



The Musical Language of Olivier Messiaen in *Vingt Regards sur L'Enfant – Jésus* (1944)

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Abstract

Olivier Messiaen's iconic importance to the 21st century musical aesthetic is culturally and compositionally acknowledged. The massive piano cycle '*Twenty Contemplations of the Infant Jesus*' profoundly corroborates this expressive and artistic genius. The discussion and musical presentation will illustrate the profound power of Messiaen's transformational historical position, through Messiaen's inspiration of Roman Catholicism, the cycle's salient characteristics, and the compositional tools. This presentation correlates the structural parameters through three of the *Regard: Regards du Père, Première communion de la Vierge, and Le baiser de l'Enfant-Jésus*.

1. Introduction:

Olivier Messiaen's primary family and childhood, as well as cultural influences, will be presented as witnesses to the creation of Messiaen's deepening predispositions in musical content. These influences sculpted the affinities to diverse sound sources of Messiaen.

2. Salient Characteristics:

Repetition, polymodality, cacophony, an extended range, and non-metric improvisational interpolations are dynamics of the textures and sonorities.

3. Compositional Tools:

Pertinent tools of composition germane to the three (3) performed segments of the *Vingt Regards* (see listing) will be illustrated: descriptive musical personas, non-retrograd-able scales/modes, non-retrogradable and Hindi rhythms, imitative techniques and contrapuntal

species, bird-song overlays and interpolations, percussive iterations, and suggestions of synaesthesia (associative colour and sound).

4. Structure:

The provision of thematic repetitions (similar to the use of 'leitmotif'), and Messiaen's utilization of numerology in creating the macro form will be explained as they individually pertain.

5. Programmatic Inspirations:

Messiaen's profound spiritual in liaison with Roman Catholicism will be couched in the aspects of the thematic issues.

6. Performance:

- I. Regard du Père* (Gaze of the Father)
- XI. *Première communion de la Vierge*
(The First Communion of the Virgin)
- XV. *Le Baiser de l'Enfant-Jésus*
(The Kiss of the Child Jesus).

1. Introduction

The massive programmatic piano cycle, *Vingt regards sur L'Enfant-Jésus*, of Olivier Messiaen, is acknowledged as an exemplary and explicit expression of musical inspiration and spiritual yearning. The twenty pieces, to be performed sequentially, reflects a penetrating human endeavor, with its perpetuity of vision and strength. Yet, even as an outpouring of Messiaen's profound grounding in Roman Catholicism, the musical language far exceeds religious classification, similarly as in all works of Messiaen.

In understanding the complexities and diverse touch-stones of the cycle, the actual translation of the title indicates the broad-reaching potentials of comprehension. *Vingt regards* has been translated variously as 'Twenty Contemplations...', or 'Twenty Glances...', or 'Twenty Gazes' 'on the Child' or 'Infant Jesus'.

The genesis of this work reaches back into Messiaen's critical and formative childhood years, nurtured in a wealth of artistic experience. His mother was a successful poet, and his father was a literature teacher and an authority on Shakespeare, having translated the entire *oeuvre* of Shakespeare into French. Messiaen was steeped in a love and respect for design and the balance in the awkward and sometimes elusive concept of beauty. He was immersed in an atmosphere appreciation, not only the human passions, but also their mystical extension.

The critical importance to this work was Messiaen's 'muse', his wife, Yvonne Loriod. Through her pianistic brilliance as attributed by Messiaen, she intimately affected the dynamic and virtuosic pianism essential to the *Vingt regards*. Yvonne Loriod premiered the work in 1945, one year after its completion.

And it was from Yvonne Loriod's recommendation, written in 1987 regarding the role of Messiaen's deep religious belief, that in piano performance "the warmth of the Faith and

Enthusiasm", the religious emotion, will be added to the musical emotion when she admonished for performance of '*La Première Communion de la Vierge*' (The First Communion of the Virgin), "one must love the purity of the Virgin, believes in her total virginity. Just as for this conception, the Infant Jesus is born without changing his mother..."

Messiaen struggled in his compositional process. Messiaen confessed,

"I have tried to be a Christian musician and proclaim my faith through song, but without ever succeeding,... what I can say is that I prefer music that is iridescent, subtle, even voluptuous.... Music that sings ...Music that is like new blood, a signed gesture, an unknown perfume. Music that expresses the end of time, ubiquity, glorified bodies and the divine and supernatural mysteries. A 'theological rainbow'."

Messiaen's religious grounding inured his use of the Gregorian plain chant and the 'Magnificat' of the Roman Catholic mass. Fascinated from early youth, Messiaen documented and eventually recorded the song of birds. This process evolved into a view that bird-song was "Creation singing the praises of God." Six segments of the cycle are laced with bird-song, one of which will be performed here ~ *The First Communion*.

As a Parisian during the Nazi occupation of WW II, Messiaen composed and wrote songs same as other artists of the underground resistance. The energy of these artists was couched in art, poetry, and manifestoes applauding and iterating the cry of human rights, equality, and freedom from oppression. And Messiaen's cry was strong, resulting in this cycle and the work written during Messiaen's 1940-41 interment in a

Nazi concentration camp, *La Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (Quartet for the End of Time).

Both works take on the mantle of personal belief, faith and action.

2. Salient Characteristics

Musical characteristics permeating Messiaen's works are clearly heard and illustrated from the three segments I have selected to perform:

I. *Regard du Père* (*Gaze of the Father*);

XI. *Première communion de la Vierge*
(*The First Communion of the Virgin*);

and,

XV. *Le Baiser de l'Enfant-Jésus*
(*The Kiss of the Child Jesus*).

The characteristics are:

a. repetition (whether of recurring notes, or motives): thematic repetitions, as well as repetitive pulsations appear in all three works performed today;

b. polymodality (concurrent use of varied modes): illustrated in *The Kiss* with an F# major scale, and the overlay of the octatonic mode common to Messiaen's composition;

c. cacophony (illustrating the intensity of the emotion, almost orchestral in nature): climactic occurrences exist in the *First Communion* and *The Kiss*;

d. extended ranges (expanding the sonority): examples exist in all of the three segments performed today;

e. non-metric improvisational interpolations: flourishes which heighten the energy in both *First Communion*, and *The Kiss*.

f. differing time spans (simultaneously occurring): long durations of thematic content in both *Gaze of the Father* and the *First Communion* juxtaposed with the quickened bird-song soliloquies; and,

g. 'personages rythmiques' (rhythms that recur with characteristic regularity, assuming the role of dramatic characters): all segments performed illustrate this characteristic.

3. Compositional Tools

The powerful musical personas or themes galvanizing this cycle are the *Theme de Dieu* (*Theme of God*), *Theme de l'Etoile et de la Croix* (*Theme of the Star and of the Cross*), and *Theme d'Accords* (*Theme of Chords*).

Messiaen's use of non-retrograde scales or modes and non-retrograde rhythms are devices which result in complex and unpredictable textures and movement. This use provides that the pitches and/or rhythms are the same ~ both forwards and backwards, as in a palindrome. In the perception of the musical material, one does not hear the palindrome, rather one is aware of the unpredictable. In this use, Messiaen insured the attitude of infinite possibility, as a reflection of the profound magnitude of a religious faith.

Complimentary with non-retrograde use are augmentations and diminutions of musical lines, sometimes simultaneously, which expand Messiaen's musical palette. This diversity of contrapuntal species again reflects Messiaen's desire to create an infinite nature in this musical utterance.

As previously mentioned, the inclusion of 'bird-song' was a fundamental compositional element of Messiaen. His life was enhanced by nature and the actual recording and use of bird-song. This is clearly apparent in both *First Communion*, and *The Kiss*.

The cacophony resulting from percussive out-cries underlines Messiaen's search again for an ultimate expressive infusion and impact.

From the early *Preludes* of 1928-29, Messiaen describes the 'intangible sounds of the dream' through prescribed associations of colour: "blue, orange, violet, purple and copper to gleaming gemstones". Messiaen relates specific colours to the sound spectrum in the *Vingt regards*. Messiaen's book *Musique et couleur* (Music and colour) is the testament to his associations of sound and colour ~ in a word, *synaesthesia*.

4. Structure

In *Vingt regards*, three themes function overall as drivers, in substance and in character. This employ is not new to musical composition. Wagner's operas are more intensely comprehended through this awareness: *leitmotif*, melodies or musical sequences that indicate specific identities, feelings, emotions, dispositions, or circumstance.

The first appearing theme, and in the first segment, is the *Theme of God*: it is found in seven of the twenty segments, and is of a singing quality (*cantabile*). This theme will appear in all of the segments performed.

The second theme is the *Theme of the Star and of the Cross*: of a sinuous nature, with irregular rhythm.

The *Theme of Chords* is the third theme, and is found in seven segments. This theme is built from Messiaen's special scale constructions, which as Messiaen described, "[migrate]... sometimes fragmentary...as concentrated as a rainbow."

The special ordering of the twenty segments reflects Messiaen's use of numerology in the service of a Christian association.

Among other associations, the number 7 refers to the Cross, twice that, 14, refers to Angels; the ninth segment, *Regards du Temps* (*Contemplation of Time*), represents the nine months preceding birth; in every fifth piece appears the *Theme of God*; the outer movements of groups of five are the longest outpourings of stormy virtuosity; the second half is grouped in fives, dominated by great slow movements. You will hear one of these, XV *The Kiss*.

5. Programmatic Inspirations

Messiaen's Catholicism was the source for additional inspiration of the *Vingt regards*.

As mentioned previously, the 'Magnificat' melody is borrowed from the Roman Catholic liturgy and is heard in the *First Communion*.

Secondary to the previously mentioned

themes are the *Theme d'amour* (*Theme of Love*), which will be heard here in the *First Communion*, reflecting Messiaen's search for a language of mystical love, and the *Theme de joie* (*Theme of Joy*), with the use of modal resonances and tone colors catapulting the work towards its final ecstatic conclusion.

6. Performance

I will perform three parts of the cycle which derive their programmatic character from the *Theme of God*,

I *Regard du Père*

(*Gaze of the Father*)

This segment initiates the cyclic preponderance of the *Theme de God*. It is characterised by the rhythm of 'short-short-short-long-long', a 'personages rythmiques', and is cast in F# major. This, the first segment of the cycle, sets a time-scale for the work: spacious, and majestic; broadly flowing with a left hand melody coloured by interjections in the right hand. Messiaen's instruction is that it is to be performed entirely softly, 'extremely slowly, mysteriously', evoking a calm serenity, and *avec amour* (with love).

Through musical representation, herein also lies another of Messiaen's view of the God as infinity and eternity. The continuously repeating notes pulsate to impart a never-ending static quality, which intensifies the piano sonority and the emotional response. The work ends with unending repetitions and an added *fermata* (stop) over the last note – metaphorically, a canopy which extends eternally.

As also in Gregorian chant, this is similar to a host of intensely moving Indian music and the meditative mantra. The time evoked reflects what the composer considers 'theological time'. As Messiaen stated, "Time is one of God's creatures because it is opposing that which is Eternal, to Him who has no beginning and no end.

XI *Première communion de la Vierge*

(First Communion of the Virgin)

This segment iterates the *Theme of God* but in a very different role. It has transposed to the traditionally understood pastoral centre of F major, and assumes an interior and more serene perspective. Decorated with an idealized simply repetitive and joyful birdsong, the 'enthusiastic' and syncopated 'Magnificat' melody of the Roman Catholic liturgy—*Liber usualis* appear. This conveys the Virgin's excitement appears. This conveys the Virgin's wondrous excitement and disbelief of the Annunciation.

From Messiaen's description, the Theme of God appears with 'gifted curls, in stalactites, by embracing the interior...the reminder of the theme of the Virgin and the Child of the Nativity.' The religious inspiration exists from a revered painting known to Messiaen, the Virgin kneeling in contemplation worshiping the Child in her womb.

This programmatic element provides a framework for analysis and interpretation. The Theme of God has two figurations superimposed that suggest the halo surrounding the Virgin. As in other works of Messiaen, the idea of a halo is created with specific timbres...in this case the 'halo resonance' is above the cyclic theme. The Theme is again heard ending with a Bb chord of 'added resonance' and a downward reach to the lowest extreme of the piano. This produces shimmering vibrations.

The motivic borrowing of the 'Rappel de la Vierge et l'Enfant' (Reminder of the Virgin and the Child) actually comes from Act I of Modeste Mussorgsky's opera Boris Godunov. The accompanying upper registral seventh chords with the added chromatic dissonance give a chime-like effect. This added timbre is not new to Messiaen, and is similar in use to an earlier piano work of 1930, *Les sons impalpable du rve* (The impalpable sounds of a dream).

This excitement resonates from the rhythmic syncopation of the simultaneous presentation of the two themes, the Theme of God, and the Magnificat. The expansion into three variations creates an emblematic climax of the energy. The segment finally withdraws into an iteration of the Theme of God.

The low pulsations following represent the heartbeats of the unborn Christ-child within his mother.

The last six measures once again have the Theme of God in the bass, with the treble evoking a commentary. Special simplicity and meaning of the final G chord, underlines the mystery of the Incarnation. Mary worships Jesus within her.

XV *Le Baiser de l'Enfant-Jésus*

(The Kiss of the Child Jesus)

Messiaen's own commentary offers insight for this setting of the Theme of God, casted as a lullaby. It has a repeated rocking bass pattern, with the instruction to be played 'very calm and slow'. It must evoke the infant Christ 'en sommeil' (in sleep).

This fifteenth segment of the cycle, being a multiple of five, is a reminder that to Messiaen, the number five represents divinity. This is a predisposition of Messiaen's reflecting his attraction to Indian music and Hindu theology: five is the 'number' of the Indian god Shiva. Again, the tonal centre is the mystical F#.major with the same tonal hierarchy as the very well-beloved Barcarolle of Frederic Chopin. The texture also resonates with sixth chords typical of Claude Debussy. From Messiaen's early piano compositions, these composers' influences were heard. Messiaen did love the piano music of both composers.

As a set of four variations, The Kiss moves from 'calm' through a transformation, inspired from a picture of Ste. Therese de Lisieux, with arms outstretched to embrace the

Christ-child. The powerful climax is created through the Theme of Chords, emphasizing the Communion. This culminates in an ecstatic combination of the two secondary themes, the Theme of Joy and the Theme of Love.

The rhapsodic sweetness closing this segment of the cycle is programmatically intended to reflect the suspension of time and space... ultimately equal to the contemplation of eternal love.

References

- Messiaen, Olivier, 1944. *Vingt Regards sur L'Enfant-Jésus*, Durand S.A. Éditions Musicales.
- Siefert, Charles E., 1989. *Messiaen's Vingt Regards Sur L'Enfant-Jésus: A Historical and Pedagogical Study*. University of Michigan Press. Ann Arbor, MI.

