

The expression of religiousness in Olivier Messiaen's (1908-1992) oeuvre

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Abstract

As Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) was deeply religious, he regarded most of his works of sacred thematology as actions of faith. Most of these are attached to the meditations of the truths of the Catholic faith and borrow elements from the Bible and the writings of the Fathers of the Church, and express the Greatness of God. Messiaen creates three basic genres of musical adaption to the sacred: liturgical music, religious music and the synaesthesia of sound-color and bedazzlement. In this study, the following works of Messiaen are examined in the light of the above: *L' Ascension*, *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* (Movements I, II and VII), *Vingt Regards sur L' Enfant Jésus* (Regards I, II, V, VII), *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ* and the opera *Saint Francois d' Assise*, in which the expression of religiousness is clearly evident.

Olivier Messiaen (1908 – 1992) was deeply religious from childhood¹. When he was awarded the Erasmus Prize in Amsterdam in 1971, he stated in his acceptance speech that he believed in God. Evidently, he believed in the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit (to which he dedicated his *Mass of the Pentecost*) and in Jesus Christ, the Word that became Flesh, to whom he dedicated a great number of his works. He also hoped for the Resurrection of the dead, for which he had composed his work *Les Corps Glorieux*.²

¹ Antoine Goléa, *Recontres avec Olivier Messiaen* (Paris: René Juillard, 1960), 34.

² Ingrid Hohlfeld – Ufer, *Die musikalische Sprache Olivier Messiaens, dargestellt an dem Orgelzyklus 'die Pfingstmesse'* (Duisburg: Gilles & Francke Verlag, 1978), 7 and Almut Rößler, *Zur interpretation der Orgelwerke Messiaens* (Duisburg: Gilles & Francke Verlag, 1978), 90.

Throughout his life, Messiaen asserted his belief in God. From 1931 until a few months prior to his death in 1992, he worked as organist in the Holy Trinity Church in Paris.³ In addition, between 1926 and 1992, Messiaen wrote a prolific number of religious works, which - as he himself mentions in his book *The Technique of my musical language* - are related to the meditation of the truths of the Catholic faith, and borrow elements from the inexhaustible sources of the *Bible* and the *Fathers of the Church*.⁴

In 1972, on the occasion of the first European performance of his work for organ *Meditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité*, Messiaen stated that it was more important to him to propound the Greatness of God in his oeuvre rather than the Holy Passion. Only in some of his works did he show the Cross of Christ and the Love of God that is expressed at the moment of Crucifixion.⁵

In the preface to his book *The Technique of My Musical Language*, Messiaen mentions that he is searching for a true spiritual music that is an act of Faith, an authentic music whose language can open doors and bring down some faraway stars.⁶ And further on, in the first chapter of the book, Messiaen states that he is searching for a brilliant music to offer a fine sensual pleasure to the sense of hearing. At the same time, this music should be able to express certain noble sentiments and especially religious feelings, the noblest sentiment of all, elevated by theology and the truths of the Catholic faith. Music must simultaneously be sensual and stochastic, expressing religious gaze⁷ so as to permit a power play between ecstasy and feeling.

Messiaen's views on the adaption of music to Divinity

Messiaen stated in his lecture in the Notre-Dame de Paris in 1977 that music can be adapted to Divinity in three basic ways:

³ Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Messiaen* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), 34-36 and Christopher Dingle, *The life of Messiaen*, Musical Lives (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 239.

⁴ Olivier Messiaen, *The Technique of my musical language*, trans. John Satterfield (Paris: Alphonse Leduc 1966), 7,109.

⁵ Hohlfeld – Ufer, 11.

⁶ Messiaen, *The Technique of my musical language*, 7.

⁷ Messiaen, *The Technique of my musical language*, 8.

- Liturgical music
- Religious music
- The opening to the Beyond, the Invisible and the Ineffable, which can be reached by the synaesthesia of sound-color and culminate in a feeling of bedazzlement.⁸

Liturgical music follows the structure of the Mass and the Officium, and has a significance only within them. It praises God only within the institution of the Church. According to Messiaen, liturgical music is only the *cantus planus*, because it is only this which simultaneously incorporates purity, joy and the lightness necessary for the flight of the soul towards Truth.⁹

Religious music is, according to Messiaen, any music which reverently approaches the Divine, the Sacred and the Ineffable, and aims at expressing the Divine Mystery. This approach can be effected at any time and in any place.¹⁰

Regarding the synaesthesia of sound-color, Messiaen believed that every chord, or rather every complex of tones, creates a well-defined color. If the chord is successively transposed by a semitone, then in each one of the 12 semitones of an octave, it will change color. Between one octave and another, the colors of each chord remain the same, but only in a higher octave will they be lighter, whereas in a lower octave, they will be darker.¹¹

Similarly, in his lecture in Kyoto in 1988, as well as in his conversation with Claude Samuel in 1996, Messiaen stated that four of his modes, namely the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 6th and their transpositions, correspond to definite colors or color combinations. For example, the first transposition of the second mode from c is designated chromatically as follows: blue-violet rocks punctuated with small gray cubes, cobalt blue, deep Prussian blue, highlighted by a little violet-purple, gold, red, ruby and stars of mauve,

⁸ Messiaen, *Lecture at Notre-Dame*, trans. Timothy Tikker, (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1978), 4.

⁹ Messiaen, *Lecture at Notre-Dame*, 4-5, 15.

¹⁰ Olivier Messiaen, *Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, trans. T. Glasow (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1996), 7-8, 15.

¹¹ Messiaen, *Lecture at Notre-Dame*, 11.

black and white. The blue-violet dominates. The second transposition of the 2nd mode from cis, chromatically speaking, entirely different: gold and silver spirals on a background of brown and with ruby-red vertical stripes. Gold and brown dominate. The third transposition of the 2nd mode from d is chromatically designated by light green and prairie-green foliage with specks of blue, silver and orange-red. Here, the green dominates.¹²

Messiaen, though, stated that he did not possess synaesthesia in a physiological sense, meaning that he did not concurrently experience an optical and an acoustic sensation on listening to a note; he simply pictured colors in his mind as he heard music.¹³ If we accept that everyone can combine sound and color and be impressed and bedazzled by them - and touch the Supernatural through them - then everything referring to the Divine will be a sort of rainbow of sounds and colors.¹⁴

Messiaen experienced his first chromatic emotion at the age of ten on seeing the stained-glass windows of Sainte Chapelle in Paris. The stained glass windows of Catholic churches are full of religious regimentations, a kind of catechism with icons. From a distance, the icons cannot be distinguished in detail, but one simply sees the colors and is bedazzled by them. These bedazzlements show that God is behind the words, the thoughts and the ideas - behind everything - which are in some way associated with Him.

Chromatic music is like a stained glass from the Middle Ages in the way in which it bedazzles and through this bedazzlement it magnifies the Glory of God. At once, it touches our noblest senses, sight and hearing. By bedazzling these senses, he leads us to approach that which is above logic and intuition, which is Faith.¹⁵

¹² Olivier Messiaen, *Conférence de Kyoto* (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1988), 7 and Messiaen, *Music and Color*, 64.

¹³ Jean Marie Wu, 'Mystical Symbols of Faith: Olivier Messiaen's Charm of Impossibilities', in *Messiaen's Language of Mystical Love*, ed. Siglind Bruhn, Studies in contemporary music and culture, 1 (New York – London: Garland Publishing, 1998), 85-120: 86, 115.

¹⁴ Messiaen, *Lecture at Notre-Dame*, 12.

¹⁵ Messiaen, *Lecture at Notre-Dame*, 13-15 and Messiaen, *Conférence de Kyoto*, 5-6 and S. van Maas, 'Forms of love: Messiaen's aesthetics of éblouissement', in

Messiaens' views expressed in his oeuvre

Regarding Messiaen's works of religious thematology, he did not compose any works of proper liturgical music, except for a very short motet a capella entitled *O sacrum convivium* in 1937 for the celebration of the Divine Eucharist. His works written for the organ and his *Messe de la Pentecôte* have rather a para-liturgical use. Moreover, his work *La Transfiguration* is a long oratorium, to be played in concert, and his work *Trois petites Liturgies*, in his own French verse, is also not intended to be played in church. This synthetic attitude of Messiaen's is based on his steady conviction, referred to above, that liturgical music is only the cantus planus.¹⁶

In some of his works, Messiaen draws upon melodic elements from the cantus planus, mostly without preserving the modality of the liturgical chant, but instead adapting it to his modes of limited transpositions.¹⁷ Take, for example, Messiaen's work *La Nativité du Seigneur*, which consists of nine meditations for the organ. In the first part, entitled *La Vierge et l'Enfant*, he paraphrases in the right hand the Christmas Introit 'Puer natus est nobis' (Born is a child for us) with embellishments, while the left hand moves with chords in the sixth mode of limited transpositions.¹⁸

In other works, Messiaen composes his own melodies, which give the sensation of being melodies from the cantus planus. For example, in his work *L'Ascension*, which consists of four symphonic meditations for orchestra, in the first part - entitled *Majesté du Christ demandant sa gloire a son Père* - the trumpets play a long melodic phrase, creating the feeling of a melody from the cantus planus, which is then repeated in different periods. Musicologist Anne Le Forestier cites this melody in neumatic notation without taking into account its different variations.¹⁹

Messiaen Studies, ed. Robert Sholl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 78-100: 79.

¹⁶ Harry Halbreich, *Olivier Messiaen*, Musiciens d'aujourd'hui (Fayard: Fondation Sacem, 1980), 56.

¹⁷ Dimitris Athanasiadis, *O. Messiaen – The compositional techniques and his oeuvre* (Thessaloniki: Macedonian Conservatory Edition, 1995), 30.

¹⁸ Halbreich, 270, 272.

¹⁹ Anne Le Forestier, *Olivier Messiaen – L'Ascension*, Cahiers d'analyse et de formation musicale, 1 (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1984), 3.

In the second part of Messiaen's work *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* (*Quartet for the end of Time*), he also uses a melody of his own, which resembles a melody from the cantus planus (a detailed reference to this melody will be made later in this paper).

Messiaen composed the *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* in 1941 during his captivity in the prisoner of war camp Stalag VIII A at Görlitz in Germany. His fellow-prisoners were three other musicians, a cellist, a clarinetist and a violinist. Consequently, the piece was written for the clarinet, violin, cello and piano, with the first performance taking place inside the camp with Messiaen himself at the piano.²⁰

In many of his works, Messiaen provides apophthegms from the religious writings - the *Holy Bible* and the *Writings of the Fathers of the Church* - that were the sources of his inspiration. Moreover, he uses musical symbolism motivated by Theology.

In the preface to the *Quatuor's* score²¹ edition, Messiaen mentions that he was directly inspired in the composition of the quartet by the apophthegm in *Saint John's Apocalypse*:

1. And I saw another mighty angel come down from heaven, clothed with a cloud: and a rainbow was upon his head, and his face was as if it were the sun, and his feet as pillars of fire.
2. [...] and he set his right foot upon the sea, and his left foot on the earth.
5. And the Angel which I saw standing upon the sea and upon the earth lifted up his hand to heaven.
6. And swear by him that liveth for ever an ever [...] that there should be time no longer.
7. But in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, the mystery of God should be finished [...].

²⁰ Olivier Messiaen, *Preface - Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* (Paris: Durand, 1941), I-IV: I and Anthony Pople, *Olivier Messiaen: Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1, 7, 8 and Nigel Simeone, 'Messiaen in 1942: a working musician in occupied Paris', in *Messiaen Studies*, ed. Robert Sholl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)1-33: 2-3.

²¹ Messiaen, *Preface - Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*, I-II.

These are selective phrases from passages 1, 2, 5, 6 and 7 from Chapter 10 of the *Book of Revelation*, in which it is stressed that the mighty Angel swears that there is not much time left, but that very shortly when the voice of the seventh angel will be heard, God's mysterious final plan for the world will begin unfolding.²²

Messiaen chose to compose the *Quartet* in eight movements, because, as he mentions in the preface to the score, seven is the perfect number - the six days of creation, sanctified by the Divine Saturday. The seventh day of rest is prolonged into eternity and becomes the eighth of everlasting light, of immutable peace. He also states that the musical language of the *Quartet* is intangible, spiritual and Catholic. For each of the eight movements, Messiaen gives a title and writes an introductory note.

For the first movement, *Liturgie de crystal*, he notes the following: 'a solo blackbird or nightingale improvises, surrounded by a shimmer of sound, by a halo of trills lost very high in the trees. Transpose this onto a religious plane and you have the harmonious silence of Heaven.'²³

Indeed, the movement consists of four different kinds of musical lines which are rhythmically independent. The violin and the clarinet play the songs of the bird. In the entrance of their melodic line (clarinet [A] bar 1, violin [A] bar 3), the indication 'comme un oiseau' (like a bird) is written. The cello plays impalpable harmonies in pianississimo (ppp) with glissandi giving a heavenly atmosphere. The piano plays continuous chords with the same rhythmic values in both hands, following certain rhythmical patterns throughout the whole movement. Both the tempo, which is relatively slow (*bien modéré*) and the dynamic, which is piano to pianississimo with no climax, express the 'harmonious silence of Heaven' (Example 1).

²² Haralambos Vasilopoulos, *The Apocalypse explained (as possible)*, (Athens: Orthodox Press, 1986), vol.1, 125-126.

²³ Messiaen, *Preface - Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*, I. The English translation is taken from Pople's book *Messiaen: Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*, 17.

1 **Bien modéré, en poudrolement harmonieux** (comme un oiseau) *ppp* (son flûté,

VIOLON

CLARINETTE en Si \flat (comme un oiseau) *p expressif*

VIOLONCELLE *ppp (vibrato)*

A **Bien modéré, en poudrolement harmonieux** (♩ = 54 environ) *pp legato (très enveloppé de pédale)*

PIANO

4 *vers la pointe*

Clar. *glissando* (*) *gliss.*

velle

Example 1, i: [A] bars 1-6

Regarding the second movement *Vocalise, pour l' Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps*, Messiaen notes the following: ‘The first and third (very short) sections evoke the power of this mighty Angel, crowned with a rainbow and clothed by a cloud, who sets one foot upon the sea and one foot upon the earth. In the “middle” (section) are the impalpable harmonies of heaven. On the piano, gentle cascades of blue-orange chords garland with their distant carillon the quasi-plainsong melody of the violin and the cello.’²⁴

²⁴ Messiaen, *Preface – Quatuor*, I.

Indeed, the second movement is divided into three clear-cut sections, whose ending is defined by a double bar-line.

First section: [A] bar 1 – [C] bar 7

Second section: [D] bar 1 – [G] bar 10

Third section: [H] bar 1 - 7

The third section is a varied restatement of the music of [C] bars 1-7 in the first section. In actual fact, it is almost an inversion of it (Examples 2 and 3).

1 *Presque vif* *Modéré*
p cresc. molto *fff*
p cresc. molto *fff*
C *Presque vif* (♩=104 env.) *Modéré* (♩=54 env.)
fff
4
fff (fulgurant, pressez ce trait) *fff* *ff*
fff *fff* *ff*
8^a *8^a* *8^a b!*

Example 2, ii: [C] bars 1-7

14

Presque vif

von *p cresc. molto*

vclle *p cresc. molto*

Presque vif ($\text{♩} = 10\frac{1}{2}$ env.)

3

Modéré

von *fff*

Clar. *fff*

vclle *fff*

Modéré ($\text{♩} = 5\frac{1}{2}$ env.)

fff (fulgurant, pressez ce trait)

6

Clar. *ff*

fff

ff

Example 3, ii: [H] bars 1-7

For example, both parts start with a melodic scale of sixteenth notes which is played by the violin and the cello in two octaves distance. However, in the first section it is ascending, [C] bars 1-3, whereas in the third it is descending, [H] bars 1-3. The dynamic is initially piano and becomes - within three measures - fortississimo with a great crescendo. Generally, both the tempo that alternates between *robust*, *modéré* and

presque vif and the dynamic, which is mostly fortississimo, reflect the strength of the Angel, with his one foot on the sea and the other on the earth.

In the entire middle section, the quasi-plainsong melody is played by the cello and doubled by the violin two octaves higher (Example 4). Its first six bars, [D] bars 1-6, are also heard in the first section of the movement, at [B] bars 1-3, in the identical sequence of pitches but in rhythmical diminution (sixteenth notes). The part of the piano in the middle section cannot be characterized as a harmonization of the melody. As the composer himself mentions in his prefatory note, the piano music in this section is ‘gentle cascades of blue-orange chords’, which give more a sense of an aura or a distant resounding accompanying the melody. To this sensation contribute the tempo, which is *presque lent* with the indication *impalpable lointain*, as well as the dynamic that varies mainly between pianississimo and piano. Moreover, both the violin and the cello play with mute, whereas the clarinet is absent. The piano playing is characterized as *gouttes d’eau en arc-en-ciel* (*drops of water in the rainbow*), the rainbow that crowns the Angel (Example 4).

9

1 *Presque lent, impalpable, lointain*

von *Sourdine pp*

vclle *Sourdine pp*

D *Presque lent, impalpable, lointain (♩ = 50 env.)*

ppp (gouttes d'eau en arc-en-ciel)

*ped. ped. ped. ped. ped. ped. ped. **

3

von

vclle

ped. ped. ped. ped. ped. ped. ped. ped.

Example 4, ii: [D] bars 1-4

In this section, Messiaen also points out the synaesthetic phenomenon of sound and color as he defines the chords of this section as blue-orange. As already mentioned above, Messiaen associates four of his modes and their transpositions with specific colors and the color-combinations that they create. It is difficult to specify how the orange-blue color matches all the 333 continuous chords in sixteenth notes (with reprises) that the piano plays. One must also bear in mind the complementary colors. Messiaen himself, in a later account of the *Quatuor* in 1978, adds the colors mauve, gold, green, violet-red and steely grey for the piano chords.²⁵

For the seventh movement, *Fouillis d' arc-en-ciel, pour l' Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps*, Messiaen writes in his prefatory note to the score: 'Certain passages from the

²⁵ Pople, 36-39.

second movement return. The mighty Angel appears, and above all the rainbow which crowns him (the rainbow: a symbol of peace, wisdom and of all sounding and luminous vibrations). In my dreams, I hear recognized chords and melodies, I see known colors and forms; [...]. These swords of fire, these flows of blue-orange lava, these sudden stars; this is the tumult of rainbows!²⁶

In this movement, speaking again of the mighty Angel of the Apocalypse, Messiaen writes a quasi plainsong melody to be played by the cello, vii: [A] bars 1-12 (Example 5), which is similar to the quasi plainsong melody of the second movement, ii: [D] (see Example 4). In both passages, the tempo is *presque lent*, and the piano plays continuous chords in sixteenth notes that are characterized as blue-orange and should be played in piano dynamic. The dynamic of the quasi plainsong melody, though, is in the seventh movement forte, whereas in the second movement it is piano to pianississimo.

The image shows a musical score for two instruments: Violoncelle (Cello) and Piano. The Violoncelle part is written on a single staff with a treble clef and a 3/4 time signature. It begins with a first measure marked with a '1' and contains a melodic line with a slur over the first few notes. The tempo and mood are indicated as 'Rêveur, presque lent (8ve réelle)' and 'f expressif'. The Piano part is written on two staves (treble and bass clefs) and consists of a continuous accompaniment of chords in sixteenth notes. The dynamic is marked 'PIANO' and 'p'. A box labeled 'A' highlights the first three bars of the piano accompaniment. The tempo is also indicated as 'Rêveur, presque lent (♩=50 env.)'. The score includes various musical notations such as accidentals, slurs, and dynamic markings.

Example 5, vii: [A] bars 1-3

Throughout the seventh movement, we hear several variations of the quasi plainsong melody and also of a second theme, as well as fragments and combinations of the blue-orange chords, which contribute to the sense of the tumult of rainbows.

The work *Vingt regards sur l' Enfant Jésus* (*Twenty contemplations of the Infant Jesus*), composed by Messiaen in 1944, is a great piano cycle consisting of twenty pieces and is full of symbolism.²⁷ As Messiaen himself mentions in the prefatory note

²⁶ The English translation is taken from Pople's book *Messiaen: Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*, 72.

²⁷ Dingle, 84.

to the score, his sources of inspiration were - among others - the *Writings* of the Belgian Benedictine abbot Dom Columba Marmion, of Saint Thomas Aquinas, Saint John of the Cross, Sainte Thérèse de Lisieux, as well as the *Gospels* and the *Missal*. He specifically names the book *Le Christ dans ses Mystères* by Dom Columba Marmion, which inspired the writer Maurice Toesca in his work *Les Douze Regards (The Twelve Contemplations)* which Messiaen expanded to twenty. So, the work refers mainly to the contemplations of the Infant Jesus in the Manger and the aspects-looks set upon him by the God-Father, Christ himself, the Spirit of Joy, the Virgin, the Church of Love, the Angels, the Magi as well as immaterial or symbolic creatures, such as Time, the Heights, Silence, The Star and the Cross.²⁸

In the prefatory note, the composer also sets out three themes, the *Theme of God*, the *Theme of the Star and the Cross* and the *Theme of the Chords* (Example 6).

THÈME DE DIEU : 

THÈME DE L'ÉTOILE ET DE LA CROIX : 

THÈME D'ACCORDS : 

Example 6, The three themes of the work

The *Theme of God* is used to a great extent in the three pieces, referring to the three parts of the Holy Trinity (No. 1 *Contemplation of the Father*, No. 5 *Contemplation of the Son about the Son* and No. 10 *Contemplation of the Spirit of Joy*) as well as at isolated points within the pieces No. 6, No. 11, No. 15 and No. 20.²⁹

²⁸ Olivier Messiaen, *Note de l'auteur – Vingt regards sur l'Enfant Jésus* (Paris: Durand, 1944), I-IV and Siglind Bruhn, 'The spiritual layout in Messiaen's Contemplations of the Manger', in *Messiaen's Language of Mystical Love*, ed. Siglind Bruhn, *Studies in contemporary music and culture*, 1 (New York – London: Garland Publishing, 1998), 247-267: 247-248.

²⁹ Halbreich, 218 and Messiaen, *Note de l'auteur – Vingt regards*, I.

In the first piece, *Contemplation of the Father*, Messiaen writes the Biblical quotation (Matthew 3: 17- during the baptizing of Jesus) as a sub-heading: ‘And God said: this is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased...’ Next to the indication of the tempo, which is extremely slow, there is an indication that the piece should be played *mysteriously, with love* as is fit for God – the Father. In addition, the dynamic moves from pianississimo (ppp) to piano (p), further intensifying this atmosphere. The *Theme of God* is heard from the first bar of the piece (Example 7) and is repeated unaltered or slightly modified throughout the piece as a dominant element.

I. Regard du Père
(Et Dieu dit: "Celui-ci est mon Fils bien-aimé en qui j'ai pris toutes mes complaisances"...)

Extrêmement lent – mystérieux, avec amour (♩ des triolets = 60)

(Thème de Dieu) 8^{va} bassa

2 8^{va} bassa

Example 7, Contemplation No. 1 (bars 1-2)

In the fifth piece, *Contemplation of the Son about the Son*, Messiaen writes the following as a sub-heading: ‘Mystery, rays of light in the night – refraction of joy, the birds of silence – the person of Word within a human nature – marriage of the human and the divine nature in Jesus Christ ...’ In many passages within the piece, its texture consists of three layers: The uppermost consistently has three-note chords whereas the middle one consistently has four-note chords (Example 8). As musicologist Siglind

Bruhn points out,³⁰ three is the number of the Holy Trinity, which symbolizes the divine nature of Christ, whereas four represents the number of elements constituting the world, which symbolize the human nature of Christ. The *Theme of God* is heard in variation in the lowest layer of the piece, first in bars 2-7 in augmentation (Example 8), and is repeated unaltered or modified in several parts of the piece.

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

(Thème de Dieu)
p lumineux et solennel

Example 8, Contemplation No. 5 (bars 1-8)

The Star and *the Cross*, as the composer mentions, follow the same theme, as the first opens and the last closes Christ's time on earth. We encounter it in the second piece (*Contemplation of the Star*) first in bars 5-6 and again in bars 10-11 (example 9) and then later on during several other parts of the piece. We also encounter it in the seventh piece (*Contemplation of the Cross*) first in bars 1-3 in the bass line (Example 10).

³⁰ Bruhn, 252-253.

Modéré, un peu lent (♩=76)

5

8° bassa
(Thème de l'étoile et de la croix)

10

8° bassa

Example 9, Contemplation No. 2 (bars 5-13)

Bien modéré (♩=40)

mf *expressif et douloureux*

PIANO

L *mf*
(Thème de l'étoile et de la Croix)

2

Example 10, Contemplation No. 7 (bars 1-3)

The *Theme of the chords* is met throughout the piece, unaltered, divided into pieces, condensed, with the rhythm altered, and in various modes of transposition yet very easily recognizable by its colors: steely gray-blue traversed by vivid red and orange, violet-mauve with a dash of brown leather, and encircled by violet-purple.³¹ Thus, the

³¹ Halbreich, 219.

synaesthetic phenomenon of sound-color is again projected, intensifying the religiousness of the work.

The work *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ* (*The Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus Christ*) (1965-1969) and the opera *Saint François d' Assise* (1975-1983) are, as Messiaen himself mentions in his conference in Kyoto, the most important, considering the volume of their sound - they are actions of Faith.³²

La Transfiguration is written for seven instrumental soloists (piano, cello, flute, clarinet, xyloimba, vibraphone and marimba), a mixed choir of 100 singers and an enormous orchestra of 109 musicians; altogether 216 performers. It is divided into fourteen pieces which form two parts of seven pieces each (septets) with the same progression: the first evangelical recitative, two meditations, the second evangelical recitative, two meditations, and the final choral. The Latin texts put into music are taken from Saint Matthew's Gospel, the Epistles of Saint Paul, the psalms, the Book of Wisdom, the Book of Genesis, the liturgical prayers of the office of the feast, and passages from the collected theological works of Saint Thomas Aquinas dealing with the transfiguration.

In his conference in Kyoto, Messiaen mentioned that several passages of the work express bedazzlement. Musicologist Sander Van Maas states that, on a music-technical level, the music of bedazzlement is based on a strategy of sudden change. The specific passages actually resemble a 'window' surrounded by sharply contrasting music.³³

One of the passages of *La Transfiguration*, that expresses bedazzlement can be found at the end of the ninth piece (II.2. *Perfecte conscius illius perfectae generationis. Méditation*) where the sonority becomes very strong. A grand rhythmic combination, consisting of three groups of different rhythms and utilizing the Ancient Greek feet (treated in shorts and longs of various duration) and the Indian regional rhythms (*deçi-tâlas*) in retrograde motion, superposes the rhythm of the choir. The small cymbals, the bells and the gongs double the rhythms of the woodwinds and the

³² Messiaen, *Conférence de Kyoto*, 13

³³ Van Maas, 86.

strings, while the trumpets and the trombones underline the rhythm of the choir. Every rhythmic group has its own harmonies. There are enormous colors which evolve massively, one on top of another.³⁴

Another passage of *La Transfiguration* that expresses bedazzlement is in the twelfth piece (II.5. *Terribilis est locus iste. Méditation*), on the words ‘Gloria in excelsis Deo.’ The beginning of the phrase is given forcefully by the woodwinds, the brass and the choir. Suddenly, on the word ‘Deo,’ the choir and the strings play *pianissimo subito* - the cello play *pizzicato* - , providing a great change of clarity. In the end, the sensation of bedazzlement is found again in the two chorals which close each septate. The first choral (I.7. Choral de la Sainte Montagne) is played *pianissimo*, whereas the second (II.7. Choral de la Lumière de Gloire) is played *fortissimo*. Neither choral, however, can be analysed except in terms of color, colors which are both suave and terrifying.³⁵

Saint Francois d' Assise is an opera in three acts and comprises eight scenes, with a total duration of almost five hours. It is written for seven singers (performing the roles of the Angel, Saint Francis, the leper, Brother Leon, Brother Massé, Brother Elie and Brother Bernard), a mixed 150-person choir and a great orchestra. Since it is an enormous orchestral composition, the opera contains thousands of chords and combinations of timber with constant change of color.³⁶

As bedazzlement can also pervade the drama and the stage setting as well as the music,³⁷ there is such an example of bedazzlement at the very end of the work. Messiaen makes the dying Saint Francis exclaim: ‘Lord, Music and Poetry have conducted me to You: by image, by symbol, by the default of truth. Lord, illuminate me with your Presence. Liberate me, intoxicate me, bedazzle me forever with your excess of Truth...’. And, after these words, there are the following stage directions written into the score: a blinding, white light must illuminate the place where Saint Francis lies. The act of Faith increases through the hope of Resurrection, sung at the

³⁴ Messiaen, *Conférence de Kyoto*, 15.

³⁵ Messiaen, *Conférence de Kyoto*, 15.

³⁶ Messiaen, *Conférence de Kyoto*, 17.

³⁷ Van Maas, 82-83.

end by the choir: ‘From pain, feebleness and shame: he releases us by force, glory and joy...’³⁸

Conclusions

To sum up, Olivier Messiaen had a sublime faith in God which guides the expression of religiousness in his oeuvre. Dominant in his works of religious thematology are references to religious texts, symbolism as well as his views on the religiousness of music. In consideration of these views, there are three ways that music can be adapted to Divinity: liturgical music, religious music and the opening to the Invisible and the Ineffable reached through the synaesthetic phenomenon of sound-color and culminating in a feeling of bedazzlement.

Messiaen wrote only one work of pure liturgical music, as he considered the cantus planus to be the only real liturgical music. In some of his works, melodies from the cantus planus are used, adapting their modality to his modes of limited transpositions. Messiaen also himself composed melodies that resemble the melodies of the cantus planus, while in some other works, he pointed out the synaesthetic phenomenon of sound-color, providing the colors of specific chords and themes that he used in the prefatory notes to the score. In others, Messiaen highlighted attention on the passages that express bedazzlement either by using musical means or through the action and stage setting. All of the above elements form the expression of religiousness in Messiaen’s work.

Short Biography

Anna-Maria Rentzeperi-Tsonou studied in the Department of Chemistry (B.Sc., 1987) at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece, and then in the Department of Musical Studies (B.A.(Hons.), 1993), going on to earn a doctorate in Historical Musicology (Ph.D., 2002) within the University’s Department of Musical Studies. Concurrently, she studied harmony (Harmony Degree, 1989) and classical singing at the State Conservatory of Thessaloniki (Diploma summa cum Laude, 1991). She is

³⁸ Messiaen, *Conférence de Kyoto*, 18.

closely involved with various educational, performing and musicological activities and has written several musicological studies, especially focusing on Modern Greek composers. Currently, she is a lecturer in the Department of Musical Science and Art at the Macedonia University of Thessaloniki, Greece.