

The Theme of God: A Musical and Theological Discussion of  
Olivier Messiaen's *Vingt regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*

By

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## Abstract

The purpose of this research is to help both performers and liturgical musicians to better understand Messiaen's musical style and theological inspiration. Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) is one of the most important composers of French keyboard music in the twentieth century. He composed numerous works in nearly every musical genre, many inspired by his Catholic faith. *Vingt regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* (Twenty Contemplations on the Infant Jesus) is a two-hour masterpiece for solo piano written in 1944, and is one of the most significant of his works. The piece is constructed by using three main themes: the *Thème de Dieu* (Theme of God), *Thème de l'étoile et de la Croix* (Theme of the Star and of the Cross), and *Thème d'accords* (Theme of Chords). The "Theme of God" is based on an F-sharp major chord with chromatic passing tones in the inner voice. The "Theme of the Star and of the Cross" symbolizes the birth and death of Jesus by using chant-like monophony. The "Theme of Chords" is constructed on four chromatic and dissonant chords creating the sound of bells. Throughout the *Vingt regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*, Messiaen uses a variety of rhythmic figures, including Greek rhythms, Indian rhythms, non-retrogradable rhythms, diminution and augmentation. He also created an inventory of scales, which he named the modes of limited transposition.

This research will examine Messiaen's *Vingt regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* by focusing on the movements based on the "Theme of God," namely movements 1, 5, 11, and 20. Following a musical discussion of these pieces, this research will then discuss the theological considerations in *Vingt regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* using Messiaen's own comments found in the score and in additional reference materials.

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## Introduction

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) is one of the most significant composers in the twentieth century. He was influenced by Claude Debussy (1862-1918), Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971), Richard Wagner (1813-1883), and Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881). Also, Messiaen affected his notable students, Pierre Boulez (1925-2016), William Bolcom (b. 1938), Karlheinz Stockhausen (1928-2007), and Iannis Xenakis (1922-2001) when he was a professor of harmony at the Paris Conservatoire.

Messiaen composed works in many genres, including one opera, twenty orchestral, thirteen vocal, two chamber, three solo instrumental, fourteen organ, thirteen piano, and four electronic works. The piano was one of his major instruments, and he wrote two piano works based on the Catholic faith: *Visions de l'Amen* and *Vingt regards sur l'Enfant Jésus*. The *Vingt regards* was written from 1943 to 1944 and is based on three main themes: the *Thème de Dieu* (Theme of God), *Thème de l'étoile et de la Croix* (Theme of the Star and of the Cross), and *Thème d'accords* (Theme of Chords). The *Vingt regards* also includes two secondary themes: *Thème d'amour* (Theme of Mystical Love), and *Thème de joie* (Theme of Joy). This research will evaluate these themes, particularly focusing on Messiaen's *Thème de Dieu*, and the theological influences found throughout the work.

Chapter 1 examines Messiaen's many musical innovations, including the use of Greek meter, Indian rhythm, symmetrical permutation, added values, diminution and augmentation rhythm based on his treatise, *Technique de mon langage musicale*. Also, it discusses the modes of limited transposition and the birdsong as dominant features. Furthermore, this chapter is particularly interested in the religious background of the *Vingt regards*. Chapter 2 discusses the

dominant and cyclical themes found throughout the *Vingt regards*: The Theme of God, Theme of the Star and of the Cross, and Theme of Chords. Chapter 3 thoroughly analyzes the Theme of God as used in movements 1, 5, 11, and 20. This chapter focuses on the similarities and differences in these four movements.

Chapter 4 then explores theological interpretations of Messiaen's music and how, through different settings of the themes, his express the various biblical messages. Accordingly, this chapter investigates the account of the *Vingt regards* in the Catholic context and then examines how the biblical messages are delivered through the *Vingt regards*.

## Chapter 1: Background of Messiaen's Music

### 1.1. Messiaen's Musical Language

#### 1.1.1. Rhythmic and Melodic Characteristics

According to one of Messiaen's interviews, he introduced himself as a rhythmologist and an ornithologist.<sup>1</sup> He published his first treatise, *Technique de mon langage musicale* (Technique of My Musical Language), in 1944 while he was a professor of harmony at the Paris Conservatory. Messiaen emphasized three points in his treatise: rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic elements.<sup>2</sup> He dedicated it to Bernard-Delapierre, an Egyptologist and composer of film scores, whom he met when they were French military prisoners during World War II. A second treatise, *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur, et d'Ornithologie* (Treatise on Rhythm, Colour and Ornithology), is a seven volume work about rhythmic figures, emphasizing four elements: time, color, rhythm, and birdsong. Yvonne Loriod, Messiaen's second wife, compiled these volumes from 1949 to 1992. In volume 1, Messiaen looked at Greek meter and Indian characters and analyzed 39 choruses of *Le Printemps* by Claude Le Jeune.

Messiaen's use of rhythm is one of the most significant revolutions in music. Both treatises focus on various rhythmic elements, including Greek and Indian rhythms and birdsong. However, *Technique de mon langage musicale* simply explains the rhythms, while *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur, et d'Ornithologie* describes compositional skills and a more practical study of Messiaen's musical components.

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<sup>1</sup> Olivier Messiaen and Bernard Gavory, "Who Are You, Olivier Messiaen?," *Tempo*, New Series, No. 58 (Summer, 1961): 33. accessed February 5, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/944251>.

<sup>2</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *The Technique of My Musical Language*, trans. John Satterfield (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1956), 7.



#### 1.1.1.1. Greek Rhythms

When Messiaen studied at the Paris Conservatory, his organ professor, Marcel Dupré (1886-1971), and his music history professor, Maurice Emmanuel (1862-1938), provided him with a foundation in Greek music. Messiaen learned Greek rhythmic improvisation based on Dupré's *Traité Cours Complet d'Improvisation à l'Orgue* (Complete Course in Organ Improvisation, c1925-1937). He also took a one-year music history course focusing on Greek meter from Emmanuel who wrote a treatise *Music of Ancient Greece* (1895).<sup>3</sup> Messiaen had difficulty understanding ancient Greek rhythms due to the lack of treatises on the subject. However, he devoted himself to research and finally compiled one chapter on Greek meters in his second treatise, Volume I of *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur, et d'Ornithologie*. The Greek basic notation consists of long and short values and the short value is called a *metron*; the duration of one long value equals two short values.<sup>4</sup> In Greek notation, the long value is notated with a horizontal shape and the short value is with U-shape as seen below.<sup>5</sup>

Long: —                      Short: U

Figure 1: Greek Shape

Claude Le Jeune (1530-1600), a French composer, frequently used Greek rhythms in his music. He arranged a text by Jean-Antoine de Baïf (1532-1589)'s libretto into his vocal work, *Le Printemps* (1603), by using *vers mesuré*, which is music that is adjusted by appropriate syllable,

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<sup>3</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Olivier Messiaen Music and Color*, trans. Thomas Glasow (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1994), 73.

<sup>4</sup> Melody Ann Baggech, "An English Translation of Olivier Messiaen's "Traite De Rythme, De Couleur, Et d'Ornithologie"," Order No. 9914415, The University of Oklahoma, (1998): 92-93.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

strophe and accents with various meters.<sup>6</sup> Greek verses can be organized in simple, compound, and mixed meters of the longs and shorts.

Because Messiaen was inspired by the *Airs* of *Le Printemps*, he composed *Cinq rechants* (1948) for vocal ensemble that shows his respect for Le Jeune.<sup>7</sup> The following works were also influenced by Greek rhythms: *Turangalîla-Symphonie* (1948); and the first movement, *Les langues de feu* of *Messe de la Pentecôte* (Pentecost Mass, 1949-50).

#### 1.1.1.2. Indian Rhythms

In addition to Greek rhythms, Indian rhythms were equally important in Messiaen's compositional style. Messiaen discussed Indian meter in Chapter 2 of *Technique de mon langage musicale*, and Chapter 4 in Volume 1 of *Treatise de Rythme, de Couleur, et d'Ornithologie*.

Çârngadeva (Sharngadeva), an Indian theorist of the thirteenth century, built an Indian rhythmic system with 120 *decî-tâlas*. The rhythmic system was printed in the *Encyclopédie de la musique et dictionnaire du conservatoire* by editors Lavignac and Laurencie in 1924.<sup>8</sup> The metrical rhythmic value is the *tâla*, and it has a monophonic figure. Messiaen frequently used the *râgavardhana* rhythm number 93 on the *decî-tâlas* table, the *candrakalâ* rhythm number 22, and the *lakskmîça* rhythm number 88.<sup>9</sup>



Music Example 1: Original *râgavardhana* rhythm of the number 93 on the *decî-tâlas*

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<sup>6</sup> Siglind Bruhn, ed., *Messiaen's Language of Mystical Love* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998), 122.

<sup>7</sup> Robert S. Johnson, *Messiaen* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1989), 95.

<sup>8</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *The Technique of My Musical Language*, 14.

<sup>9</sup> Siglind Bruhn, ed., *Messiaen's Language of Mystical Love*, 123.

The 120 *decî-tâlas* have a lot of dotted 16<sup>th</sup> notes, so doubling the values of each note is made in order to read them easily.



Music Example 2: Double values on *râgavardhana* rhythm of the number 93 on the *decî-tâlas*

Messiaen utilized not only Greek rhythm but also Indian rhythm in *Cinq rechants* (1948).<sup>10</sup> These rhythms include the *miçra varna* with sopranos, the *simhavikrama* with altos, and the *laya* with basses in the first piece, *Groupe Vocale de France of Cinq rechant*.<sup>11</sup> The Indian meter is also found in the *Noël* from *Vingt regards*. Messiaen applied the *miçra varna* of number 26 on the *decî-tâlas* table from measure 10 to 12.<sup>12</sup>



Music Example 3: *miçra varna* of number 26



Music Example 4: *Noël* of *Vingt regards*, mm. 10-12

<sup>10</sup> Melody Ann Baggech, "An English Translation of Olivier Messiaen's "Traite De Rythme, De Couleur, Et d'Ornithologie"," Order No. 9914415, The University of Oklahoma, (1998): 378.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 377

### 1.1.1.3. Added Values

Messiaen frequently uses the rhythmic technique of added values throughout his music. This is a process of repeating a melodic passage while adding duration to selected notes in the repeated version. Added values can also occur relative to a standard metrical division. Messiaen enlarged the note value by stretching and reducing duration in order for the rhythm to be more flexible. This technique can be clearly seen in the example below from Messiaen's *Danse du bébé-Pilule* from *Chants de terre et de ciel*.<sup>13</sup>



Also, he sometimes added dominant seventh and ninth intervals to the chord with the sixth. The combination of these elements shows up the eighth piece, *Le collier* of *Poèmes pour Mi*, as an example and throughout the *Vingt regards*.

Added 6<sup>th</sup>      Added 7<sup>th</sup>      Added 9<sup>th</sup>

The image shows three measures of music in a grand staff. The first measure is labeled 'Added 6<sup>th</sup>' and shows a C major chord with an added sixth (F). The second measure is labeled 'Added 7<sup>th</sup>' and shows a C major chord with an added seventh (Bb). The third measure is labeled 'Added 9<sup>th</sup>' and shows a C major chord with an added ninth (D).

Music Example 8: Added 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup>

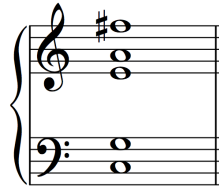
The image shows a short musical phrase in a grand staff. It consists of four measures. The first measure is a C major chord. The second and third measures are C major chords with an added seventh (Bb) and an added ninth (D). The fourth measure is a C major chord.

Music Example 9: Added 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>

The image shows a musical score for a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in the upper staff and has the lyrics 'Ah! mon collier! Ah! mon col - lier!'. The piano accompaniment is in the lower staff and features complex chordal textures with many accidentals. Dynamics markings include *f* (forte) and *p* (piano).

Music Example 10: *Le collier* of *Poèmes pour Mi*

Messiaen's additional interval innovation is the use of the augmented fourth. Using this interval as part of a stable harmony is normally avoided in 18<sup>th</sup> century composition, but he created a new tonal system. This example shows the addition of an augmented fourth on the C major chord with the sixth.



Music Example 11: C major chord with added sixth and augmented fourth (tritone)

#### 1.1.1.4. Augmentation and Diminution

Augmentation uniformly increases the note durations in a melody by a certain whole-number factor, and diminution does the same, but with a decrease.<sup>15</sup> Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) frequently used these techniques.

Messiaen was likely under the influence of these techniques, yet he expanded inexact duration.<sup>16</sup> In the example shown below, “B” is a non-uniform augmentation of “A” because B’s second note is not a dotted quarter note, which is what it would be under a uniform augmentation. However, Messiaen experimented with non-whole-number augmentation, for example, by the addition of a dot. This essentially adds one-half of the value to each note rather than doubling it.



Music Example 12: Non-uniform Augmentation<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Willi Apel and Ralph T. Daniel, *The Harvard Brief Dictionary of Music* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), 20.

<sup>16</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *The Technique of My Musical Language*, 19.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, Music Example 26. (*Arc-en-ciel d'innocence* of *Chants de Terre et de Ciel*)

### 1.1.1.5. Non-retrogradable Rhythm

The term “non-retrogradable” refers to a series of durations that are the same reading either forwards or backwards. Messiaen applied the term “non-retrogradable” to his rhythms that followed the same principle.

In *Vingt regards*, the same rhythmic order continues in the reverse direction of symmetrical rhythms with a central common value, which was set up in the three movements: nos. 6, 12, and 20. In the example below, Messiaen indicates the non-retrogradable rhythm of the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> bars from movement 20 of the *Vingt regards*.

The image displays three systems of musical notation for piano. The first system is titled "Presque vif (♩=132)" and is marked "PIANO". It features a complex rhythmic pattern with a central common value, indicated by a dashed line and the text "(1<sup>er</sup> thème) (Rythme non rétrogradable)". The tempo is marked "8" and the dynamics range from *f* to *ff*. The second system is marked "(amplifié à gauche) (et à droite)" and features a similar rhythmic pattern with dynamics from *ff* to *f*. The third system is titled "Presque lent (♩=60)" and is marked "(amplifié à gauche) (et à droite)". It features a simpler rhythmic pattern with dynamics from *ff* to *f*. The tempo is marked "8" and the dynamics range from *ff* to *f*. The text "(Thème de Dieu)" is written below the third system.

Music Example 13: *Regard de l'Eglise d'amour* of *Vingt regards*, mm 1-7

### 1.1.2. The Modes of the Limited Transposition

In addition to his rhythmic creativity, Messiaen also sought out new pitch patterns to create interesting and unique melodic lines. The modes of limited transposition are discussed in Chapter XVI of his treatise *Technique de mon langage musicale*. Volume 1 provides a theoretical explanation of the modes, while Volume 2 provides numerous musical examples of the modes in practice. Messiaen applied his own modes throughout his works, and he laid the foundation of this device for the interval equidistance. There are five sequential equidistances within the octave: the chromatic scale, the whole-tone scale, the diminished seventh chord, the augmented triad and the tritone.<sup>18</sup> The portion of the different interval sequences incorporates all modes.

He divided the octave into groupings with equidistant values to create a total of seven modes.

Table 1: The Modes of the Limited Transposition

	Interval Sequences	Sequential Equidistance	Transpositions
Mode 1	Whole tone	Whole tone	2
Mode 2	1 semitone + 1 whole tone	Diminished 7 <sup>th</sup> chord	3
Mode 3	1 whole tone + 2 semitones	Augmented triad	4
Mode 4	2 semitones + 1 minor third + 1 semitone	Tritone	6
Mode 5	1 semitone + 1 major third + 1 semitone	Tritone	6
Mode 6	2 whole tones + 2 semitones	Tritone	6
Mode 7	3 semitones + 1 whole tone + 1 semitone	Tritone	6

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<sup>18</sup> Siglind Bruhn, *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation* (New York: Pendragon Press, 2007), 43.



The first mode is the whole-tone scale of the six whole-tone equal subdivisions, and it has two transpositions.<sup>19</sup> The second mode consists of the alternation of a semitone with a whole tone dividing the octave into four groupings outlining the diminished-seventh chord. It is called the *octatonic scale*, and it has three transpositions.<sup>20</sup> The third mode consists of one whole tone and two semitones with three groupings of the octave as well as the augmented triad, and it has four transpositions.<sup>21</sup> The fourth mode consists of the note relationship of two semitones, one minor third, and one semitone on the octave with two sets as the tritone repetitions, and it has six transpositions.<sup>22</sup> The fifth mode consists of one semitone, one major third, and one semitone on the octave divided into two grouping as the tritone restatements. This mode has six transpositions.<sup>23</sup> The sixth mode consists of two whole tones and two semitones of two brackets in the octave as the tritone scheme, and it has six transpositions.<sup>24</sup> The seventh mode consists of the pitch value of three semitones, one whole tone, and one semitone of the octave divided into two grouping as the triton patterns. The mode has six transpositions.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *The Technique of My Musical Language*, 59.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.



Music Example 14: Mode No. 1, Whole-tone Scale



Music Example 15: Mode No. 2, Octatonic



Music Example 16: Mode No. 3



Music Example 17: Mode No. 4



Music Example 18: Mode No. 5



Music Example 19: Mode No. 6



Music Example 20: Mode No. 7

### 1.1.3. Birdsong

Another important element in Messiaen's musical language is the use of birdsong. Other composers had already used birdsong in their music; however, Messiaen is the first composer to establish certain kinds of birdsong as musical notation.<sup>26</sup> Messiaen had loved birdsong since he was young, and referred to birds as incredible musicians and great gifts.<sup>27</sup> He had researched birdsong from diverse territories through his life as an ornithologist, and built numerous birdsong notations to describe bird's intonation. He identified the birds whose songs he collected by the French or Latin names given by scientists, and it can totaled around 12000 species.<sup>28</sup> In his early compositions, he frequently depicted the blackbird and nightingale, common birds in his hometown.<sup>29</sup> In the chamber ensemble work *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (1941), he used birdsong, the blackbird and nightingale, for the first time and it laid the foundation for the use of the birdsong in his music.<sup>30</sup>

The image shows a page of musical notation for a chamber ensemble. It features four staves: Violon (Violin), CLARINETTE en SI b (Clarinet in B-flat), VIOLONCELLE (Cello), and PIANO. The tempo and mood are indicated as 'Bien modéré, en poudrolement harmonieux' and '(comme un oiseau)'. The piano part is marked 'pp legato (très enveloppé de pédale)'. The clarinet part is marked 'p expressif'. The violin part is marked 'ppp (vibrato)'. The cello part is marked 'ppp (vibrato)'. The score includes a section labeled 'A'.

Music Example 21: *Liturgie de cristal* of *Quatuor!*

<sup>26</sup> Peter Hill, ed., *The Messiaen Companion* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1995), 258.

<sup>27</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Olivier Messiaen Music and Color*, trans. Thomas Glasow (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1994), 85-91.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 86. The kinds of birds are the Marsh Warbler, the Quail, the Great Sedge Warbler and Turdoid, the Sedge Warbler, the Red-legged Partridge, the Grey Partridge, and so on.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Hill, ed., *The Messiaen Companion*, 249.

<sup>30</sup> Carla H. Bell, *Olivier Messiaen* (Boston, Massachusetts: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 20.

The melody on the clarinet describes the blackbird. Messiaen referred to the “harmonious silence of heaven” from the blackbird and nightingale at dawn.<sup>31</sup> He depicted the nightingale as a virtuosic tenor with a powerful voice.<sup>32</sup>



Music Example 22: Nightingale from *Liturgie de cristal* of *Quatuor!*

Messiaen continued to be inspired by birdsong and in many of his other works: *Le merle noir* (1951) for flute and piano, *Reveil des oiseaux* (1953) and *Oiseaux exotiques* (1956) for piano and orchestra, and *Catalogue d'oiseaux* (1956-1958) for piano. Many of his sacred pieces also utilize birdsong including, *Verset pour la fête de la Dédicace* (1960) for organ; *Couleurs de la Cité Céleste* (1963) for small orchestra; *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum* (1964) for the winds, strings, and metallic percussion; and *Saint François d'Assise* (1975-1983) for opera. The most extensive of these works dealing with birdsong is the *Catalogue d'oiseaux*. Messiaen wrote seven books containing thirteen pieces with subtitles of a bird's name. He attempted to copy the precise birdsong based on recordings he collected around his place of residence.<sup>33</sup> He collected the birds' real sound in France at first, and then recorded birds in Europe, Asia, Africa, North America, South America, Mexico, and Austria.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Peter Hill, ed., *The Messiaen Companion*, 258.

<sup>32</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Olivier Messiaen Music and Color*, trans. Thomas Glasow (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1994), 88.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>34</sup> Robert S. Johnson, *Messiaen*, 211-223.

In *Regard des hauteurs* of *Vingt regards*, he clearly depicted nightingale sounds, and he mentioned in the preface the song of the blackbird, warbler, chaffinch, goldfinch, Cetti's warbler and serin.<sup>35</sup>



Music Example 23: The Nightingale in *Regard des hauteurs* of *Vingt regards*, mm. 5-6

## 1.2. Religious Background of Messiaen's Music

### 1.2.1. Roman Catholic Faith

I am, above all, a Catholic composer. All my works, whether religious or not, are documents of faith glorifying the mystery of Christ. Through my poor stammerings about *Divine Love* I have tried to find a music signifying a new epoch, a loving and chanting music.<sup>36</sup>

Messiaen was born in France on December 10, 1908. His father, Pierre Messiaen (1883-1957), was an English teacher who was famous for translating William Shakespeare's works from English to French. His mother, Cécile Sauvage (1883-1927), was a poetess who published a collection of poetry. She wrote *L'ame en bourgeon* (The Budding Soul) for her baby while she was pregnant with Messiaen. Although his parents were not religious, his mother instilled in him a respect of faith in the Roman Catholic Church from a young age; thus, his musical compositions were naturally inspired by the Catholic faith.<sup>37</sup> He read the *Summa Theologica* of

<sup>35</sup> Peter Hill, ed., *The Messiaen Companion*, 252.

<sup>36</sup> Claude Rostand, *French Music Today*, trans. Henry Marx (New York: Merlin Press, 1950s), 46.

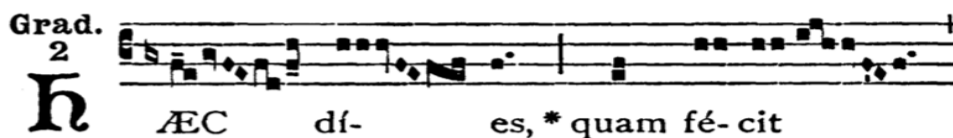
<sup>37</sup> Carla H. Bell, *Olivier Messiaen*, 2.

Saint Thomas Aquinas and also studied the Gospels, the Epistles of Saint Paul, and the Book of Revelation.<sup>38</sup>

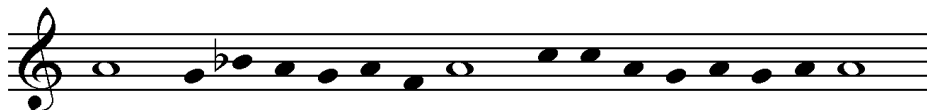
When Messiaen was appointed an organist at Sainte Trinité in Paris in 1931, he was influenced by Gregorian chants. Messiaen incorporated the chants into his music, such as *Chants de terre et de ciel* (1938). He composed the liturgical works *La Nativité du Seigneur* for organ (1935), *O Sacrum convivium!* for offertory of the choral motet (1937), *Trois petites liturgies de la Présence Divine* for chamber (1944), *Turangalila Symphonie* for orchestra (1948), *Messe de la Pentecôte* for organ (1950), and *La Transfiguration de Notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ* for vocal (1969). Ironically, he did not compose a setting for the Ordinary Mass, but he intended *Messe de la Pentecôte* as the Proper of the mass. In the opening of *Regard de L'Esprit de joie*, Messiaen uses the *Haec dies* theme from the *Gradual* for Easter Sunday.<sup>39</sup>



Music Example 24: *Regard de l'Esprit de joie* of *Vingt regards*, mm. 1-2



Music Example 25: *Haec dies* in *The Liber Usualis*, p.778, 1961



Music Example 26: Modern notation in *Haec dies*

<sup>38</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Olivier Messiaen Music and Color*, trans. Thomas Glasow (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1994), 16.

<sup>39</sup> Robert S. Johnson, *Messiaen*, 21.

### 1.2.2. Overview of *Vingt regards sur l'Enfant Jésus*

Myself, I have always believed, simply and completely with the faith of a charcoal-burner. God for me is manifest, and my conception of sacred music derives from this conviction. God being present in all things, music dealing with theological subjects can and must be extremely varied. The Catholic religion is a real fairy-story with this difference, it is all true. I have therefore, in the words of Ernest Hello, tried to produce 'a music that touches all things without ceasing to touch God'. But, if my music is a spontaneous act of faith, without premeditation, it is by no means a mystical music.<sup>40</sup>

Messiaen composed the *Vingt regards* based on his Catholic faith and utilized many of the ideas described in *Technique de mon langage musical* and the *Vingt regards* which were both published in 1944. Messiaen dedicated *Vingt regards* to the pianist Yvonne Loriod who later became his second wife. In this period, Messiaen focused on composing piano music for Loriod; hence he composed two piano works, *Visions de l'Amen* (1943) and *Vingt regards* (1944). He also created *Trois petites Liturgies de la Présence Divine* (1944) for chamber ensemble at that time.<sup>41</sup>

According to the preface of the *Vingt regards*, Messiaen paid homage to Dom Columba Marmion who wrote *Le Christ dans ses Mystères* (Christ in His Mysteries)<sup>42</sup> in 1919 and to Maurice Toesca who wrote *Les douze regards* (The Twelve Gazes). Dom Columba Marmion (1858-1923) was already famous for writing books about the Catholic faith when he was the abbot at Benedictine Abbey in Belgium, Maredsous.<sup>43</sup> Marmion's *Christ in His Mysteries*, directly influenced not only Messiaen's *Vingt regards* commentaries, but also the structure of the work. This book consists of three portions: *Preliminary Conferences* (chapters 1-2), *Part I: The Person of Christ* (chapters 3-5), and *Part II: The Mysteries of Christ* (chapters 6-20). *The Preliminary Conferences* and *Part I: The Person of Christ* describe the mysteries of Christ,

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<sup>40</sup> Olivier Messiaen and Bernard Gavoty, "Who Are You, Olivier Messiaen?" *Tempo* 58, 34

<sup>41</sup> Vincent P. Benitez, *Olivier Messiaen: A Research and Information Guide* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 3.

<sup>42</sup> English translation by Mother Mary St. Thomas in 1924.

<sup>43</sup> Siglind Bruhn, *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation*, 129.

various kinds of religious persons and divine missions.<sup>44</sup> While *Part II: The Mysteries of Christ* develops and further discusses the ideas presented in the first five chapters. Messiaen parallels this construction in the *Vingt regards* by presenting the primary thematic material in the first five movements like an exposition, followed by fifteen movements of development and expansion.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Siglind Bruhn, *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation*, 131.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*



## Chapter 2: Stylistic Analysis of the *Vingt regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*

### 2.1. Cyclic Symbolism

Messiaen designed three main themes and two secondary themes based on the Catholic faith. The main themes are the Theme of God, Theme of the Star and of the Cross, and Theme of Chords, and the secondary themes are the Theme of Mystical Love and Theme of Joy.

#### 2.1.1. Theme of God

The Theme of God refers to the most crucial cyclic theme for God, and refers to the first person of the Trinity, God the Father. This theme appears in movements 1, 5, 6, 11, 15 and 20. Notably, Theme of God is in mode No. 2, and this theme evenly preserves the same shape in nos. 1 and 5. The Theme of God's frame modifies two settings in nos. 5 and 20, and alters dance-like rhythms in no. 11. The Theme of God is a simple chordal passage consisting of four chords using the rhythmic pattern short-short-short-long-long (U U U — —), which is a combination of the Greek rhythms Tribrach (U U U) and Spondee (— —).



Music Example 27: Theme of God



#### 2.1.4. Theme of Mystical Love

The Theme of Mystical Love is one of the secondary themes, and it appears in three movements: nos. 6, 19, and 20. This theme is a combination of chords built on mode 2 (chords 1 and 2) and a chord pair that reminds one of the Theme of God with a descending fourth motion from F-sharp to C-sharp rather than a descending 5<sup>th</sup> motion from C-sharp to F-sharp.



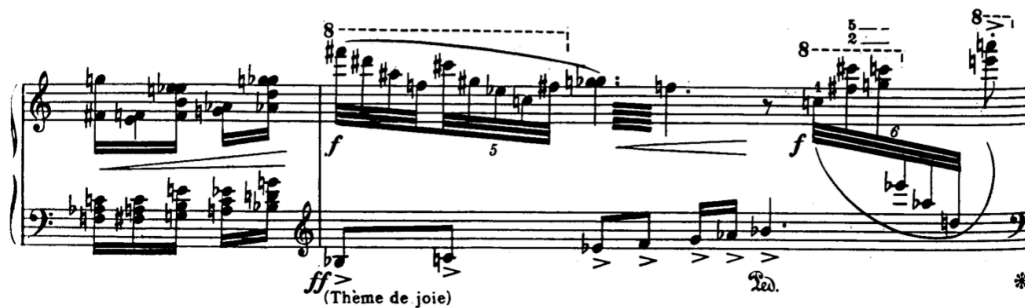
(Thème d'amour)  
Music Example 30: Theme of Mystical Love

#### 2.1.5. Theme of Joy

The Theme of Joy is also a secondary theme, since it is only been used in the tenth movement.



Music Example 31: Theme of Joy



Music Example 32: *Regard de l'Esprit de joie* of *Vingt regards*, mm. 34

## Chapter 3: A Detailed Study of the Theme of God

### 3.1. No. 1, *Regard du Père*

This movement (Gaze of the Father) presents the Theme of God in its pure form. It occurs several times without any contrasting elements.

#### 3.1.1. Structure

The first movement consists of two sections followed by a coda. The A and A' sections are very similar, and the two transitions indicate the octave passages of the C# between two sections and a coda. The melody of Theme of God is very clearly in the bass clef in the A Section, which is followed by repetition and harmonic progression.

Table 2: Structure of *Regard du Père*

	Measure
A Section	1-8
A' Section	9-16
Coda	17-19

Messiaen made every eighth note retain a frame of the sixteen-note triplet without any change. There is a steady flow of sixteenth-note triplets within each eighth note of Theme of God, and the upper staff seems to accompany elements in order to emphasize the theme's melodies. However, these sixteenth-note pairs in the upper staff support the exact Theme of God's harmony by having the same intervals.

**Extrêmement lent - mystérieux, avec amour (des triolets = 60)**

(Thème de Dieu)  
8° bassa

Music Example 33: *Regard du Père* of *Vingt regards*, mm 1

The structure consists of three sections. It is divided by two transitions featuring a C# octave in measure 8 to 9 and measure 16. In the beginning, the Theme of God emerges slowly and clearly, concluding with melody line, B#-E-A#-E-A#-C# from measure 6 to 7 to arrive at the first transition with repetitions in the C# octave, which sounds like a bell.

The first system of the musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is in treble clef, the middle in bass clef, and the bottom in bass clef. The key signature has three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The top staff begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and ends with a *dim.* (diminuendo) marking. The middle staff begins with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic and ends with a *dim.* marking. The bottom staff is marked with a dashed line and the text "8<sup>o</sup> bassa".

The second system of the musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is in treble clef, the middle in bass clef, and the bottom in bass clef. The key signature has three sharps. The top staff features a rapid sixteenth-note passage, starting with a pianissimo (*pp*) dynamic and ending with a *pp* marking. The middle staff begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and ends with a *p* marking. The bottom staff is marked with a dashed line and the text "8<sup>o</sup> bassa".

The third system of the musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is in treble clef, the middle in bass clef, and the bottom in bass clef. The key signature has three sharps. The top staff begins with a *dim.* marking, followed by a *ppp* (pianississimo) dynamic marking. The middle staff begins with a *dim.* marking, followed by a *pp* dynamic marking. The bottom staff is marked with a dashed line and the text "8<sup>o</sup> bassa".

Music example 34: *Regard du Père* of *Vingt regards*, mm 6-9

The second section's outline is almost the same as the first section, but the end of the second statement follows a new melody line, D#-A-A#-G#-F#-C# from measure 14 to 15, to reach the second transition.

8° bassa

8° bassa

8° bassa

Music Example 35: *Regard du Père* of *Vingt regards*, mm 14-16

It ends at the coda, and it gradually descrescendos by using ascending chords with *ppp*.

ppp

pp

Music Example 36: *Regard du Père* of *Vingt regards*, mm 19

### 3.1.2. Three Transpositions of Mode No. 2

The Theme of God is built on the second mode of the modes of limited transposition and dominates the first movement. In this movement, Messiaen utilizes all three versions of mode 2.

Table 3: Format for Mode No. 2

Mode 2	Pitches							
Mode 2 <sup>1</sup>	C	C#	D#	E	F#	G	A	B $\flat$
Mode 2 <sup>2</sup>	C#	D	E	F	G	G#	A#	B
Mode 2 <sup>3</sup>	C	D	E $\flat$	F	F#	G#	A	B

### 3.2. No. 5, *Regard du Fils sur le Fils*

This is the second setting of the Theme of God called *Gaze of the Son upon the Son*. This piece combines three chordal progressions, each in a different mode and rhythm followed by birdsong. The dynamic markings range from *p* to *ppp* for most of this movement, which gives it a mysterious sound.

#### 3.2.1. Structure

Messiaen indicated *Très lent* to mean very slow, and “Polytonality and rhythmic canon by addition of the dot” is written below the tempo marking. Messiaen utilized three independent staves in this movement to clearly delineate distinct rhythmic and melodic ideas. Each of the movements three sections concludes with birdsong.



Table 4: Structure of *Regard du Fils sur le Fils*

Structure		Components with the Theme of God	Measure
1 <sup>st</sup> Section	A	Rhythmic Signature I stated three times	1-21
		Rhythmic Signature II stated twice	
	B	Birdsong	22-33
2 <sup>nd</sup> Section	A'	Rhythmic Signature I stated three times	34-53
		Rhythmic Signature II stated twice	
	B'	Birdsong	53-66
3 <sup>rd</sup> Section	A''	Rhythmic Signature I stated once	66-73
		Rhythmic Signature II stated once	
	B''	Birdsong (Coda)	74-76

In the beginning, the upper staff has three-note chords, the middle staff has four note chords, and the lower staff has the Theme of God. The upper and middle staves are in rhythmic canon, with the middle staff being uniformly one “dot” longer than the upper staff. For example, when the upper staff has a quarter note, the middle staff has a dotted quarter note. The lower staff presents the Theme of God in its regular rhythmic form. The upper and middle staves are linked rhythmically, but the lower staff of Theme of God functions independently.

**Très lent** (♩=76)  
 (Polymodalité et canon rythmique par ajout du point)

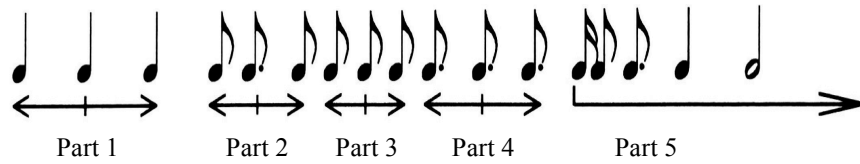
Music Example 37: *Regard du Fils sur le Fils* of *Vingt regards*, mm 1-4

Messiaen used the rhythms found in the upper and middle stave as his “Rhythmic Signatures” in many major works, including *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ: Chants de terre et de ciel* (1938), *Les Corps glorieux* (1939), *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* (1941), *Visions de a’Amen* (1943), *Harawi* (1944), *Vingt regards* (1944), *Cinq rechants* (1948), *Turangalila Symphony* (1948), *Catalogue d’oiseaux* (1958), and *Des Canyons aux étoiles* (1974).<sup>48</sup>

Music Example 38: Rhythmic Signature I

Rhythmic Signature I can be divided into five parts: four three-note groups and one five note group. The three-note groups are non-retrogradable; the five-note group has increasing note values.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Siglind Bruhn. *Messiaen’s Interpretations of Holiness and Trinity* (New York: Pendragon Press, 2008), 82.  
<sup>49</sup> Siglind Bruhn, *Messiaen’s Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation*, 53.



Music Example 39: Rhythmic Signature I, with divisions found in the *Vingt regards*<sup>50</sup>

### 3.2.2. Transpositions

Messiaen combined three modes, one in each staff. The upper staff is in mode 6 (3<sup>rd</sup> transposition), the middle staff is in mode 4 (4<sup>th</sup> transposition), and the lower staff is in mode 2 (1<sup>st</sup> transposition). These modes, while different, are relative to each other in that they have four to six notes in common. These three modes overlap four or six notes among eight notes.

Table 5: Modes 2, 4<sup>4</sup>, and 6<sup>3</sup>

Modes	Pitches											
Mode 2	C	C#/D♭		D#/E♭	E		F#	G		A	A#/B♭	
Mode 4 <sup>4</sup>			D	E♭	E	F			A♭	A	B♭	B
Mode 6 <sup>3</sup>	C	C#	D		E		F#	G	A♭		B♭	

### 3.2.3. Rhythmic Canon

The fifth movement has rhythmic canon in the upper two staves while the third staff keeps the Theme of God. Each of the three sections of Theme of God begins differently.

The Rhythmic Signature I and II consist of seventeen chords in two upper staves. The middle staff increases the value of each note by the addition of a dot in the upper staff. The duration in the middle staff matches the rhythmic order of the upper staff by adding half the value of the note.

<sup>50</sup> Siglind Bruhn, *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation*, 260.

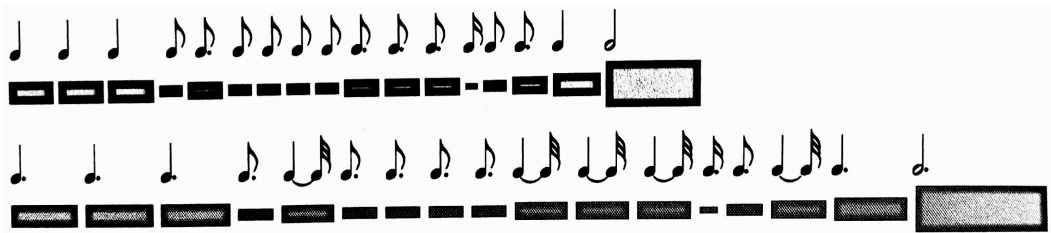


Figure 3: Rhythmic Signature I and II <sup>51</sup>

In the first section, the Rhythmic Signature (see music example 38) starts three beats earlier than the Theme of God. Rhythmic Signature I appears in the upper staff repeats two times giving three statements, and Rhythmic Signature II appears in the middle staff recurs once giving two statements.

**Très lent** (♩=76)  
 (Polymodalité et canon rythmique par ajout du point)

(\*) 8  
*m. dr.* (mode 6<sup>s</sup>)  
*pp*

8  
*m. g.* (mode 4<sup>e</sup>)  
*ppp* (doux et mystérieux)

(mode 2)  
*m. g.*  
 (Thème de Dieu)  
*p* lumineux et solennel

*dr.*  
*g.*

Music Example 40: The first section

The Rhythmic Signature that opens the second section begins one beat before the Theme of God, and the repeat pattern is the same cycle as the first section.

<sup>51</sup> Siglind Bruhn, *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation*, 172.

Music Example 41: The second section

The third opening begins with the Theme of God in unison with the Rhythmic Signatures, but the Rhythmic Signature appears only once in the first and second lines.

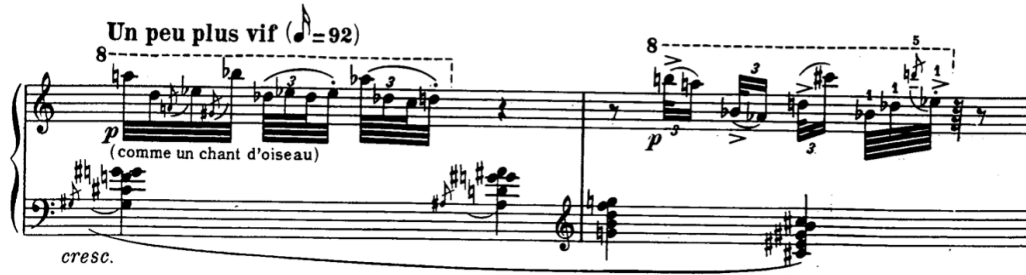
Music Example 42: The third section

### 3.2.4. Birdsong

Birdsong appears after each of the canonic statements. Messiaen mentioned “refraction of joy” and “the birds of silence” in his preface. Birdsong can be heard clearly in many places. For Messiaen, birdsong often symbolized the silent awe and joy of celebrating God.<sup>52</sup> In the *Vingt regards*, Messiaen never mentioned specific bird names, and birdsong often appears between silences.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Siglind Bruhn, *Images and Ideas in Modern French Piano Music* (New York: Pendragon Press, 1997), 250.

<sup>53</sup> Siglind Bruhn, *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation*, 174.



Music Example 43: Birdsong

### 3.3. No. 11, *Première communion de la Vierge*

*The Virgin's first communion* focuses on the Virgin Mary when she was pregnant with the Son of Man. The Theme of God appears in B-flat major as mode 2-2.

#### 3.3.1. Structure

This movement is the second setting of the Theme of God. There are two sections with coda centered around a B-flat major tonal center. The structure is similar between two sections, but the second one varies the rhythm and tempo of the Theme of God.

The first section is in two parts: A and B. Part A has the Theme of God basic idea followed by repetition of the basic idea and continuation. Part B has the similar structure of the first part including Theme of God, repetition of basic idea and continuation, plus two codetta and a contrast portion. Section II follows the same plan as Section I except one codetta instead of two.

Table 6: Structure of *Première communion de la Vierge*

			Measure
Section I	A	Basic Idea I	1-2
		Repetition of Basic Idea I	3-4
		Continuation I	5-8
	B	Basic Idea II	9-10
		Repetition of Basic Idea II	11-12
		Continuation II	13-16
		Codetta	16
		Contrast I	17-19
		Codetta	20
Section II	A'	Basic Idea I	21-22
		Repetition of Basic Idea I	23-24
		Continuation I	25-28
	B'	Basic Idea II	29-30
		Repetition of Basic Idea II	31-32
		Continuation II	33-36
		Codetta	37-42
		Episode I	43-61
		Episode II	62-72
Coda		73-81	

Messiaen used mode 2-2, which appears as chordal progressions.

The image shows two systems of musical notation for piano. The first system consists of two staves. The upper staff has a treble clef and contains several measures of music with dynamics *f*, *p*, and *ppp*. The lower staff has a bass clef and contains corresponding accompaniment. A tempo marking *Rall.* is present. The second system also has two staves, with the upper staff marked *Rall.* and the lower staff marked *Ced.*. The music continues with complex chordal textures.

Music Example 44: *Première communion de la Vierge* of *Vingt regards*, mm. 17-19

In the center section of this movement, Messiaen modified the Theme of God’s rhythm to a dance-like form comprised of long-short-long rhythmic patterns.<sup>54</sup> This rhythm highlights Messiaen’s indication of “breathless enthusiasm” in the score describing the Virgin’s joy and excitement of being chosen as the mother of God.

The image shows two systems of musical notation for piano. The first system is marked *Au mouvement très rapide* and features a treble staff with a tempo marking of 79. The second system is marked *Modéré, un peu vif (Magnificat - enthousiasme haletant)* and features a treble staff with a tempo marking of 138. The score includes dynamics *ppp* and *f*, and a *Ced.* marking. The music features complex rhythmic patterns and chordal textures.

Music Example 45: *Première communion de la Vierge* of *Vingt regards*, mm. 20-23

<sup>54</sup> Bruhn. *Image and Ideas in Modern French Piano Music*, 256.



One of his crucial elements is a progressive growth that means measured rhythmic stretching.<sup>55</sup> In this case, the rhythm is based on the value of a sixteenth note from measure 48 to 52. The values of each note in the five measures increase by the values of the sixteenth note in the following pattern: 2+4, 3+4, 5+4, 7+4, 11+4.<sup>56</sup>

Music Example 46: *Première communion de la Vierge of Vingt regards*, mm. 48-52

### 3.3.2. Transpositions

This movement includes mode 2, 4 and 7. Section I has four musical gestures (labeled *a*, *b*, *c*, *d*). In measure 1 and 2, the Theme of God appears under gestures *a* and *b*. The gesture *a* is mode  $4^2$  and gesture *b* is  $2^2$ . In development of Section I, the Theme of God continues to occur in the base below gestures *c* and *d*. Gesture *c* is  $7^2$  and element *d* is  $7^3$ .<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Bruhn. *Image and Ideas in Modern French Piano Music*, 257.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 253

Theme of God (mode 2)

Music Example 47: gestures *a* and *b*

Theme of God (mode 2)

Music Example 48: gesture *c*

Theme of God (mode 2)

Music Example 49: gesture *d*

Each of the modes used in this movement (2, 4, and 7) are part of the same “family tree,” meaning that there is clear overlap in the pitches present in each of these modes.<sup>58</sup> Five of eight notes are overlapping between mode 2 and 4<sup>2</sup>. Mode 7 comprises 10 notes, and it contains six to

<sup>58</sup> Siglind Bruhn, *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation*, 182.

eight notes of mode 2 and 4. Each mode has a different meaning. Mode 2 is “God’s Love”, mode 4 is “Word Incarnate”, and mode 7 is “Star and Cross.”<sup>59</sup>

Table 7: Modes 2, 4<sup>2</sup>, 7<sup>2</sup>, and 7<sup>3</sup>

	Pitches											
Mode 2	C	C#/ D♭		D#/ E♭	E		F#	G		A	B♭	
Mode 4 <sup>2</sup>		C#	D	E♭			F#	G	G#	A		C
Mode 7 <sup>2</sup>		C#	D	D#	E		F#	G	G#	A	B♭	C
Mode 7 <sup>3</sup>		C#	D	E♭	E	F		G	G#	A	B♭	B

### 3.3.3. Heartbeat of the Baby Jesus

Messiaen expressed the heartbeat of the Baby Jesus by using repetitions of contra F. Before the heartbeat emerges, the chordal passages increase like mathematical sequences from measures 54 to 61: 1+3, 2+4, 3+5, 4+6, 5+7, 6+8, 7+9, and 8+10. Imagine the basic count is the 16<sup>th</sup> note, and each of the notes increases by a 16<sup>th</sup> note of the basic count in the next measure.

<sup>59</sup> Siglind Bruhn, *Messiaen’s Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation*, 156.

(Valeurs de 2 en 2, de 1-3 à 13-15)

Music Example 50: *Première communion de la Vierge of Vingt regards*, mm. 54-58,  
sequences: 1+3, 2+4, 3+5, 4+6, 5+7

The growth of rhythmic stretching successively has regular repetitions of contra F as the heartbeat of Baby Jesus from measures 62 to 71: 9+11, 10+12, 11+13, 12+14, and 13+15.

8<sup>a</sup> bassa  
(Battements du cœur de l'Enfant)

8<sup>a</sup> bassa

8<sup>a</sup> bassa

Music Example 51: *Première communion de la Vierge of Vingt regards*, mm. 62-64, sequences: 9+11, 10+12

### 3.4. No. 20, *Regard de l'Eglise d'amour*

The final movement is called *Gaze of the Church of Love*. It is one of the longest movements in length and the final movement to demonstrate God's love.

#### 3.4.1. Structure

This final movement again presents the Theme of God, but also features additional elements including melodic palindromes, non-retrogradable rhythms, and bell sounds. There are five sections: Exposition, Contrast I, Recapitulation, Contrast II, and Conclusion with Coda. It also includes the Theme of God, Theme of Love and Theme of Chords.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Bruhn. *Image and Ideas in Modern French Piano Music*, 266

Table 8: Structure of *Regard de l'Eglise d'amour*

Structure		Theme	Measure
Exposition	Melodic Palindrome & Non-Retrogradable Rhythmic Gesture	Theme of God	1-6
	Theme of God		7-8
	Asymmetric Growth		9-16
	Theme of God		17-18
	Asymmetric Growth		19-26
	Theme of God		27-30
Contrast I	Theme of Love	Theme of Love	31-54
	Repetition of Theme of Love		55-84
Return	Melodic Palindrome & Non-Retrogradable Rhythmic Gesture	Theme of God	85-92
	Asymmetric Growth		93-104
	Theme of God		105-111
Contrast II	Bell Rondo	Theme of Chord	112-117
	Episode I		118-128
	Bell Rondo		129-134
	Episode II		135-139
	Bell Rondo		140-160
Conclusion	Theme of God	Theme of God	161-195
	Episode III		196-199
	Coda		200-220

### 3.4.2. Transpositions

This movement begins with a melodic palindrome (identical pitches both forwards and backwards) in mode 2. This gesture extends in range both up and down the keyboard with interjecting measures that feature a non-retrogradable rhythmic gesture.

### 3.4.3. Non-retrogradable rhythm

One of the crucial elements in Messiaen's compositional style is non-retrogradable rhythm: a mirroring process in which the rhythm is the same when read forwards or backwards. This is rhythmic version of the melodic palindrome described above. In movement 20, there are non-retrogradable rhythmic patterns in measure 2, 4, and 6.

Messiaen used the Greek rhythm Amphimacer (— U —) in measure 2, and then he developed rhythmic extensions in measure 4 and 6 by adding symmetrical notes.<sup>61</sup>

The image shows a musical score for the piano piece "Regard de l'Eglise d'amour" from "Vingt regards". It consists of three systems of music. The first system is marked "Presque vif (♩=132)" and "(1er thème) (Rythme non rétrogradable)". It features a complex rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth and thirty-second notes. The second system is marked "(amplifié à gauche) (et à droite)" and continues the rhythmic pattern. The third system is marked "Presque lent (♩=60)" and "(Thème de Dieu)", showing a slower, more sustained rhythmic pattern. The score includes dynamic markings such as *f*, *ff*, and *piano*, and various musical notations including notes, rests, and ornaments.

Music Example 52: *Regard de l'Eglise d'amour* of *Vingt regards*, mm. 1-7

<sup>61</sup> Melody Ann Baggech, "An English Translation of Olivier Messiaen's "Traite De Rythme, De Couleur, Et d'Ornithologie", " Order No. 9914415, The University of Oklahoma, (1998): 362.

In the Return, Messiaen expanded the non-retrogradable rhythmic patterns by adding octaves in contrary motion in the right hand.

The image shows a musical score for a piano piece. It consists of two systems of music. The first system is marked "Rall." and "Presque vif (♩=132) (1er Theme)". The second system is marked "8" and "ff". The score includes dynamic markings such as "dr.", "f", "ff", and "f". The right hand features complex rhythmic patterns with octaves in contrary motion. The left hand features a steady rhythmic pattern with octaves in contrary motion. The score is in G major and 4/4 time.

Music Example 53: *Regard de l'Eglise d'amour* of *Vingt regards*, mm. 85-89



## Chapter 4: Theological Interpretations of Theme of God

### 4.1. No. 1, *Regard du Père*

#### 4.1.1. Quote and Commentary of the First Movement

In the subheading commentary found in the score for the *Vingt regards*, Messiaen quoted from Matthew 3:17, Mark 1:11, and Luke 3:22.<sup>62</sup> According to Matthew 3:17, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” Mark 1:11 and Luke 3:22 refer to the same story from Matthew 3:17.<sup>63</sup> These verses delineate the announcement for the birth of Jesus. Because the *Vingt regards* deals with the contemplation of the Baby Jesus, these verses record the first time Jesus is referred to as Son of Man. These biblical verses incorporate the Theme of God, and the hermeneutic message delivers the Theme of God as God’s Love.<sup>64</sup>

#### 4.1.2. Musical and Theological Interpretations of the First Movement

Messiaen evoked God’s image by using F# major triads in not only *Vingt regards* but also *Visions de l’Amen*.<sup>65</sup> In *Vingt regards*, Messiaen made the Theme of God by using mode 2, so this mode in particular refers to God’s Love.<sup>66</sup> Messiaen created mode 2 as God’s Love having three versions. In the doctrine of the Trinity, God is one in nature, and God also exists in the trinity: “the Father as the Eternal Majesty, the Son as the Incarnation, and the Holy Spirit as the Paraclete.”<sup>67</sup> The number three in the Christian perspective refers to the Divine perfection.<sup>68</sup> I

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<sup>62</sup> Et Dieu dit: “Delui-ci est mon Fils bien-aimé en qui j’ai pris toutes mes complaisances”...

<sup>63</sup> Mark 1:11 is that a voice came from the heavens, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” Luke 3:22 refers that the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

<sup>64</sup> Bruhn, *Image and Ideas in Modern French Piano Music*, 240.

<sup>65</sup> Siglind Bruhn, *Messiaen’s Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation*, 50.

<sup>66</sup> Siglind Bruhn, ed., *Messiaen’s Language of Mystical Love*, 253.

<sup>67</sup> Andrew Shenton, *Olivier Messiaen’s System of Signs* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008), 17.

argue that Messiaen creates the three versions of mode 2 as the present-perfect, and it expresses God's eternal love in the world. Three transpositions represent God's perfection. The first transposition refers to the providence, or God the Father; the second transposition describes human aspects of Son of God; the third transposition mentions the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. These three persons make up God's perfection, and mode 2 consequently indicates the Almighty God.

## 4.2. No. 5, *Regard du Fils sur le Fils*

### 4.2.1. Quote and Commentary of the Fifth Movement

In this subheading commentary, Messiaen wrote, "Mystery, rays of light in the night – refraction of joy, birds of silence – the person of the Word in human nature – marriage of human and divine natures in Jesus Christ."<sup>69</sup>

### 4.2.2. Musical and Theological Interpretations of the Fifth Movement

In this movement, Messiaen utilized numbers for theological purposes. From the Christian perspective, the number five represents the crucifixion as "victory over death."<sup>70</sup> Messiaen created the image of a dual Jesus: the Son of God (Jesus on the cross) looking down upon the Son of Man (the Infant from the title).<sup>71</sup> In this movement, Messiaen uses three staves to present his musical material. The Theme of God is in the lowest staff, and represents God the Father

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<sup>68</sup> Adele Berlin, Marc Zvi Brettler, and Michael A Fishbane, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). This book fully explains the meaning of the number three.

<sup>69</sup> *Mystère, rais de lumière dans la nuit \_réfraction de la joie, les oiseaux du silence \_la personne du Verbe dans une nature humaine \_mariage des natures humaine et divine en Jésus-Christ...*

<sup>70</sup> Siglind Bruhn. *Messiaen's Interpretations of Holiness and Trinity*, 42.

<sup>71</sup> Siglind Bruhn, *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation*, 137.

while the upper two staves present different harmonic and melodic material to convey other aspects of Messiaen's religious symbolism. The two upper staves indicate the duality of the Divine Son and the Child in the manger.<sup>72</sup> The upper staff indicates the Divine Son suffering on the Cross, and the middle staff is the Son of Man as the Divine Son gazing upon God in human flesh.<sup>73</sup> The "Rhythmic Signature" in the upper two staves utilizes "the human aspect of the Son of God," and Messiaen employed this rhythmic figure in his major works.<sup>74</sup>

The combination of modes indicates dual aspects of God. The upper staff uses mode 6 and refers to God's mission to save humans from their sin, and then Jesus will be crucified on the Cross to atone for human sin.<sup>75</sup> The use of mode 4 on the middle staff indicates the Nativity as the human aspect of the Son.<sup>76</sup> The number 4 of Presocratic cosmological speculations means the notion of the earthly, so Messiaen intended the Child aspect by using four-note progressions with mode 4<sup>4</sup>.<sup>77</sup>

Not only does Messiaen evoke religion in this movement, but he also creates a mood of joy and peace. He did this by describing birdsong through his music. Messiaen composed pieces about St. Francis, the Patron of Animals in Catholicism. Although he does not directly mention St. Francis in the fifth movement, he still alludes to this saint by creating the sound of birdsong.

Birdsong brings with it a theological lesson describing Jesus' aspects and exultant joy<sup>78</sup> and symbolized the joy, praising God's love and jubilation.<sup>79</sup> In addition, the Holy Spirit appears in the Bible as a dove, and these representations are clear throughout the *Vingt* regards. Birds

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<sup>72</sup> Siglind Bruhn, *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation*, 146.

<sup>73</sup> Siglind Bruhn, *Images and Ideas in Modern French Piano Music*, 241.

<sup>74</sup> Scott Murphy, "In the Beginning of Penderecki's *Paradise Lost*," *Twentieth-Century Music* 10, no. 2 (September 2013): 246.

<sup>75</sup> Siglind Bruhn, *Images and Ideas in Modern French Piano Music*, 392.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Siglind Bruhn, ed., *Messiaen's Language of Mystical Love*, 253.

<sup>78</sup> Siglind Bruhn, *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation*, 174.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

represent God's message of peace to humans. In Catholicism, Saint Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) was familiar with animals and was able to communicate with them. Pope Gregory IX canonized Saint Francis as Patron of Animals, Merchants and Ecology in 1228. One famous work of art, *Legend of St. Francis: Sermon to the Birds*, was painted by Giotto di Bondone (1267-1337). This work refers to a surprising anecdote. When St. Francis travelled in Bevagna, Italy, he approached a flock of birds to preach the gospel and bless them; birds uncommonly paid attention to him.<sup>80</sup>

There are also music works that relate to St. Francis: *Saint François d'Assise* for opera by Messiaen; *Cantico del sol di Francesco d'Assisi*, S. 4 for choir, piano, organ, and bass trombone; and *St. François d'Assise of Deux Légendes*, S. 175 (1863) for piano by Liszt. Franz Liszt (1811-1886) composed a lot of religious works in his later years because he became a monk. The first piece, *St. François d'Assise: La prédication aux oiseaux of Légendes*, means "St. Francis of Assisi Preaching to the Bird." It describes how St. Francis gave a sermon by expressing the birdsong with trills.<sup>81</sup> When comparing the two works, Liszt did not mention this particular birdsong, while Messiaen often did point out specific songs.<sup>82</sup> Both Messiaen and Liszt composed works that reflected on St. Francis, so it proves that the birdsong is an inspiring message from God.

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<sup>80</sup> Saint Cardinal Bonaventure, *The Life of St. Francis*, trans. Ewert Cousins (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 129.

<sup>81</sup> Stewart Gordon, *A History of Keyboard Literature* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), 317

<sup>82</sup> Peter Hill, ed., *The Messiaen Companion*, 250.

### 4.3. No. 11, *Première communion de la Vierge*

#### 4.3.1. Quote and Commentary of the Eleventh Movement

The subheading commentary is “After the annunciation, Mary loves Jesus in her... My God, my son, my Magnificat! \_ my love without sound of words...”.<sup>83</sup> It illustrates Virgin Mary’s pregnancy with Infant Jesus and how she obeyed God’s direction from the angel Gabriel.

#### 4.3.2. Musical and Theological Interpretations of the Eleventh Movement

The story of Mary’s pregnancy is importantly illustrated by the Catholic prayer “Angelus.”<sup>84</sup> I argue that the eleventh movement references her importance and mimics Jesus’s heartbeat in her womb.

The Angelus is “the angel of the Lord” that comes from the Latin phrase *Angelus Domini* in the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century. It is found in the Roman Catholic prayers commemorating the Incarnation of Jesus including recitation of the Hail Mary in the morning, noon and sunset.

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<sup>83</sup> Après l’Annonciation, Marie adore Jésus en elle...mon Dieu, mon fils, mon Magnificat!\_mon amour sans bruit de paroles...

<sup>84</sup> V. The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary;

R. And she conceived of the Holy Spirit.

Refrain

V. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.

Blessed are thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

R. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

V. Behold the handmaid of the Lord:

R. Be it done unto me according to Thy word. Refrain

V. And the Word was made flesh:

R. And dwelt among us. Refrain

V. Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God.

R. That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

Let us pray:

Pour forth, we beseech Thee, O Lord, Thy grace into our hearts,

That we, to whom the incarnation of Christ, Thy Son, was made known by the message of an angel, may by

His passion and cross be brought to the glory of His resurrection,

Through the same Christ our Lord.

R. Amen.

This movement explains the Virgin Mary’s pregnancy and the announcement of the Birth of Jesus. God sent the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary who was engaged to be married to Joseph in Nazareth. Gabriel declared Mary would give birth to a son called Jesus. Mary accepted the Lord’s Word, and this movement refers to her obedience and modesty. There is the origin of the second person of the Trinity as the Son of the Father. According to John1:1, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The Word became the Son and he is forever with us. Furthermore, it clarifies “the Word became Flesh.” Messiaen comments in measure 21 of the piece, *Magnificat\_enthousiasme haletant*, describing Mary’s breathless enthusiasm as she waited for the birth of Baby Jesus.<sup>85</sup> This breathlessness is represented by the faster and more-jagged rhythmic construction of the Theme of God at this point in the movement.

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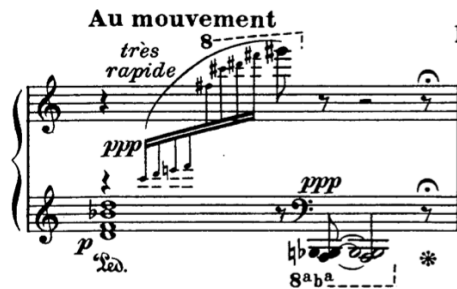
Music Example 54: *Première communion de la Vierge* of *Vingt regards*, mm. 20-23

According to Luke 1:31, the passage “Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus” is called *Magnificat*. This movement indicates that God’s love is with the Virgin Mary.<sup>86</sup> The Theme of God continues through all sections by using mode 2 and the aspect of Child at Bethelhem as the use of mode 4.

<sup>85</sup> Siglind Bruhn, *Images and Ideas in Modern French Piano Music*, 256.

<sup>86</sup> Siglind Bruhn, *Messiaen’s Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation*, 180.

Unlike the grace of God's calling, Messiaen utilized harmonies of a chromatic cluster in the lowest register in order to express human awe.<sup>87</sup>



Music Example 55: *Première communion de la Vierge* of *Vingt regards*, mm. 20

This harmonic cluster indicates Mary's fear of having a baby out of wedlock before she married Joseph. Messiaen also used music to express fear when he was a prisoner in Görlitz, Germany, he composed *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (Quartet for the End of Time) for chamber ensemble in 1941. He considered working on his music a matter of life and death. Therefore, he expressed human's fear about unexpected circumstances through dark sounds.

#### 4.4. No. 20, *Regard de l'Eglise d'amour*

##### 4.4.1. Quote and Commentary of the Twentieth Movement

In the subheading commentary, it is written "Grace makes us love God as God loves Himself; After the sheaves of night, the spirals of anguish, here are the bells, the glory and the kiss of love... all the passion of our arms around the Invisible."<sup>88</sup>

<sup>87</sup> Siglind Bruhn, *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation*, 166.

<sup>88</sup> La grâce nous fait aimer Dieu comme Dieu s'aime; après les gerbes de nuit, les spirales d'angoisse, voici les cloches, la gloire et le baiser d'amour... toute la passion de nos bras autour de l'Invisible...

#### 4.4.2. Musical and Theological Interpretations of the Twentieth Movement

This movement takes many elements found earlier in the *Vingt regards* and combines them, alluding to a unified vision for God, and specifically God's Love. The opening gestures combined with the non-retrogradable rhythmic figures seem to explore God's presence in all things.

Music Example 56: *Regard de l'Eglise d'amour* of *Vingt regards*, mm. 1-7

The dominant element in this movement, and in the work as a whole, is love, and Messiaen again uses the F# as a tonal area to symbolize this love becoming perfection. This F# chord with added sixth emerges in the sixth movement first, and it is summoned back in the twentieth movement providing a musical symbol for God's love becomes perfection.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>89</sup> Siglind Bruhn, *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation*, 275.



## Conclusion

Olivier Messiaen's *Vingt regards* is a monument of Twentieth Century piano composition and also a towering work of religious conviction. Messiaen's discovery of Catholicism in his youth provided a deep sense of devotion that influenced many of his compositions, and led him to create many new compositional techniques. These techniques, including added note values, non-retrogradable rhythm, diminution, augmentation, birdsong and the modes of limited transposition all serve to explain his faith.

The *Vingt regards* is perhaps the most overtly religious concert work for the piano in the Twentieth Century. Messiaen's direct indications for his primary themes including Theme of God, Theme of the Star and of the Cross, and Theme of Chords, their meanings, and their uses throughout the work are evidence of Messiaen's devout and mystical Catholicism.

Messiaen's specifically Catholic perspective is essential in the *Vingt regards*. Understanding these main themes and the theological background is essential when studying or performing the work, either in its entirety or in single movements. For performers who do not have a Christian background, it can be difficult to understand what is the *Magnificat*, and the important symbolism behind Messiaen's religious numbering, chromatic clusters in the lowest register, use of repetition, fast modal passages, and other musical symbols. I hope that this research can be helpful to performers seeking to better comprehend both the musical and religious messages found throughout the *Vingt regards*. In its totality, Messiaen's ultimate purpose in the *Vingt regards* is to demonstrate through music the power and unifying nature of God's eternal love.

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