that in humans' inadequate attempts to imitate God's love for Himself, God is always there to support and guide. Nevertheless, humans feel awe toward God and His plan of salvation.

This movement also appears to be a synthesis of the work's exposition, encompassing the first five movements. The complete unfolding of the *Theme of God* in the latter half of the movement is a clear reference to the 1st movement, 'Contemplation of the Father.' This mighty apotheosis is interrupted twice by quotations from the 4th movement, 'Contemplation of the Virgin.' Before the apotheosis, there is a passage with bell chords, the germ of which comes from the 2nd movement, 'Contemplation of the star.' In the 5th movement, 'Contemplation of the Son upon the Son,' Messiaen introduced his rhythmic signature for the first time, which contains four symmetrical rhythms. This palindromic element has been used extensively in the work's final movement with its multidimensional mirroring processes. The 3rd movement is also represented:

Between the three fragments of the *Theme of God* and its final complete presentation, three times a series of growth processes is heard, expressing transformation and "spirals of anguish." These passages serve as a reminder of the 3rd movement, 'The interchange,' although the music is entirely different. Octaves in the left hand are accompanied by rapid arabesques in the right hand, which constitute the first serial twelve-tone sequence in Messiaen's music. All twelve-tone sequences begin with the note E, thus once again expressing God's reliable presence in the spiritual transformation of humanity.

The *Theme of Love* is strongly present and goes through several developments in the first half of the movement. This theme, which expresses the love between God and humanity, now uses the upbeat, which

consists of three descending notes played twice. The new guise of the *Theme of Love* clearly evokes associations with the hunting song in the 10th movement, 'Contemplation of the Spirit of Joy.' In increasingly passionate developments, the numerous repetitions of the *Theme of Love* express immense joy and rapture.

After a repetition of the initial patterns of mirrors and palindromes and the third passage of growth processes, a section with bell chords and the pedal note C \sharp follows. Towards the end of this bell-ringing, Messiaen quotes chord structures from the second theme of the 9th movement, which expressed timelessness. Rhythmically, these chords undergo a structured deceleration from 1/16 to 16/16. This is reminiscent of the framing passages in the 16th and 18th movements, thus pointing to a connection between the prophets and the Church of love.

Finally, at the end follows the grand glorification of the *Theme of God*, constituting the second half of the movement. Here, Messiaen brings his vast cycle to an emotional climax in a "triumph of love and joy, tears of joy."

The deepest A on the piano concludes the movement, and thus the entire cycle, as if Messiaen wanted to remind us never to lose sight of the awe-inspiring aspect of the Incarnation.

Morten Heide



My encounters with Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen

Olivier Messiaen became a pivotal figure in my musical journey. It was in his hometown Avignon, in July 2002, that I had my initial encounter and lessons with Messiaen's second wife, and muse, the exceptional pianist Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen.

At that time, I was a young second-year piano student at the academy of music in Odense, Denmark. A few years prior, my piano teacher introduced me to a movement from Messiaen's extensive piano cycle, *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*. The music immediately resonated with me, sparking a deep fascination that continued to grow over the years. I began attending concerts featuring Messiaen's music, devouring biographies and theoretical works, and immersing myself in the study of his compositions.

When I commenced my studies at the academy of music I already had a deep and growing interest in 20th-century music. My musical interests were diverse, and my curiosity was broad, but Messiaen's music became my passion. So when I learned that Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen would be teaching at the summer masterclass in Villeneuve lez Avignon, at the annual Centre Acanthes, with a focus on Messiaen's music, I knew I had to participate! Additionally, she would be joined by her two French colleagues, Roger Muraro, who was her former student and a prominent interpreter of Messiaen's piano music, and Claude Helffer. Composers would also be present at the summer masterclass, teaching and sharing their music, guiding young composition students.

In the months leading up to the course, I diligently prepared as many movements as possible from Messiaen's *Vingt Regards*, along with pieces by Betsy Jolas, Brian Ferneyhough, Ivan Fedele (all three would be present), Alban Berg, and Arnold Schoenberg. The anticipation was palpable, and I arrived in Avignon with a sense of gratitude and high expectations.

The weeks at the beautiful Chartreuse in Villeneuve lez Avignon did not disappoint. The historical buildings of the first and largest Carthusian monastery in France, dating back to the 14th century, provided a serene,

solemn, and ascetic setting for the masterclasses. The monks' old, bare cells had been transformed into practice rooms equipped with modern grand pianos, and the thick monastery walls kept the indoor temperature comfortably below 26 degrees Celsius. During breaks we enjoyed the charm of the monastery's secluded courtyards, surrounded by harmonious, covered cloisters.

The atmosphere was intense in the most positive sense of the word, and the instruction was of the highest calibre. The masterclasses offered a bombardment of stimulation and inspiration for both the senses and the intellect. The participants' level was truly high, and a supportive and friendly atmosphere prevailed.

It was the masterclasses conducted by Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen and Roger Muraro that left the deepest impact on me. In addition to my own lessons, I attended fellow participants' sessions, absorbing wisdom from both teachers. Their stories about Messiaen, his thoughts, teachings, and creative process made me feel closer to the composer, as if I had met him in person.

Roger Muraro addressed technical challenges, suggesting solutions. He delved into timbre and colours, emphasising the nuances of a chord and the creation of overtones in bird motifs. Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen, in contrast, was less patient with our technical struggles. I vividly recall her response to a student seeking advice on mastering a fast chord sequence in the 6th movement, 'By Him everything was made,' from *Vingt Regards*: "Oh, it's not that difficult! Just practice!" she said with a smile, walked over to the piano, effortlessly playing the fast chord sequence to perfection – standing, small as she was, at the grand piano!

Loriod-Messiaen readily offered suggestions for alternative playing techniques without being prompted. One was the use of a clenched fist on the piano, showing that it could create a unique tonal effect, particularly when applied precisely to specific black keys in the lower register. She demonstrated how the soft muscle between the little finger and the wrist could produce a rich, warm, and round fortissimo sound, with the tightness of the fist and muscle tension allowing for variation. Another technique she endorsed was lower octave doublings in the bass on selected notes, even when not notated. She explained that Messiaen himself had approved this practice on multiple occasions. One place she suggested adding this effect was at the end of the initial oriental dance in the 10th movement.

She demanded full control over soft chords. A note from her hand over a pianissimo passage in my score of *Vingt Regards* reads, "Entendre toutes les notes!" (Hear all the notes!).

Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen enriched our sessions with stories, connecting each piece to its historical context, often inspired by nature. For instance, she recounted how Messiaen had visited a cave where he had seen stalactites, which later inspired him for the figurations in the right hand at the beginning of the 11th movement of *Vingt Regards*.

Occasionally, she struck a religious tone. For instance, suggesting to say the prayer "Hail Mary" after the concluding tender thirds in the 11th movement before continuing with the powerful octaves of the 12th movement. When asked if being a Catholic enhanced interpretation of Messiaen's music, she retorted, "Do you think one is a better interpreter of Bach's music if one is a Lutheran?!" She believed that Messiaen's music, primarily religious in nature, was by no means exclusively reserved for devout Catholics.

Questions arose about whether *Vingt Regards* was always meant to be performed in its entirety. Loriod-Messiaen revealed that she sometimes performed the entire cycle with two intermissions or selected portions. However, some of the *Twenty Contemplations* are more suitable to stand alone in a concert program than others. Messiaen lamented how pianists often favoured charming titles, neglecting those movements devoted to the mysteries of the Christian faith. He clarified that the picturesque pieces gain their meaning within the context of the entire composition, providing contrasts that highlight the metaphysical aspects of the work. Likewise, listening to the complete cycle in one hearing is a journey comparable to hearing Beethoven's 9th Symphony; both create an incredible cumulative effect towards the final movement. Hearing the finale in isolation diminishes some of its effectiveness.

Our discussions about pianistic endurance led to Loriod-Messiaen sharing her interest in the Tour de France. She drew parallels between athletes' careers and those of classical musicians, noting the discipline, rigorous physical and mental training, and the performance itself, comparing it to a sports athlete's moment of competition and individual achievement.

Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen and Roger Muraro underscored that the tempo relationships between sections were more critical than adhering to the exact metronome markings. However, they insisted on precise note durations, even in complex rhythmic patterns. They stressed Messiaen's point in letting chord sequences evolve rhythmically with the following number of semiquavers per chord: 1-3-2-4-3-5-... -7-9-8-10 (the end of the 11th movement 'The First Communion of the Virgin'), or as in the chord sequence halfway through the 20th movement 'Contemplation of the Church of Love': 1-2-3-4-5-6-...-13-14-15-16.

Messiaen aimed to evoke a sense of stillness or eternity in the slow movements, an effect best achieved by adhering to specified tempos. Ironically, Loriod-Messiaen herself played 'Contemplation of the Father' at a faster tempo than Messiaen's marking. Personally, I make a conscious effort to closely follow his tempo indications, especially in the slow passages, recognising the significance Messiaen placed on accurately sustaining the durations of the long notes, aiming to evoke a sense of stillness or eternity.

In July 2007, I had the privilege of meeting both Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen and Roger Muraro again at the Centre Acanthes masterclasses in Metz. Her age had not diminished her ability to listen with a discerning ear, and offer precise and fitting feedback to all participants. The following year, I performed the complete *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* for the first time in several concerts to commemorate the centenary of Olivier Messiaen's birth.

Meeting and performing for Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen and Roger Muraro was a profoundly transformative and unforgettable experience. Their insights continue to inspire my interpretation of Messiaen's music, enriching my understanding. This inspiration propelled my ongoing journey of discovery in Messiaen's works, culminating in this recording.

Morten Heide

Morten Heide

Danish-Swedish pianist, conductor and piano teacher, Morten Heide, originally from Odense, Denmark, has made Sweden his home since 2013. His artistic profile is characterised by curiosity and a versatile, holistic approach to music. He is renowned for his affinity for contemporary music, along with a penchant for unearthing hidden or seldom-performed musical treasures across eras.

Latin American music is also part of Heide's repertoire. In 2006, he delivered the Danish premiere of Mexican composer Manuel Ponce's *Concierto Romántico* as a piano soloist, accompanied by the Odense Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Mei-Ann Chen. He has furthermore performed as soloist and ensemble musician with renowned conductors such as Stefan Asbury, Paul Hoskins and Christopher Austin.

Morten Heide is active as a pianist in various contexts, and his performances have graced venues throughout Scandinavia, Iceland, Germany, England, France, Italy, Latvia, and Mexico. Heide's approach to music is both intellectual and deeply rooted in musicology and performance practice. He expertly crafts his programs to reveal connections between various works and composers, often enhancing the audience's experience through informative concert introductions. For some years he was also affiliated with the University of Southern Denmark's research program "The Aesthetics of Music and Sound."

Morten Heide holds a bachelor's and master's degree in piano performance. In 2010, he completed his advanced postgraduate performance studies (Soloist Class) in piano at the Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts (now known as the Danish National Academy of Music), located in Odense. There he received piano instruction from Christina Bjørkøe, John Damgaard, and Erik Kaltoft, with a primary focus on the interpretation of contemporary music. His debut concerts were highly praised in the media and broadcast by the Danish Broadcasting Corporation on radio channel P2. Additionally, he has complemented his piano education with participation in several masterclasses and piano studies with Volker Banfield at the Hamburg University of Music and Theatre in Germany.

In addition to his prowess in piano, Morten Heide holds two master's degrees in choral and ensemble conducting, earned at the Danish National Academy of Music in Odense and the Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm. In 2014 he achieved recognition by advancing to the semifinals in The First Boris Tevlin International Competition of Choral Conductors in Moscow. In 2015, he made his debut with the Swedish Radio Choir. For several years, he served as the choir master of the Philharmonic Chorus at Odense Symphony Orchestra, collaborating with eminent conductors like Alexander Vedernikov, Stephen Layton, and Christoph Eschenbach. His extensive choral experience profoundly shaped his approach to piano performance in both polyphonic and linear dimensions.

In 2011, Morten Heide became the first Danish pianist to record Olivier Messiaen's transcendent and demanding piano masterpiece *Twenty Contemplations on the Infant Jesus*. This album marks the long-awaited presentation of his interpretation. Notably, this release stands as Morten Heide's debut solo CD.

To learn more about this artist please visit www.mortenheide.dk where you will also be able to access a pdf of this booklet in various languages.



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