

https://dspace.org/

Olivier messiaen "vingt regards sur l'enfant-Jesus" : an analysis

Laureen Cali, Di Bisceglie

2015-01-16
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/16572

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

in the way they might appear as images of the reversibility of time. [6, p.37] The self-contained nature of these rhythms renders them incapable of entering into organic relationships with other rhythms. These NRR's are used either as (i) rhythmic pedals, as in "La Parole toute-puissante", or (ii) are augmented or diminished symmetrically around the central value as in "Par Lui tout a ete fait". In the divertissement section the Subject (S) is progressively and symmetrically eliminated from either end so that the NRR remains constant.

Rhythmic canons are also a feature of this period of composition (1940-44), and are used throughout "Vingt Regards..." (In V, VI, IX, XIV and XVI). The independence of rhythm and pitch finally led to a total independence of all musical elements in "Mode de valeurs et d' intensites" (1949).

Messiaen's fascination with these rhythms as well as numbers in general, was an abstract fascination, concerned with the formulae more than the symbolism or musical embodiment they might once have had. He soon realized that the combination of his modal system and his rhythmic formulae produced a powerful and individual style in which he could combine the orthodox with the unorthodox. In this way he soon developed a musical language uniquely his own. In his conversations with Claude Samuel, Messiaen admitted to having a secret preference for this element: "I prize this preference all the more because I think it marked my entry into contemporary music." [11, p.31] This statement would appear to contradict his view that melody is the most important concept in his music.[1] The fact is that both exist side-by-side in "Vingt Regards....". In some movements the one dominates over the other, whilst in others the reverse is true.

Maurice Emmanuel wrote much on ancient Greek rhythm and music, including a substantial article in Lavignac's encyclopedia, which was Messiaen's main source for this and other exotic information. Thus Messiaen's conception of rhythm in terms chiefly of quantity

can be traced back to what he had learned of Greek metre, of rhythmic formulae, and the 120 deci-talas. The main attraction of Greek metres was the fact that most of them give rise to prime numbers and therefore irregular rhythmic figures. Greek metres are to be found throughout "Vingt Regards...".*

(f) A note about the composers use of modes

Mode, the prescription of limits within which music may move freely is fundamental to Messiaen's thought. It is a distinct concept from that of series which determines the order of movement. Messiaen's modes are comprised of several symmetrical groups. Each begins and ends on the same note, yet this note never serves as a tonic. There is a clear link of symmetry between the MLT and Messiaen's NRR's and whilst both hold a particular attraction for Messiaen, it is more the way these rhythms pose as images of the reversibility of time which attracts his attention. Each mode has a limited number of transpositions and herein lies what Messiaen has referred to as "the charm of impossibilities". Mode 2 for example, with four segments, each comprised of the intervals of a ton (t) and a semitone (st), may be transposed three times, like the chord of the diminished 7th. (-7th) The fourth transposition yields the same notes as the original. All three transpositions are used simultaneously in "Regard de Fils sur le Fils" (V) as well as in "Le Baiser de l'Enfant-Jesus" (XV). Likewise, any transposition of Mode 1, the whole-tone scale, will be confined to one of the following groups of notes: C D E F# G# A# and C# E flat F G A B. Mode 1 thus has only two transpositions. Mode 3 consists of 3 segments, each one comprising a tone followed by two semitones (or alternatively two semitones plus a tone, or a semitone,

---

* Greek metres are used in: "Regard de l'Etoile" (II), "L'Echange" (III), "Regard de la Vierge" (IV), "Regard du Temps" (IX), "Premier Communion de la Vierge" (XI), "La Parole toute-puissante" (XII) and "Regard des Anges" (XIV).

tone, semitone). Like the augmented triad it is transposable four times. This mode is used in "Regard de la Vierge" (IV), "Regard du Fils sur le Fils" (V) and in "Regard du Silence" (XVII). Modes 4-7 all consist of two segments, and all of them may be transposed six times, as can the interval of the augmented 4th (+4th). Of all the modes, mode 7 is most easily defined in "Vingt Regards..." because of its chromatic nature. Whilst Messiaen has listed seven separate modes, it will be seen that modes 4-6 are really subsets of mode 7. [Appendix I]

The attraction of these MLTs lies in their tonal ambiguity which results from their symmetry. As Messiaen mentions, a tonality can be emphasized, or left unsettled. From this point of view the greater the symmetry, the greater the possibilities. This explains the "charm of impossibilities". Thus, those modes transposable six times are of less interest than those which may be transposed two, three or four times. Although there is evidence to point to the fact that Messiaen is not the first composer to have used these modes, he is the first to have done so deliberately and consciously. All the components are equal; they do not imply any specific tonality, and therefore may suggest several tonalities, without being polytonal. Thus the composer is free to stress any one tonal centre, or to leave the tonal feeling ambiguous. In this sense therefore, they are atonal. The combination of triadic harmonies with the -7th therefore produces mode 2. Their interaction with other combinations, a whole-tone melody for example, results in mode 3. These modes may therefore be in several tonalities at once, without polytonality. Messiaen stipulates however, that whilst certain passages in his works may appear to centre around a certain tonality, they should be seen against a broader background of modality in which the tonal impression becomes hazy and of secondary importance. Thus "Regard du Pere" (I) revolves

around F# major, "Regard du Fils sur le Fils" (V) combines F# major with mode 2. This does not mean that "Regard du Pere" is centred on tonality of F# major, but rather that an impression of F# major is given.

Sections of music may incorporate polymodality as in "Regard de la Vierge" (IV) for example, in which mode 4^4 is superimposed on mode 3^1 or in "Regard de la Croix" (VII) in which mode 6^4 is superimposed on mode 4^6. Modulation may also occur. The modes may modulate to themselves, or borrow from themselves in their different transpositions. They may also modulate to another mode.

Diatonic chords do form a part in Messiaen's harmonic vocabulary, but instead of being used in the traditional progressive way, they become separated from their expected roles. They are essentially objects of contemplation, not subjects of action. Thus MTL are resultants not determinants of harmony. [6, p.81] The underlying forces may however be diatonic, and whilst they are incapable of any long-term momentum, they often function on ideas developed from the symmetrical division of the octave.

It is these MLTs which Messiaen uses to colour his music. Messiaen elaborates: "They are not harmonies in the classical sense of the term. They are not even recognized chords. They are colours and their power springs primarily from the impossibility of transpositions, and also to the colour linked with this impossibility." [11, p. 23] They are elements of colour in the larger design of Messiaen's music. They no longer have the power to propel in the traditional sense. The modes give rise to triads related not by fifths but by more ambivalent entities: the diminished 7th chord (Mode 2), the augmented triad (Mode 3), and the tritone (Modes 4 and 6). In the same way, music based on these modes remains vague and ambiguous without modulation and development in the classical sense.

Each mode has been designated a series of colours by Messiaen himself. Thus, mode 2, in the composer's view revolves around certain violets, blues and purple violet. With each transposition these colours undergo subtle change. Mode 2^1 therefore has gold and brown mingled with the basic colours mentioned above, mode 2^2 has a dominant colour of a blueish violet. Mode 3 is based on orange with red tinged with blue, and green pigments, with patches of gold and milky white with irridescent opal-like reflections. Mode 3^1 revolves around orange, gold and milky white, and mode 3^2 around grey and mauve. Mode 4 is centred on dark violet, white with violet lines and purplish violet, and mode 4^6 on carmine red, violetish purple, orange, grey-mauve and grey-pink. Mode 6 has been designated the following colours: transparent sulphurous yellow, reflections of mauve and patches of Prussian blue, purplish brown, violet and black.

The MLTs form the first of five principal means of expression which Messiaen lists in his treatise "The Technique of my Musical Language". The other four include enlarged pedals, decorations and appoggiaturas; the added dot (or value); the progressive widening of intervals; and the chord on the dominant. All five appear throughout "Vingt Regards..." and will be discussed as they occur.

Messiaen has also removed the function of rhythm and metre in the traditional sense. Instead of metre which creates a sense of orderly progression in western music, Messiaen's music is centred around a pulse, in which all moments are the same. In several of the "Regards" the pulse is so slow that the connection between pulses is weakened so that it is almost not felt. It is in these movements that the possibility of eternity becomes evident in the music. Messiaen however, is also able to achieve the same effect in the faster movements using repetition within a harmonic field of stasis.

The effect of all the influences on Messiaen's work discussed above are not to be underestimated. They have provided for Messiaen an incentive, which has found free expression and development in his music, through contemplation as well as through musical exploration. It is therefore not surprising to find numerous eclectic and innovative techniques and devices in Messiaen's music.

Whilst his earlier compositions reveal the influence of impressionism, he was not content to remain merely another "post-impressionist" for long. He methodically began to modify the harmonic, melodic and rhythmic materials of his predecessors to mould his own personal tastes. He thus began to introduce strikingly novel ingredients which were to become the trademarks of his later style. Thus we find the use of birdsong, plainsong, Hindu rhythms, Greek metres, asymmetrical augmentation and diminution, non-retrogradable rhythms, palindromes, added values, added notes, modes of limited transposition, static harmony, natural resonance and circular repetitive forms, all of which are present in "Vingt Regards...".

1.3 Introduction to "Vingt regards sur L'Enfant-Jesus".

Writing once again for Yvonne Loriod, Messiaen began composing "Vingt Regards..." only eight days after completing "Trois petites liturgies". Completed in under six months this work represents a tour de force of piano writing. The former work was completed in 1944 and represents one of the great peaks of twentieth century piano writing. Together with his Turangalila Symphony (1944), it forms the stylistic plateau of Messiaen's second period of composition (1940-1944). Messiaen had turned inward towards a more speculative, meditative, contemplative process. In "Vingt Regards..." Messiaen was chiefly concerned with the contemplation and expression of the many mysteries of the Catholic faith, but especially the Incarnation. This composition consists of twenty pieces of varying character and length, some highly virtuousic, others of a more contemplative nature. All however, relate in some way to the Christ Child, either physically or

The effect of all the influences on Messiaen's work discussed above are not to be underestimated. They have provided for Messiaen an incentive, which has found free expression and development in his music, through contemplation as well as through musical exploration. It is therefore not surprising to find numerous eclectic and innovative techniques and devices in Messiaen's music.

Whilst his earlier compositions reveal the influence of impressionism, he was not content to remain merely another "post-impressionist" for long. He methodically began to modify the harmonic, melodic and rhythmic materials of his predecessors to mould his own personal tastes. He thus began to introduce strikingly novel ingredients which were to become the trademarks of his later style. Thus we find the use of birdsong, plainsong, Hindu rhythms, Greek metres, asymmetrical augmentation and diminution, non-retrogradable rhythms, palindromes, added values, added notes, modes of limited transposition, static harmony, natural resonance and circular repetitive forms, all of which are present in "Vingt Regards...".

1.3 Introduction to "Vingt regards sur L'Enfant-Jesus".

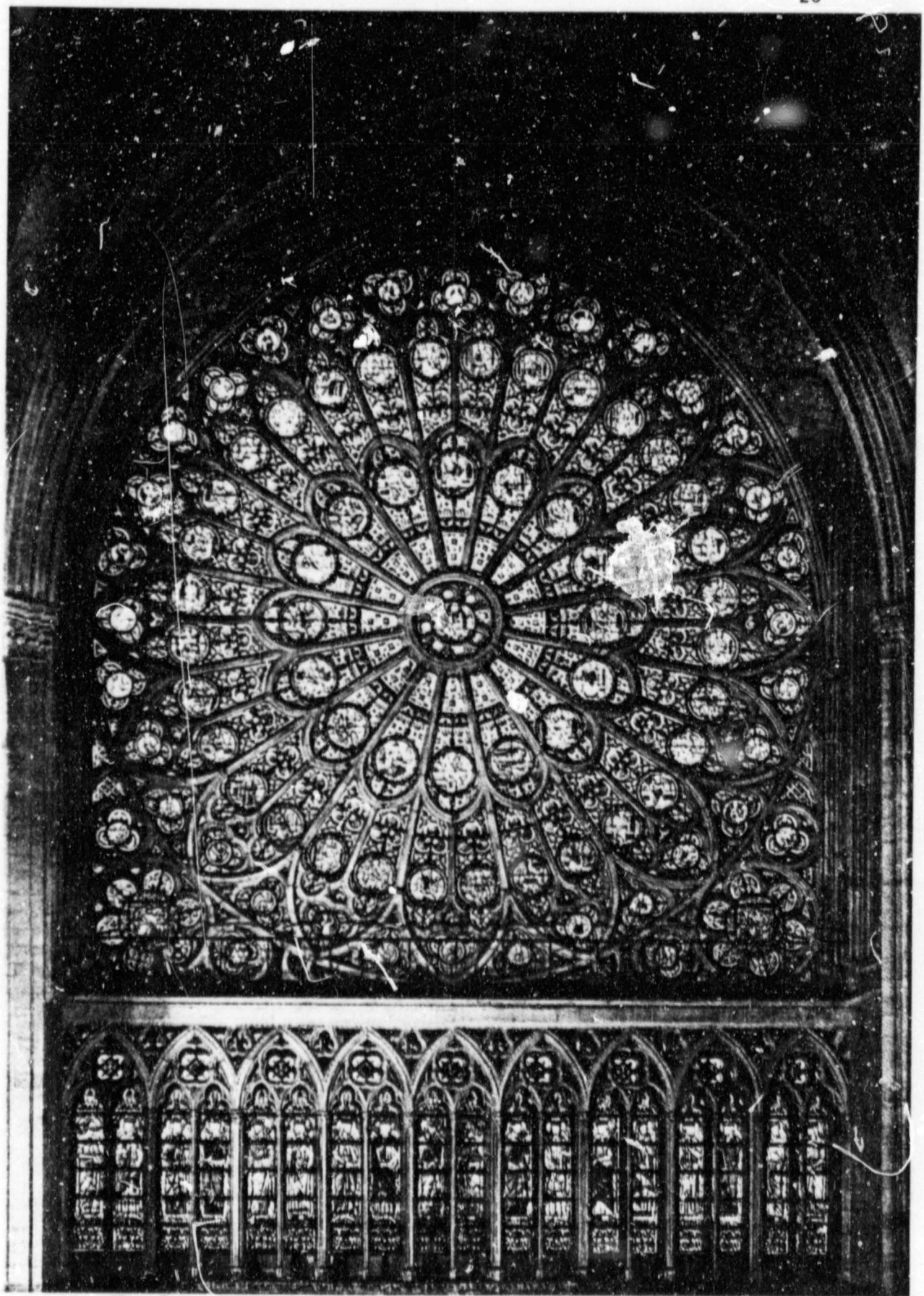
Writing once again for Yvonne Loriod, Messiaen began composing "Vingt Regards..." only eight days after completing "Trois petites liturgies". Completed in under six months this work represents a tour de force of piano writing. The former work was completed in 1944 and represents one of the great peaks of twentieth century piano writing. Together with his Turangalila Symphony (1944), it forms the stylistic plateau of Messiaen's second period of composition (1940-1944). Messiaen had turned inward towards a more speculative, meditative, contemplative process. In "Vingt Regards..." Messiaen was chiefly concerned with the contemplation and expression of the many mysteries of the Catholic faith, but especially the Incarnation. This composition consists of twenty pieces of varying character and length, some highly virtuousic, others of a more contemplative nature. All however, relate in some way to the Christ Child, either physically or

to some aspect of His omnipotence, again revealing the importance of Marmion"s "Christ and His Mysteries" in inspiring this work. Some of the pieces are based on the meditation of figures such as the Virgin, the Son and the Angels, whilst others are symbolic meditations of abstractions such as the Heavens, Silence, and Time. "Vingt Regards..." has been very aptly described as an "enormous twenty-movement keyboard symphony." [74]

Messiaen provided an in-depth introduction to this work, as well as a descriptive inscription to each movement. Each of the twenty movements is headed by a biblical, liturgical or inspirational text. In order to better understand the music and the sumbolism surrounding it, it is necessary to note the relevance of these texts to each piece. It soon becomes clear that the single most important concept in "Vingt Regards..." is the contemplation of an idea, outwardly expressed by these quotations and literary references, and inwardly expressed in the music itself. The key to the understanding of this music is to be found in these ideas described and implied in the score.

"Vingt Regards..." is strongly pictorial, and was much inspired by paintings, religious works of art, stained glass (such as is to be found in Notre Dame, Chartres, Bourges, and Amiens Cathedrals), biblical texts, the Roman Missal, the theological and meditative writings of such people as St. Thomas Aquinas, Dom Columba Marmion, St. John of the Cross, St. Therese of Lisieux and Maurice Toesca, and nature, especially birds.

The twenty movements are arranged according to contrasts of tempo, intensity and colour. There are also symbolic undertones in the arrangement which will be discussed in each of the analyses respectively. "Vingt Regards.." is an integral work within Messiaen's total oeuvre, not only because it reviews his style of the sixteen years prior to its composition, but also because it looks ahead into the next decade.



The famous Rose Window (South) in Notre Dame Cathedral
(courtesy of the Curator of Notre Dame, Vicar Jacques Perrier)

2. REGARD DU PERE (I): The Contemplation of the Father

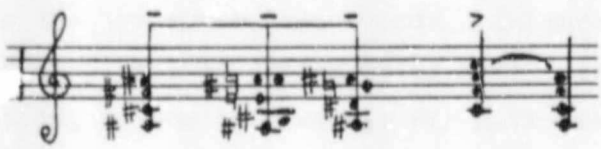
"And God said: This is my Beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased."
Mathew 3:17.

Messiaen's choice of the contemplation of the Father as the opening movement to "Vingt Regards..." is significant for several reasons, which become apparent when the symbolism underlying the movement and its accompanying text are explored. According to Catholic doctrine, God the Father is almighty, an infinite Being possessing all wisdom, justice and perfection; He is the beginning and the end, creator of all that is, and the source of all beatitude. For these reasons, God is represented as Unity and has been symbolised by the number 1. In medieval number philosophy, the organization of numerical truths and their relationship to each other was made possible by Pythagoras' principle that "all things have a number ..... and it is this fact which enables them to be known." [17, p.34] Since it was accepted that God was the Creator, He was therefore also the Source of all things, the Godhead, and thus came to be symbolized by the number 1. The scriptural text quoted at the beginning of this movement indicates that Messiaen is concerned here with God's relationship with His Son and the mystery of His Incarnation.

God in His omnipotence fully comprehends Himself in the single act of the Word becoming flesh. As Dom Columba Marmion explains in his book, "Christ in His Mysteries": "in one word that exhausts all His knowledge, He expresses this infinite knowledge to Himself ..... this utterance whereby God expresses Himself is the Word. Faith tells us that this Word IS God: because the Word has (or rather He is) with God one and the same nature." [20, p.37f] Marmion explains further that through communicating to the Word, God created the Word and it became flesh in His Son. Messiaen makes further reference to this mystery throughout "Vingt Regards...".

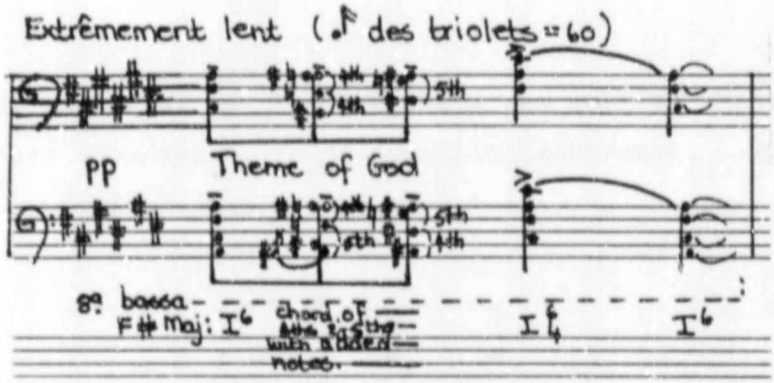
The ineffable joy of God contemplating His only Son is a frequent theme in the bible. "From the bosom of my Divinity before the creation of light, I communicated life to Thee." (Ps. CIX, 3) and "Thou art My Beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased", (Luke 3:22; Mathew 3:17, the text chosen by Messiaen) are two such examples. God re-created Himself in His Son, who is His equal. As Marmion explains, the Father contemplating His Son, is ecstatic at the sight of Him with His own perfections. In the above text He declares to the world that this Son is the object of all His love and devotion. And it is these facts that Messiaen himself contemplates in this "Regard du Pere".

It is not surprising then that this entire movement is based on the first and most important of the four cyclic themes, the Theme of God:



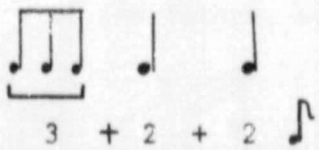
In its various guises it symbolizes God, who embraces all things, and yet remains constantly the same. The theme itself comprises 5 chords in F# major. The obvious diatonicism is intentional because Messiaen associates this key with the expression of joy. [41] In this predominantly tonal passage he does however, introduce his characteristic "added notes" which, in turn, colour the overall tonal harmony producing a chromatic effect. This chromaticism reveals one of the most important aspects of the MLT, namely that they suggest several tonalities simultaneously, any one of which may be highlighted at any one time. The repeated 3rd of chord I in F#, rising to the dominant on C# and falling again to the 3rd in bar 1 emphasizes the key of F# major.

Within the key of F# major these 5 chords may be described as follows:



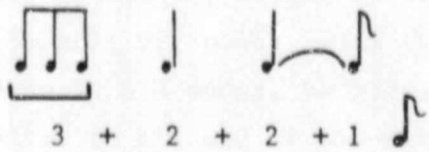
The extensive doubling reveals influence of organ mixtures on Messiaen's music. The character of the first chord, chord I^6, is subtly altered in the two subsequent chords. In much the same way as Messiaen pictures complexes of colour being subtly transformed whilst in continuous motion, so too he pictures his harmonies undergoing the same process. Whilst the 3rd of chord I (A#) still prevails, the root and the 5th have been replaced by added notes (4ths or 5ths). These added notes which often have neither preparation nor resolution, are subtle components of the chord, changing its colour, and in Messiaen's words "giving it spice, a new perfume." [1] They also enable him to create timbral changes, by introducing new partials above or below an harmonic complex with the intention of altering the timbre. Chord I^6 then appears in its pure form, that is, with no added notes, on the fourth of the first measure, and this is followed by a return of chord I^6. This theme, appearing as it does at the beginning of "Vingt Regards" can be seen as being responsible for the centrality of this F# major triad in its second inversion. The harmonic progression as well as the melodic curve is echoed in the top stave, the melodic curve doubled in octaves. Melody, above all, was the key factor in this second period of composition with harmony and rhythm of secondary importance. Messiaen elaborates further in his treatise "The Technique of my Musical Language": "Supremacy to melody! The noblest element of music ...may melody be the principal aim of our investigations. Let us always work melodically - rhythm remains pliant and gives precedence to melodic development, the harmony chosen being the "true", that is, wanted by the melody, and the outcome of it." [1, p.31]

The total number of 𝅘𝅥𝅯 in this theme, as well as their individual grouping within this theme, is of symbolic importance. There are a total of 7 𝅘𝅥𝅯, divided into groups of 3 + 4:

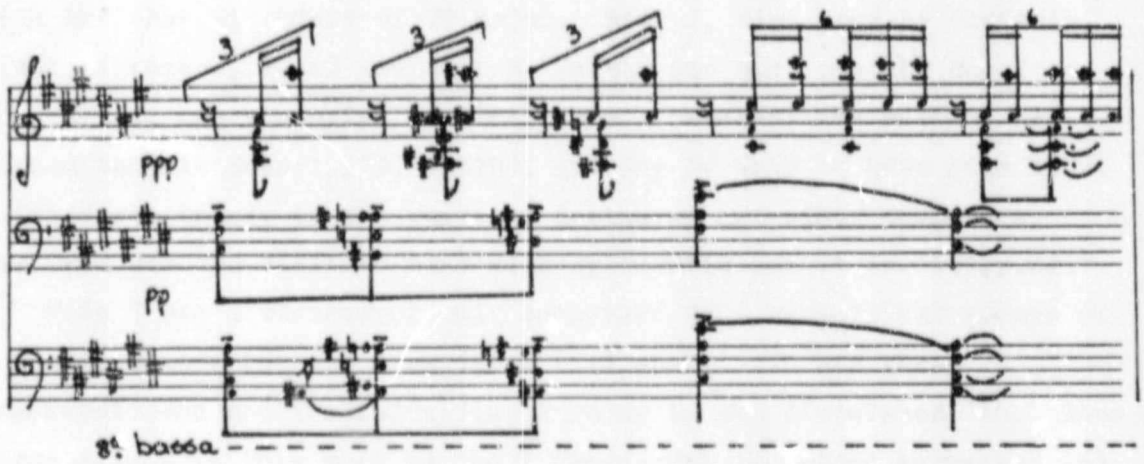


The importance of the number 7 is stressed in medieval number symbolism. To Augustine it symbolized perfect completeness, since it was composed of the first even and odd number of Aristotle (i.e. 3 + 4). [17, p.100] This significant number recurs throughout this movement.

Messiaen immediately introduces one of his favourite devices in this theme. By adding an extra value (𝅘𝅥𝅯) on at the end of the Theme of God, he elongates the sense of rhythmic descent from the accented chord I^6, thus creating an ametrical effect.



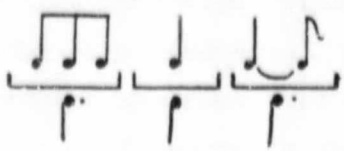
Messiaen deliberately uses 3 staves, 3 registers, and triplets throughout this movement because of the symbolic nature of the number 3. Three was accepted as the universal number of the Deity as well as the Trinity. [17, p.95] In the Holy Trinity God extends His unity in 3 directions, in the persons of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.



Numbers, especially prime numbers, hold a particular fascination for Messiaen. As he is aware of the symbolic meaning of these numbers, the composer has constantly sought to incorporate them into his musical language. [5, p.1; 11, p.46] Thus the charm of impossibilites represented in his modes, by virtue of their limited transposition, also applies to his use of non-retrogradable rhythms (NRR), in that they sound the same whether sounded from left to right, or right to left.. Both are inherently symmetrical. The first rhythmic cell of the Theme of God is an example of an NRR:

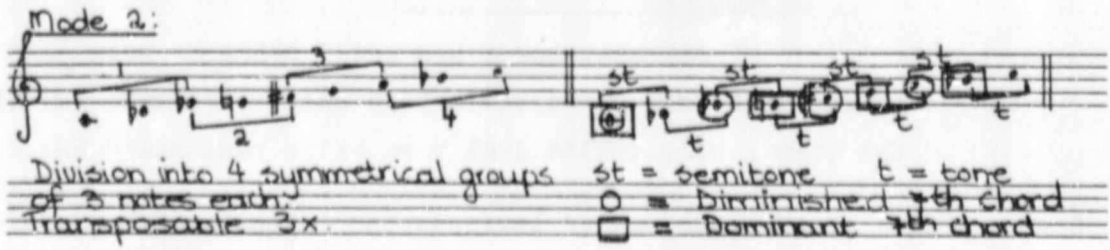


If the added value is taken into account, the Theme of God itself also contains a latent palindrome thus:

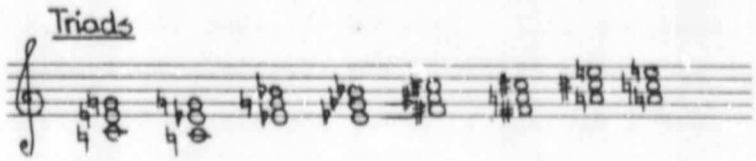


The symbolism does not stop with these three numbers however; it extends into his choice of key and mode. F# major is a key used only in those movements which reflect supreme devotion. Messiaen combines F# major with mode 2 in this movement, a combination he is particularly fond of. Only one transposition of mode 2 contains the major triad of F# (2^1) and only four of its eight notes are shared with the diatonic scale of F# major. Mode 2, also used by Scriabin, Rimsky-Korsakov, Ravel and Bartok, is the one most used by Messiaen, for whom it has a special mystical aura. Whereas its use may be traced back to Mozart [53, p.820], and may be said to have come about quite fortuitously in the works of Beethover and other composers, Messiaen was the first to make such systematic use of it. [53,p.823]

Mode 2 has a structural unit comprised of 4 symmetrical groups of 3 notes, a tone (t) and a semitone (st) apart. It has three transpositions and the underlying harmony is the diminished 7th. Also associated with this mode is the $\frac{6}{4}$ chord with the added augmented (+) 4th, and the dominant (dom) 7th with the added 6th:



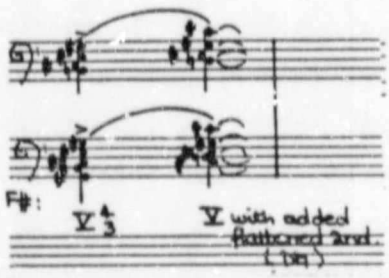
Triads characteristic of the mode include:



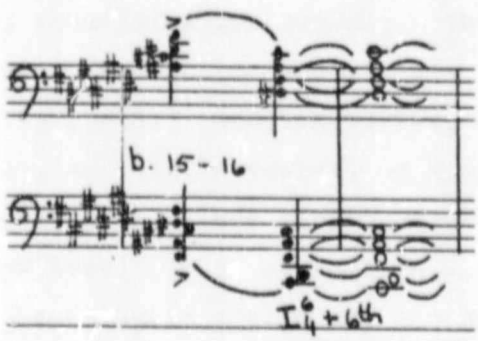
The structural qualities of this mode, as well as the 'charm of impossibilities' inherent in it, automatically suggest a harmony that is circuitous and static rather than progressive. The triads here are not related by 5ths but by more ambivalent elements, such as the diminished 7th chord, and the augmented 4th.

Harmonically it soon becomes apparent that whilst Messiaen chose to highlight the tonal centre of F# major in this "Regard", he systematically undermines any cadential impulse in the conventional

sense, [41] and the music therefore loses its sense of progression. The chord of the dominant, when it does appear, is never resolved:



Combined with mode 2, Messiaen allows himself a far greater freedom to use the full chromatic spectrum of chords within the key of F# major. In this way he is able to juxtapose a whole string of chords that really have only the slightest diatonic relationship to each other. The following chord could thus be labelled in several different ways:



(1) I^{6}_{4} with an added ♭6th, p.4th and maj. 7th
(2) the augmented triad on the flattened 6th (D F# A#)
(3) the diminished triad on B (B D E#(F)) with a maj. 7th

This chord is prepared and resolved by the same chord. The approach is by leap in the upper stave, by step in the lower. The resolution, for the most part, is by step. This progression reveals again an inherent chromaticism which was to become an increasingly important feature of Messiaen's works of the War years. The attraction of the chord with the added 6th is described by David Drew as 'inhibitory par excellence' because of its dual character. In this chord consonance and dissonance exist side by side in a state of mutual frustration, and it is this quality which satisfies Messiaen's need for harmonic elements that subvert the conventional tension-relaxation pattern in Western music. Hence it changes the relationship of the music to the

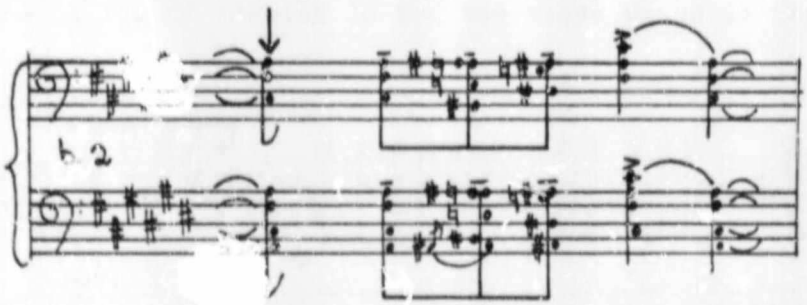
time factor which is Messiaen's ultimate goal - to evolve a music that may "eloigner le temporal."

Whilst the overall impression of "Regard du Pere" is of music in a state of tonal stasis, the fact is that internally it is constantly changing with Messiaen's frequent use of "added notes" to colour the harmonies. While a direct correlation between colour and harmony in Messiaen's music may not be obvious to everyone, an understanding of the symbolism behind medieval colour lore and colour complementation does aid the interpretation of his music, particularly his preference for MLTs. Messiaen has clearly stated that "one cannot speak of an exact correspondence between a tonality and a colour." [11, p.18] Complementation plays an important role in the creation of colour, and this may explain why Messiaen has ascribed colours to his modes in which several complementary tonalities are evident. Thus the second mode in Messiaen's view "turns through certain violets, certain blues and violet-tinged purple." [11, p.42] Reddish violet, or purple, represents the Love of Truth, and bluish violet, or hyacinth, the Truth of Love, both applicable here, since the Theme of God represents God Himself who is Truth and Love. It is against this background that Messiaen seeks to portray the Catholic truths and the mysteries surrounding them, and his music can be seen as "an opening towards the beyond, towards the invisible and the unsayable, which can be made with the help of 'sound-colour' and amounts to a sensation of 'dazzlement'". [4, p.2]

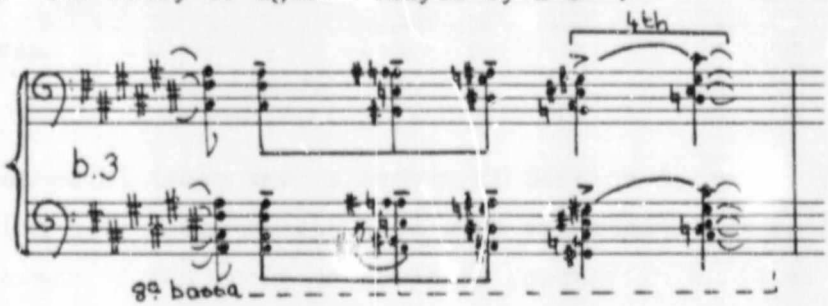
It of interest to trace and follow the growth of an entire movement from a single, original organic cell, the Theme of God. Since the harmonic tensions inherent in the Sonata and other conventional forms are absent here, Messiaen turns to repetitive, cyclic, symmetrical sectional forms to hold his compositions together. This is clearly evident in "Regard du Pere":

Section A (b. 1-3 (first )) is centered on the repetition of the Theme of God in its original form seen above. Messiaen uses one of his five principal means of musical expression to delay the second entry by adding one  to the end the last . In conventional

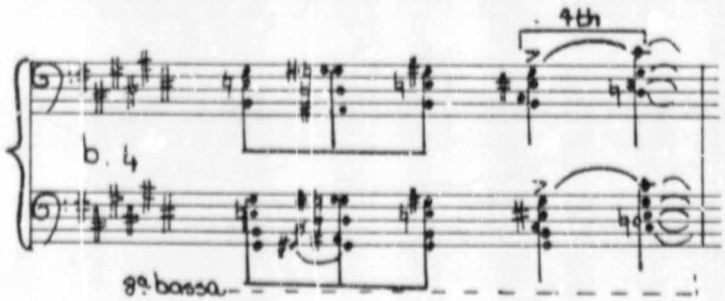
metrically orientated music, this delay would upset the overall metrical balance, but since the unit of the pulse is the ♪ (♪ des triolets = 60) this slight delay is hardly felt.



In Section B (b. 3 (second ♪) -) this Theme is modified somewhat. In b.3 the falling minor 3rd at the end of the Theme becomes a rising perfect 4th. The entry is again delayed by a ♪ :

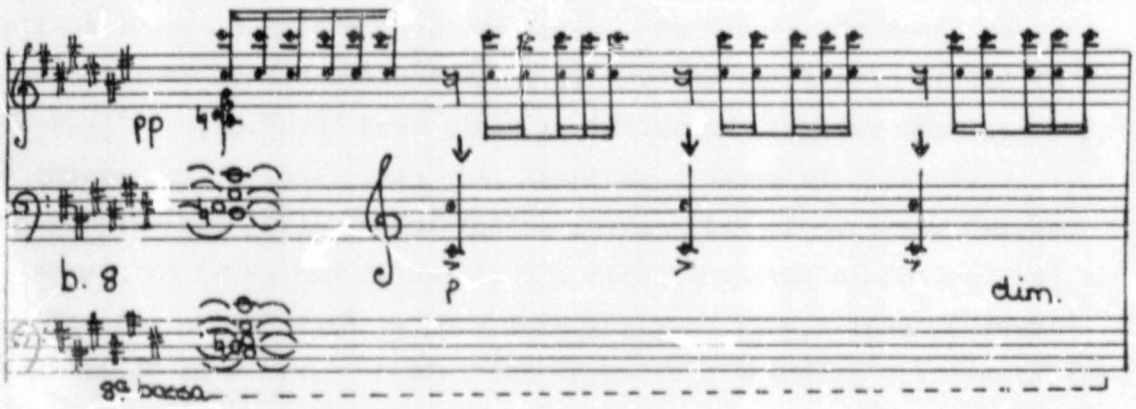


This rising motive may be seen to convey God's sense of joy, of rapture at the contemplation of His own Perfection in His Son. Thereafter, the first half of this motive is repeated a tone lower, and the 2 ♩ chords following are a repetition of the same chords in b. 3.

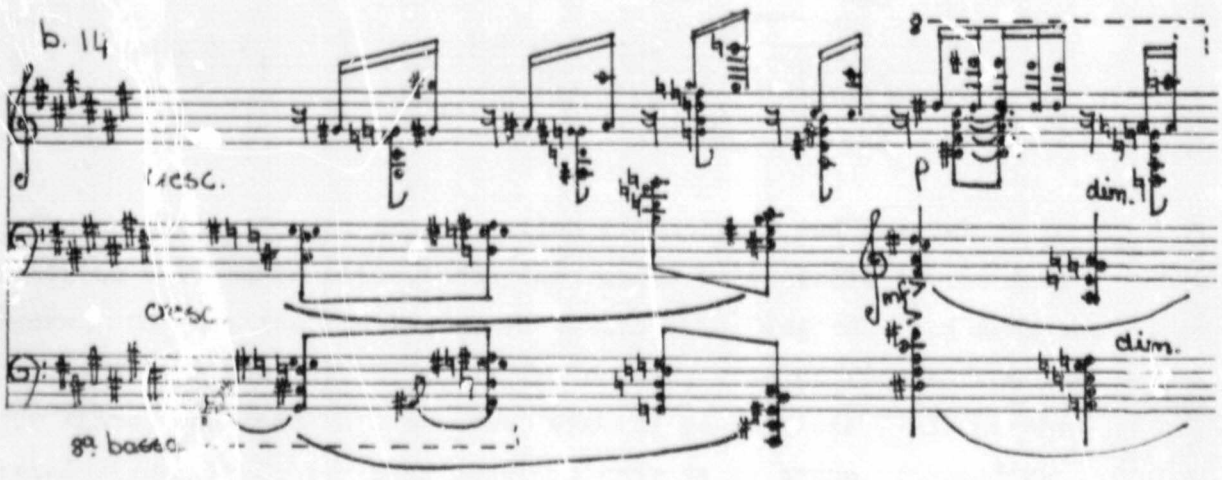


In b. 5 the first three ♪'s of the Theme of God are repeated; then follows an ascending sequence of chords, originating from the Theme of God, which reaches its climax in b. 6. The increasing chromaticism in this section creates a build-up of tension which is finally resolved in b.8 on C#, the dominant of F# major. This chromaticism is a result of chordal structures built from secundal,

tertian, and quartal elements. Besides adding "spice" to his musical language these clusters also re-create that quality of shimmering stained glass which has so inspired Messiaen. Of symbolical significance is the C# doubled in the top stave which is repeated 3 times:



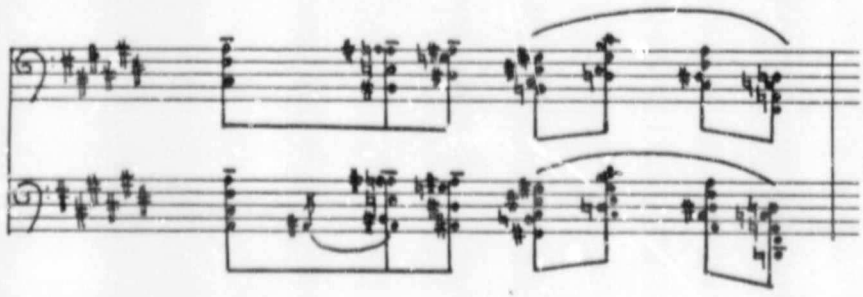
The dominant pedal leads into a return of Section A, and b. 9-11 = b. 1-3. Section B is likewise repeated with an extension - b. 11-17 = b. 3-9. The climax of the whole movement is reached in b. 14 as the slow ascent of chords of 4ths culminates in:



Finding superimposed triads too restrictive, Messiaen had begun to build chords in 4ths rather than 3rds, arbitrarily choosing the more

remote and complex relationships of the harmonic series to relate to the root. This explains the play on the interval of the +4th which follows. Like other mystically inclined composers such as Scriabin, Holst and Vaughan Williams, Messiaen was irrisistably attracted to the tritone, with its characteristic ambiguity and disjunct quality. William Austin suggests that the tritone in Messiaen's music means "the subtlety of radiant bodies, ... pure as the Angels of God in the heavens." [14, p.392] Drew gives a similar meaning for the interval in general as "a tonal leap that inspires a sense of physical disembodiment." [41] The ascending perfect 4th of b. 3 now descends in augmented form, and is Messiaen's first interval of choice. [1] The tension of the +4th is once more relieved by a second dominant pedal on C# in b. 16. Again, its three-fold sounding represents the Trinity unified in the Deity of God.

This then leads into the final section, or Coda, once more derived from the "Theme of God" as it appeared in b. 3:



The chords again are a combination of tertiary and quartal structures with added notes. Messiaen comes full circle in the last measure. He uses the opening chord to end this "Regard", and adds the 6th from F#. Above this he takes the opening triplet figure from the upper stave, and ends this movement with 21 repetitions (7x3) of the initial figure in b. 1. Thus Messiaen ends as he began, focused on God (1); the supreme Deity and source of all, including the Trinity (3) exclaims one last joyful utterance at the contemplation of His own perfection (7) mirrored in His Son.

In this first movement Messiaen has created a work using an economy of thematic material in which the meditative nature of God's devotion in the contemplation of His Son is achieved through the hypnotic repetition of the Theme of God. Messiaen's challenge of capturing the eternal truths within the temporal has been conveyed though his use of formal symmetry and repetition. Despite the simplicity of this movement there is so much to hear beneath the surface, for as Nicholas Arnfelt has said of Messiaen's music: "There is a sound behind the sound, a longer duration behind the shorter; one, the slower rhythm behind the quicker one. And behind all movement there is an awareness of stillness, and behind all sound an awareness of silence, and behind all measured time an awareness of Eternity." [34, p.21]

3. REGARD DE L'ETOILE (II): The Comtemplation of the Star
"The impact of grace ..... the star shines guilelessly, surmounted by the cross."

"Regard de l'etoile" is different from "Regard du Pere" in many respects. It has no key-signature and therefore no overt tonality. The three staves of the "Regard du Pere" have been replaced by two, and the thick chordal texture of the first "Regard" becomes a predominantly monophonic one. In "Regard de l'etoile" the extreme registers of the piano are emphasized, whereas in "Regard du Pere" Messiaen made use of the entire range of the piano. Dynamically and rhythmically this movement has far more contrast and diversity than the previous one.

Messiaen probably placed this contemplation second within the twenty for symbolic reasons. He continually uses contrasting dualities to emphasize the number 2. Again he is concerned with the Incarnation. God assumed a dual nature, human and divine, in the person of Jesus Christ. The composers text refers to two of the most important symbols surrounding Christ's birth and death, the star under which He was born and the cross on which He died. There is also an emphasis on the interval of the 2nd, and its inversion the 7th, throughout the movement.

The imagery of this movement can be better understood if the meaning and origin of the number 2 are explored. Just as in medieval number philosophy the number 1 referred to unity, so the duad or number 2 was the second number which proceeded from unity. Whereas odd numbers were universally considered more God-like, more perfect, and even more powerful, even numbers were seen as corruptible and transitory. The duad also symbolized diversity, and the Dionysian distinction between unity (#1) and diversity (#2) was carried further in a list including heaven and earth, visible and invisible, night and day, sun and moon, male and female, perfect and imperfect, Old and New Testaments and so on. Archetypally the number 2 also stands for Iah

and El, names of God written with two Hebrew characters each. [24, p.138] Thus the number 2 appears to have carried with it the ideal of mutual antithesis found in the duals of nature. In Pythagorean number theory the duad is the Mother of number. A line can be generated by expansion of the monad (a point). The line is neither spatial or concrete, and consequently the duad, like the monad is a principle rather than an actual number. As such it represents diversity, a breaking away from unity. Within the Holy Trinity, the dual nature of Christ is the best example of Christian dualism. [17, p.100f]

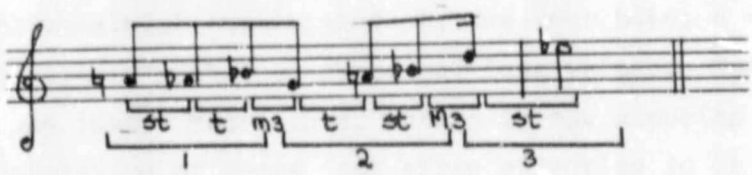
Diversity and contrast are prominent features of this "Regard de l'etoile" revealed in the following ways:

i) Contrast in dynamic between bars, for example forte in the first bar followed by 'ppp' in the second.
ii) Dissonance (b.31) followed by consonance (b.32).
iii) Contrast in range throughout the movement with an oscillation between bass (b.1) and treble register (b.32-33), as well combined extremes of the piano's register (b.2f).
iv) The binary structure of the movement subdivides again into two further sub-sections.
v) The musical material consists of two main themes.
vi) There are contrasts in texture in which a homophonic texture is followed by a more monophonic one.
vii) Messiaen distinguishes two tempi: Modere (♩=96) and Modere, un peu lent (♩=76).

The Star and the Cross are important symbols, for as Dom Marmion points out, the star which summoned the Magi "is the symbol of the inward illumination that enlightens souls in order to call them to God..... The Church has seen in the call of the Magi, the vocation of pagan nations to the faith, so that the Incarnate Word served a dual purpose: to make Itself known first to the Jews, the chosen race, but also to the Gentiles. [20, p.147f] Christ's sacrifice, originating at the moment of His Incarnation, was achieved by His

death on the Cross. Christian teaching emphasises this sacrifice in which Christ destroyed sin and restored grace to His people. [20, p.147f]

The Theme of the Star and the Cross is by far the most important of the two used in this movement, and represents the second of the four cyclic themes in "Vingt Regards...":



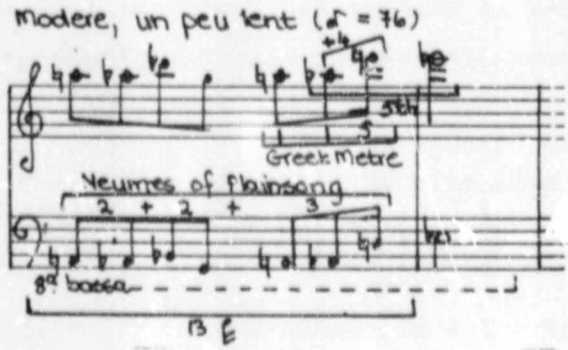
This theme is for single voice doubled at the 16th, and as Wilfred Mellers has said: "The absence of harmonic tension and the concentration of a single line divests the music of any dramatic sense, and conveys an impression of oneness with the universe. ..... The timelessness of such a notion is conveyed through the rhythmic fluidity and the lack of cadential finality or of regular metrical accent." [41] This may be said to sum up Messiaen's philosophy and aesthetics.

The Theme of the Star and the Cross reveals two further important influences on Messiaen's music, plainsong and Greek metres. As a practising church musician, he was strongly influenced by the neumes of plainsong, since he accompanied plainsong at High Mass every Sunday at the church of Sainte Trinite. Messiaen had also studied Dom Andre Mocquereau's work on Gregorian chant, "Le nombre musical gregorien". Mocquereau dealt with the rhythmic performance of chant in patterns of 'arsis' (upbeat) and 'thesis' (statement). Characteristically, plainsong is an uninterrupted succession of 'arsis' and 'thesis', rises and drops, of impulses and rests. [11, p.42] It is not divided into bars and has no regular repetition of strong and weak beats as in measured music. The repetition of beats is irregular as in speech, and it is this element which attracts Messiaen. Moreover, Messiaen glimpsed in plainsong that "true", pure, unadulterated music he was searching for; music that was an act of faith. [1, p.8] Two, three

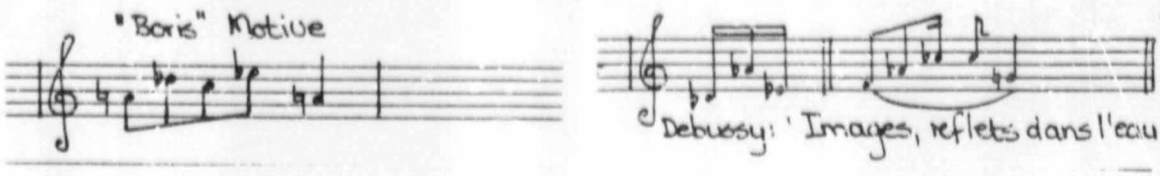
and four-note "neumes" comprise the Theme of the Star and the Cross. These groupings provide great flexibility of rhythm and pulse, especially in Messiaen's music where there is no metre in the traditional sense.

Messiaen uses the "feet" of Greek metres, but whilst maintaining the relationship between short and long values within the foot, he proportionately decreases the unit values. Greek metres rely on the very simple principle of combining feet, the foot being a rhythm composed of a certain number of short and long values. Two shorts always equal one long. Metre then, refers to the grouping of these feet. The combination of these feet often gave rise to prime numbers, which greatly [illegible] Messiaen who found a correlation between this flexibility in [illegible] the neumes of plainsong and Greek metres. [11, p.42]

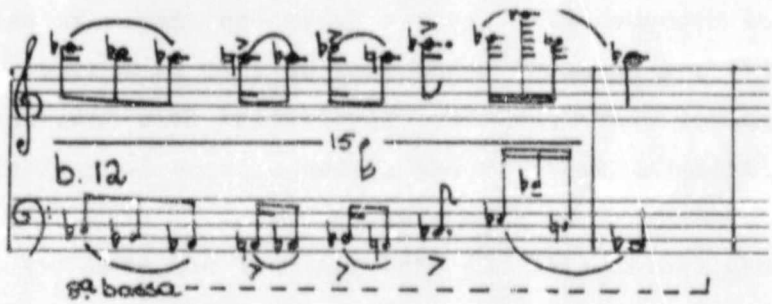
The neumes and metres are readily visible in the example below.



This example includes a melodic cell which recurs throughout "Vingt Regards...". It usually includes the intervals of the 4th or 5th with a tritone. Within this fragment there are also traces of Mussorgsky's "Boris Motive", as well as melodic contours from Debussy's "Images, reflets dans l'eau" which Messiaen lists in his treatise "The Technique of my musical Language":



The "Boris Motive" in particular might be described as a prominent melodic cell in Messiaen's music of the late 1930's and early 1940's. The chromatic wanderings in b.6-7 are also characteristic of his style as is the spacing here. In bar 12 chromaticism is used as a tool to express the anguish and pathos associated with the cross in the rising 2-note neume.



The Theme of the Star and the Cross appears in 2-bar phrases throughout, undergoing subtle rhythmic and melodic transformation as follows:

b. 6-7 Spondee (4l = 8s/♪) + anti- Bachius (11s = 5♪) = 13♪

b. 8-9 Tribach (3l = 5s/♪) + Trochee (1s x 2 = 6s/♪) = 12♪

b. 10-11 Spondee (4l = 8s/♪) + Trochee (1s = 3s/♪) + augm) = 17♪

augm

b. 12-13 Tribach (3l = 5s/♪) + Iambic (s l=3s/♪ x 2) + Trochee = 15♪ (1s = 3s/♪)

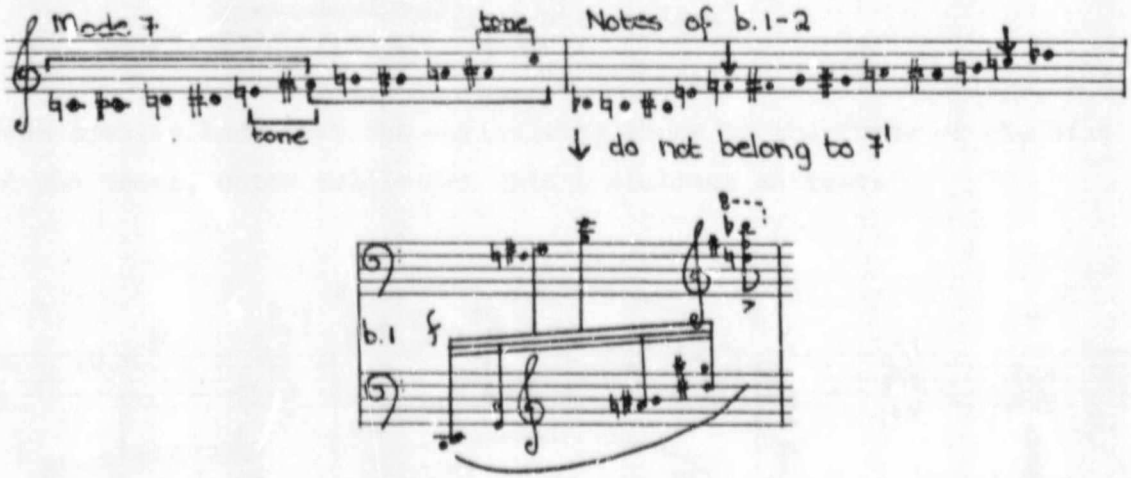
b. 14-15 Spondee (4l = 5s/𝅘𝅥𝅯) + Trochee (1s x 2 = 6s/𝅘𝅥𝅯) = 14 𝅘𝅥𝅯

b.16-17 Spondee (2 x 2l = 8s/𝅘𝅥𝅯) + Anti-Bachius (11s = 5s/𝅘𝅥𝅯) = 13 𝅘𝅥𝅯

l = long and s = short

The examples above reflect Messiaen's own interpretation of the basic principles of neumes and Greek metres. The composer lengthens or shortens the values at will so that these formulae are therefore not wholly consistent with traditional practice. This device also destroys any feeling of regular pulse, and produces asymmetrical phrases.

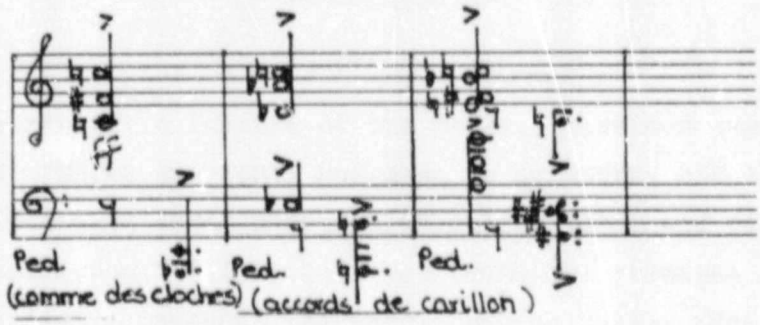
The first two bars and the last bars (b. 35f) reveal chordal clusters which contain all 12 notes of the chromatic scale, suggesting mode 7:



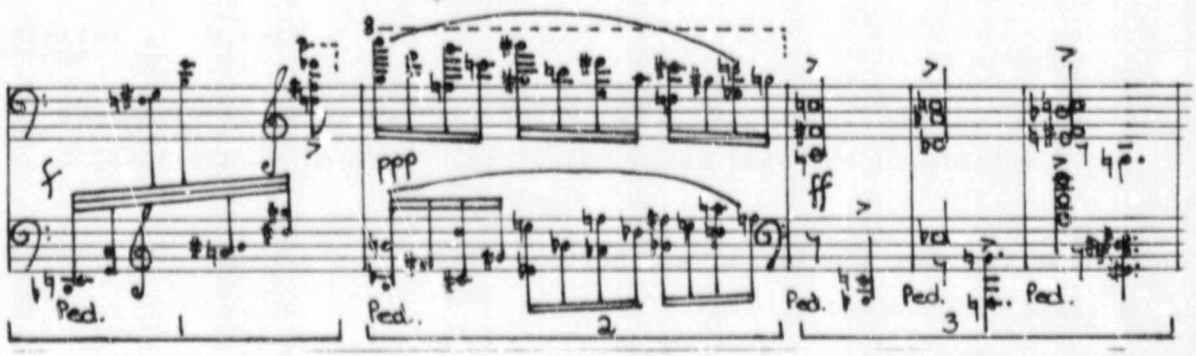
Since there is no tonal centre to this movement these chords would appear to be individual sound entities. Roger Nichols believes that these chords reveal a logic of progression "from a rising phrase [b. 1] through a falling one [b.2], to some sort of equilibrium in the repeated C's [b.3-4], [so] that we appreciate the chords as no more than colouring in an independently organized design." [9, p.36] In Nichols' view, the high 7ths and 9ths in b.2 were innovative sounds in piano music at that time, [Ibid] although they may be seen as an

extension of the interval of the 2nd, the 7th being the inverted 2nd, and the 9th a compound 2nd.

Throughout "Vingt Regards..." Messiaen evokes bell-sounds, and they make their first appearance in "Regard de l'etoile". The three repeated C's in b.3-5 represent bell chords, "comme des cloches" and "accords da carillon" in Messiaen's words, and are symbolically important since 3 represents the Holy Trinity. They also announce the Theme of the Star and the Cross. The chords are typical of Messiaen's style in that +4ths and -5ths predominate:



These opening bars form the contrasting theme to the Theme of the Star and the Cross, which subdivides into 3 distinct motives:



In each of these 5-bar segments three conspicuously different textures may be noted: that of b.1, b. 2 and then b.3-5.

Author Di Bisceglie Laureen Gail
Name of thesis Olivier Messiaen "Vingt regards sur l'enfant-Jesus" : an analysis. 1987

PUBLISHER:
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg
©2013

LEGAL NOTICES:

Copyright Notice: All materials on the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg Library website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Disclaimer and Terms of Use: Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

The University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the Library website.