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SYMBOLISM AND MEANING IN VINGT REGARDS SUR L'ENFANT-JÉSUS  
BY OLIVIER MESSIAEN, A LECTURE RECITAL, TOGETHER  
WITH THREE RECITALS OF SELECTED WORKS

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Graduate Council of the  
North Texas State University in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF MUSICAL ARTS

By

Betty Ann Walker Morris, B. Mus., M. S.

Denton, Texas

August, 1978

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Lecture Recital, Together with Three Recitals. Doctor of  
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2 illustrations, appendix, bibliography, 23 titles.

The lecture recital was given April 10, 1978. The im-  
portance of symbolism and its relation to the music in  
Messiaen's Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus was discussed.  
The following pieces from this work were performed:  
I. Regard du Père; II. Regard de l'étoile; III. L'échange;  
VII. Regard de la croix; VIII. Regard des hauteurs;  
XIII. Noël.

In addition to the lecture recital, three public solo  
recitals were performed.

The first solo recital, December 6, 1976, consisted of  
works by Beethoven, Chopin, Debussy, Mozart, and Liszt.

Music by Debussy and Schubert was performed on the  
second solo recital, June 28, 1977.

The third solo recital, June 6, 1978, included works  
by Beethoven, Debussy, Prokofieff, and Schumann.

All four programs were recorded on magnetic tape and  
are filed, along with the written version of the lecture  
recital, as part of the dissertation.

Tape recordings of all performances submitted as dissertation requirements are on deposit in the North Texas State University Library.

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NORTH TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF MUSIC

*presents*

***Betty Walker Morris, Pianist***

*in a*

***Graduate Recital***

Monday, December 6, 1976

5:00p.m.

Recital Hall

Rondo in A minor, KV 511 ..... Mozart  
Thirty-two Variations in C minor, WoO 80 ..... Beethoven  
Transcendental Etude No. 9, "Ricordanza" ..... Liszt

*Intermission*

Images II (1907) ..... Debussy  
    I. Cloches à travers les feuilles  
    II. Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut  
    III. Poissons d'or

Ballade No. 1 in G minor, Opus 23 ..... Chopin

*Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree Doctor of Musical Arts.*

North Texas State University  
School of Music  
presents

***Betty Walker Morris, Pianist***

*in a*

***Graduate Recital***

Wednesday, June 29, 1977      5:00 p.m.      Recital Hall

Sonata in G, Op. 78 ..... Schubert  
Molto moderato e cantabile  
Andante  
Menuetto: Allegro moderato  
Allegretto

*Intermission*

Seven Preludes (2<sup>e</sup> Livre) ..... Debussy  
Brouillards  
Feuilles mortes  
La puerta del Vino  
"Les fées sont d'exquises danseuses"  
Ondine  
La terrasse des audiences du clair de lune  
Feux d'artifice

*Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree Doctor of Musical Arts.*

North Texas State University  
School of Music  
presents

# **Betty Walker Morris, Pianist**

*in a*

## **Graduate Recital**

Monday, June 5, 1978                      5:00 p.m.                      Recital Hall

Variationen über den Namen Abegg, Op. 1 . . . . . Schumann

Sonata in E-flat, Op. 81a . . . . . Beethoven

Das Lebewohl: Adagio, Allegro  
Abwesenheit: Andante espressivo  
Wiedersehen: Vivacissimamente

### INTERMISSION

Visions Fugitives, Op. 22 . . . . . Prokofieff

- |                          |                                       |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. Lentamente            | 11. Convivacità                       |
| 2. Andante               | 12. Assai moderato                    |
| 3. Allegretto            | 13. Allegretto                        |
| 4. Animato               | 14. Feroce                            |
| 5. Molto giocoso         | 15. Inquieto                          |
| 6. Con eleganza          | 16. Dolente                           |
| 7. (Harp) Pittoresco     | 17. Poetico, andantino                |
| 8. Commodo               | 18. Con una dolce lentezza            |
| 9. Allegretto tranquillo | 19. Presto agitato e molto accentuato |
| 10. Ridicolosamente      | 20. Lento irrealmente                 |

L'Isle joyeuse . . . . . Debussy

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree Doctor of Musical Arts.

North Texas State University  
School of Music  
presents

***Betty Walker Morris, Pianist***

*in a*

***Graduate Lecture Recital***

Monday, April 10, 1978

5:00 p.m.

Recital Hall

***Symbolism and Meaning***  
***in***  
***Vingt Regards Sur L'Enfant Jésus***  
***by***  
**Olivier Messiaen**

- I. Regard du Père
- II. Regard de l'étoile
- III. L'échange
- VII. Regard de la Croix
- VIII. Regard des hauteurs
- XIII. Noël

*Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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SYMBOLISM AND MEANING IN VINGT REGARDS

SUR L'ENFANT-JÉSUS BY

OLIVIER MESSIAEN

Olivier Messiaen, the most influential French composer since Debussy and Ravel, stands foremost among musical pioneers of this century for his innovation in form, rhythm, and timbre. His stature is readily acknowledged by such pupils as Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen.

Born in 1908 into a literary ambiance as the son of poet Cécile Sauvage and Shakespearean scholar Pierre Messiaen, the composer brought literary association to his music as a natural expression of more than casual significance. In fact, often a full understanding of his music is possible only in the context of these literary associations. His is a unique statement, inseparable from the extra-musical inscriptions, understandable only on its own terms.

Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus, written in 1944, is the epitome of such music. Messiaen, himself, provided a lengthy "Author's Note" in addition to a descriptive inscription for each piece, and it is significant that, while he enumerated seven literary sources influencing the composition of the work, not a single musical influence is mentioned. (See Appendix I.) If we are to believe the composer,

the single most overriding factor in Vingt Regards is Idea, expressed outwardly by inscriptions and literary references, and inwardly in the technique of the music itself. In fact, there is some justification for the assertion that the key to comprehension of the music of Olivier Messiaen is to be found in these ideas described and implied in his scores.

An appropriate English translation of the title, Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus, is difficult to make, as the word Regard lacks a truly suitable counterpart in English. Considering the music and symbolism of this work, the title may best be expressed as: Twenty Meditations of the Infant Jesus.

This composition for the piano, dedicated to the French pianist Yvonne Loriod, consists of twenty pieces of varying character, some highly virtuosic, others of a contemplative nature. (See Appendix II.) All relate to the Christ Child, either physically or to some aspect of His omnipotence. Some of the pieces are based on the meditation of person-ages, such as the Virgin, the Son, the Angels, while the remainder are symbolic meditations of the Heavens, of Silence, of Time, and others.

A performance of this entire composition requires approximately one hour and forty-five minutes. The unusual length raises the question as to whether the composer intended a complete performance or offered merely a collection

from which to select pieces. An examination of the extra-musical idea in relation to the ordering of the work settles the question. In Vingt Regards the pieces which are numbered in multiples of five, long considered a holy number, bear a direct relation to the Holy Trinity: I--the Father; V--the Son; X--the Holy Spirit; XV--the Son; and XX--the Church as the body of Christ. A study of each piece reveals a close relationship of its idea to the numerical position in this composition, and clearly indicates that the composer conceived of the work as a whole, not merely as an assorted collection.

Despite the presumed intentions of the composer, a complete performance of the composition is often impracticable. Therefore, six pieces have been selected from it for closer examination.

In the "Author's Note" to Vingt Regards, Messiaen calls attention to three themes which are found in the work: the Theme of God, the Theme of the Star and the Cross, and the Theme of Chords. (See Appendix III.) Of these themes the first two are of a symbolic nature while the third is purely a compositional device and bears no extra-musical significance. While not appearing in each piece, they do occur at significant points in the music.

The position of "Regard du Père" (Meditation of the Father) as the first piece carries great significance because God, as the Father, occupies the first position in

the Holy Trinity, and is represented by the number one. In this piece Messiaen introduces the Theme of God. The tonality of F-sharp major, implied by the first chord, expresses for Messiaen the mystical nature of God's love for mankind.<sup>1</sup>

The "charm of impossibilities"<sup>2</sup> is a concept which has long fascinated this composer. His seven "modes of limited transposition," which cannot be transposed more than a limited number of times, are an extension of the "charm." (See Appendix IV.) Mode II, combined with the tonality of F-sharp, serves especially to highlight the nature of God in his love of mankind. It is this combination upon which the Theme of God is based.

The tempo marking for this first piece, Extrêmement lent--mystérieux, avec amour, permits time for meditation and contemplation. In "Regard du Père" Messiaen's interest in durations of notes and their relation to symbolic references becomes evident.

The Theme of God appears immediately in the first measure, significantly the only measure in the entire piece to contain the symbolically perfect number of seven durations of eighth notes. The quiet repetition of notes produces an hypnotic effect, and at the same time represents the

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Sherlaw Johnson, Messiaen (Berkeley, 1975), p. 32.

<sup>2</sup>Olivier Messiaen, Technique de mon Langage Musical, Vol. 1, 2 vols. (Paris, 1944), p. 5.

constant, eternal nature of God. The last twenty-one repetitions of the A-sharp octave reveal the combination of the symbolic numbers of seven and three as the representation of perfection and unity in "Regard du Père."

The Theme of God appears also in six other pieces, thereby forming a symbolic total of seven which use this theme. As the pieces vary in style, so does the theme exhibit various facets of God's nature. The quiet, meditative theme in "Regard du Père" contrasts sharply with its treatment in the sixth piece, "Par Lui tout a été fait," with its strident, victorious half-note chords, interrupted by rushes of thirty-second-note chords, the total effect being that of the power and omnipotence of God. This same theme assumes the style of a quiet berceuse in the fifteenth piece, "Le Baiser de l'Enfant-Jésus," a piece inspired by a painting of the Infant Christ leaving his mother's arms to go to Sainte Thérèse de Lisieux.

The second important theme used is that of the Star and the Cross, first heard in "Regard de l'étoile." As implied in the designation, the same theme represents separately the Star and the Cross. The dual nature of Christ as God and man is reflected in the second position which the piece occupies in the composition. Messiaen explains that the Star

and the Cross share a common theme "because one begins and the other ends the earthly period of Jesus."<sup>3</sup>

The importance of the number two in this second piece extends to the composer's use of only two staves instead of the three which are most commonly found in the other pieces of Vingt Regards.

The Theme of the Star and the Cross does not begin the second piece. A powerful, upward rush, a delicate passage suggestive of twinkling stars and three measures of fortissimo bells precede the first statement of the theme. Described in the inscription as "shining innocently," the star is represented by a theme of one simple line which is doubled four octaves lower.

Brevity is especially noteworthy in this piece which, in contrast with the other pieces, occupies two pages in the print.

The number three represents the unity of God and marks a significant point in Vingt Regards. "L'échange," the first piece not based on one of the three cyclic themes, occupies position number three, which, according to Pythagoras, is the first real number when numbers one and two are only considered principles.<sup>4</sup> It is also the first piece to involve man. By placing this piece third in the work as

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<sup>3</sup>Olivier Messiaen, Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus (Paris, 1944), p. I.

<sup>4</sup>Vincent Foster Hopper, Medieval Number Symbolism (New York, 1969), p. 41.

a whole, Messiaen has emphasized the unity of the human-divine relationship.

The process of agrandissement asymétrique forms the basis of "L'échange." This technique results in a very gradual growth whereby certain notes are consistently altered upward, downward, or remain the same in successive repetitions of a pattern.



U=Upward; D=Downward; S=Remains the same

Fig.1--agrandissement asymétrique from "L'échange"

The repetitious passages in alternating thirds represent in this piece the eternal nature of God, while the slow process of change, found in the technique of agrandissement asymétrique symbolizes a very gradual evolution of God into man. The emphasis on the number three appears in the central motive of this piece, a three-note bass figure which is the first to be subjected to growth through agrandissement



asymétrique. By the application of this technique to the three-note figure, Messiaen has suggested the expansion of divine unity by the inclusion of man in this experience of human-divine exchange.

The number three also determines the climactic ending of the piece, in which the opening measure is heard three times, followed by a measure containing three statements of the three-note figure, a dramatic measure of three rests, and a penultimate measure of the three-note figure in augmented values. A total of seven measures form this coda, signifying the perfection and completion of the God-man exchange.

The process of agrandissement asymétrique appears elsewhere in Vingt Regards consistently associated with agitation. The expansion of this technique symbolizes an ascending spiral in the third piece, "L'échange," spirals in contrary motion in the sixth piece, "Par Lui tout a été fait," and in the tenth piece, "Regard de l'Esprit de joie," it denotes an ecstatic dance-like movement.

The very use of the word spiral by Messiaen in his inscription to the third and sixth pieces bears significant relation to the traditional life-giving association with the spiral pattern.<sup>5</sup> Messiaen early acknowledged his fascination

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<sup>5</sup>Donald A. Mackenzie, The Migration of Symbols (New York, 1926), p. 60.

with Hindu philosophy, in which the spiral is used as a birth symbol. The inscription of the third piece, "L'échange," refers to the exchange of God and man, a symbolic birth. Though a single spiral to the right was a lucky omen, it also was used at times to cast an evil spell. The second spiral, to the left, was required to counteract that spell as if unwinding its coil.<sup>6</sup> The fact that spirals in contrary motion are found in the inscription for the sixth piece, "Par Lui tout a été fait," the piece representing the creation of the world, further illustrates the importance of symbolic associations in Vingt Regards.

The number seven has long represented a sense of completion and perfection. Also used as a traditional number of sacrifice,<sup>7</sup> seven indicates the position of "Regard de la Croix" in Vingt Regards. The simple character of the theme in the second piece, "Regard de l'étoile," becomes more expressive and tragic in "Regard de la Croix." Because the durations of the theme in this piece are slower than in "Regard de l'étoile," there is only one complete statement of the theme.

Again, the ending is symbolic. A seven-note phrase assumes a higher meaning by its statement five times, a number associated with the Hindu god, Shiva, the representative of

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>7</sup>Hopper, Op. cit., p. 24.

the death of death and consequently corresponding to the Christ-figure.

According to Messiaen, "It's probable that in the artistic hierarchy birds are the greatest musicians existing on our planet."<sup>8</sup> In the more recent music of this composer, birdsong has become a highly complex art, but at the time of Vingt Regards it was still a rather simple technique with few intricate rhythms. "Regard des hauteurs," the eighth piece, represents the most concentrated use of this device found in Vingt Regards.



Fig. 2--Nightingale song from "Regard des hauteurs"

In the Preface to the collection Messiaen enumerates eight different birds whose songs are found in this, the eighth piece. Of these birds, significantly only the nightingale and the lark are specifically identified in the score. It is obvious from the "Author's Note" that Messiaen

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<sup>8</sup>Claude Samuel, Conversations with Olivier Messiaen (London, 1976), p. 51.

values "above all, the lark."<sup>9</sup> It is the lark whom the composer designates to represent the heavens descending to the manger. However, first to appear in the score is the nightingale, the representative of night and the symbolic darkness on earth before the birth of Christ.

The works of William Shakespeare greatly influenced Messiaen's early music. From his father Messiaen became well-acquainted with this literature, and parts of it appear in his compositions. The association of the lark and nightingale in "Regard des hauteurs" parallels a familiar passage in Romeo and Juliet. In Act III, verse 1-3 Juliet speaks to Romeo:

Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day.  
It was the nightingale and not the lark,  
That pierced the fearful hollow of thine ear.

The thirteenth piece, "Noël," is particularly representative of the importance of symbolic associations in this work. Without understanding the numerical position of this piece in the work as a whole, the relation of the nativity and the wise men would not be readily apparent. The significance of the number thirteen stems from the fact that "the star which led the Wise Men to the manger appeared thirteen days after the birth of Christ."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Messiaen, Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus, p. II.

<sup>10</sup>Wayne Shumaker, The Occult Sciences in the Renaissance (Berkeley, 1972), p. 139.

The joyous Christmas bells open the piece in a multi-level texture, so favored by Messiaen in other works. The lowest booming cluster pedal, comprised significantly of three notes, forms a strong foundation. The middle level is a sustained triad with an augmented fourth. The upper level demonstrates the most interesting rhythm in four-note accented chords.

In addition to the bells and gongs, a special xylophone effect is required for a passage of fast, repeated notes.

The quiet, tender middle section reflects the adoration of the Christ-Child, while the eternal nature of God is represented again by extended silences. A varied return of the opening material and a brief recall of the adoration section close the piece.

Olivier Messiaen has made a unique contribution to piano literature in Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus. A few of the symbolic associations have been selected to demonstrate the importance of this relationship to his music. The number symbolism, the birdsong, and the influence of literature, all combine with his innovative compositional devices in a carefully planned manner. To assure a complete understanding of this music, the extra-musical elements must be considered.

APPENDIX I

INSCRIPTIONS FROM THE PIECES PERFORMED

- I. Regard du Père  
(Et Dieu dit: "Celui-ci est mon Fils bien-aimé en qui j'ai pris toutes mes complaisances" . . .)
- Meditation of the Father  
(And God said: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased" . . .)
- II. Regard de l'étoile  
(Choc de la grâce . . . l'étoile luit naïvement, surmontée d'une croix . . .)
- Meditation of the Star  
(Impact of grace . . . the star innocently shines, crowned by a cross . . .)
- III. L'échange  
(Descente en gerbe, montée en spirale; terrible commerce humano-divin. Dieu se fait homme pour nous rendre dieux . . .)
- The Exchange  
Descent in a shower, ascent in a spiral; magnificent human-divine exchange. God becomes man in order to make us god-like.
- VII. Regard de la Croix  
(La Croix lui dit: tu seras prêtre dans mes bras . . .)
- Meditation of the Cross  
(The Cross says to Him: you will be priest in my arms . . .)
- VIII. Regard des hauteurs  
(Gloire dans les hauteurs . . . les hauteurs descendent sur la crèche comme un chant d'alouette . . .)
- Meditation of the Heavens  
(Glory in the highest . . . the Heavens descend upon the manger like the song of the lark . . .)

XIII. Noël  
(Les cloches de Noël disent avec nous les doux noms  
de Jésus, Marie, Joseph . . .)

Christmas  
(The Christmas bells speak the sweet names of Jesus  
Mary, and Joseph with us . . .)

APPENDIX II

TITLES OF PIECES IN VINGT REGARDS

SUR L'ENFANT-JESUS

- I. Regard du Père
- II. Regard de l'étoile
- III. L'échange
- IV. Regard de la Vierge
- V. Regard du Fils sur le Fils
- VI. Par Lui tout a été fait
- VII. Regard de la Croix
- VIII. Regard des hauteurs
- IX. Regard du temps
- X. Regard de l'Esprit de joie
- XI. Première communion de la Vierge
- XII. La parole toute puissante
- XIII. Noël
- XIV. Regard des Anges
- XV. Le baiser de l'Enfant-Jésus
- XVI. Regard des prophètes, des bergers et des Mages
- XVII. Regard du silence
- XVIII. Regard de l'Onction terrible
- XIX. Je dors, mais mon coeur veille
- XX. Regard de l'Eglise d'amour



APPENDIX III

THREE CYCLIC THEMES

Theme of God:



Theme of the Star and the Cross:



Theme of Chords:



APPENDIX IV

MESSIAEN'S MODES OF LIMITED TRANSPOSITION

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