

Vingt regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus

Olivier Messiaen

Born in Avignon, December 10, 1908; died in Paris, April 27, 1992

Original thinkers appear on the planet only rarely—such was Olivier Messiaen. One of the most creative musical voices of the twentieth century, Messiaen possessed a boundless curiosity and astonishing vision. As a lover of nature, a mystic Roman Catholic, mathematical whiz, and phenomenally gifted musician, he incorporated myriad elements in the invention of his own musical language.

He had a lifelong interest in bird song, for instance, that led him to transcribe, without the aid of a tape recorder, the calls of more than 250 species for use in his music. Fascinated with rhythm, he incorporated Greek and Balinese rhythms, and employed Hindu formulae even before he understood their origin. He worked mathematical intricacies into his compositions: permutations, “irrational” values, and complex augmentations and diminutions. And captivated by the concepts of time and space, he created elaborate schemes to represent these complex ideas in musical terms.

While never embracing serialism altogether, Messiaen adapted it to his own purpose, for his treatment of pitch, rhythm, dynamics, and articulation. Conventional chords were part of his vocabulary, but he erased their traditional function by separating them from expected contexts. His harmonic vocabulary included his own system called “modes of limited transposition,” based on the modern chromatic scale divided into equal intervals. He often used these seven modes and their “limited transpositions” to represent aurally the colors of the visual world. It is a testament to his genius and inner ear that these seemingly rigid constructions yielded creations of such compelling beauty.

Almost all of Messiaen’s works for fifteen years, beginning in 1943 with *Visions de l’Amen*, were composed for piano or featured the piano prominently. His great inspiration was virtuoso pianist Yvonne Loriod, a student in his famous advanced harmony class—later elevated to composition class—at the Paris Conservatory. (She eventually became his second wife in 1961, several years after the death of his first wife, violinist Claire Delbos.) The complexities of his piano parts were all written fearlessly with Loriod’s incomparable abilities in mind.

Beginning with *Visions de l’Amen*, which she premiered in 1943 with the composer at the other piano, she premiered and recorded all of his works containing a piano part. *Vingt regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus* was composed between March 23 and September 1944. Phenomenally difficult and lasting an imposing span of over two hours, the piano cycle was first performed by Loriod on March 26, 1945, at the Salle Gaveau in Paris.

The twenty *Regards*—variously translated as contemplations, looks, gazes, glances, views, aspects—masterfully combine Messiaen’s seemingly eclectic interests. We find numerology and Roman Catholic symbolism; the musical representation of time and eternity; bird song, elevated for the first time to a soloistic role; pianistic representations of bells, tam-tams, drums, trombones, and oboes; rhythmic puzzles and canons; and modes that evoke certain colors. He achieved a cohesive whole by employing several motto themes.

The most important of these, the Theme of God (five chords emphasizing F-sharp major in a short-short-short-long-long rhythm), returns in various guises in at least seven of the *Regards* (Nos. 1, 5, 6, 10, 11, 15, and 20), symbolizing the constancy and all-embracing nature of the “supreme being.” Messiaen’s preface to the score (see below) reproduces the Theme of God and also the chromatic Theme of the Star and Cross and the Theme of Chords (a sequence of four chords in no particular rhythm). For utter clarity he labels them where they occur in the score, also noting the appearances of the exuberant, chordal Theme of Love (derived from the Theme of God) and the triumphant Theme of Joy.

Master of the slow tempo, Messiaen imposes such disciplined majesty, calm, and stasis in the first five *Regards* that the outburst of speed and wild virtuosity in No. 6, *By Him All Has Been Made*, makes a true “big bang” (Messiaen’s characterization) of the creation story. This great fugue—or “anti-fugue” as it has been deemed—is considered one of the greatest challenges in the piano repertoire, not only in digital dexterity, but in the mental agility required to master the composer’s complex rhythmic and melodic patterns.

These include what he called “*agrandissements asymétriques*” (asymmetrical enlargements), that is, in succeeding repetitions of a passage, the transposition of some notes upwards and or downwards by a half tone, while others remain unchanged. Fascinated also by rhythms that read the same backwards as forwards, Messiaen used such constructions which he called “nonretrogradable rhythms” here and elsewhere in the *Vingt regards*.

Other extroverted and virtuosic movements reflect Messiaen’s philosophy that religious music should not be insipid—No. 10, *Gaze of the Spirit of Joy*, with its ferocious energy and jazzy hunting horns; No. 12, *The All-Powerful Word*, with its percussion imitations (tam-tam and drum); and No. 13, *Christmas*, with its pealing bells.

In No. 14, Gaze of the Angels, Messiaen unleashes scintillating contrary motion and imitations of percussion, trombone, and bird song. No. 16, Gaze of the Prophets, Shepherds, and Wise Men, is striking for its “exotic” and “reedy” evocations. No. 18, Gaze of the Awesome Uncion, presents a special challenge with its framing sections in which one hand speeds up while the other slows down. The ecstatic No. 20, Gaze of the Church of Love, building toward its apotheotic glorification of the Theme of God, stands as one of the most overwhelming utterances in the piano repertoire.

No less spellbinding are the slow movements, which require a different kind of virtuosity—the conclusion of No. 1, Gaze of the Father, for example, in which only supreme control can bring about the most gradual possible decrease in volume. No. 11, First Communion of the Virgin, allows us to hear the heartbeats (very fast and low) of the unborn baby Jesus. The tender No. 15, The Kiss of the Child Jesus transforms the Theme of God into a lullaby and ends with a lovely wash of sound representing the shadow of the child’s kiss. No. 17, the Gaze of Silence, bathes the listener in a treble shimmer evoking a “rainbow in reverse.”

The extremely slow and harmonically static framing sections of No. 19, I Sleep, but My Heart Lies Awake, produce an extraordinary atmosphere of reverie. Naturally not all of the *Regards* maintain the same tempo throughout, nor is fast always loud and slow always soft. The moderate pace and only slightly changing motives of No. 3, The Exchange, are intensified by a gradual progression from very soft (*pp*) to extremely loud (*fff*). A remarkable fast but quiet *Regard* is No. 8, Gaze of the Heights, the point in the composer’s work in which specific birds become soloists for the first time.

Messiaen ordinarily spent as much time researching various theological, ornithological, or ancient Greek and Hindu sources as he spent composing the music itself. Because he wanted his performers and listeners to be precisely aware of his inspirations and how he constructed various passages, he wrote extensive program notes, which appear as prefaces to his scores or as liner notes for nearly every recording of his music that he supervised. We would be remiss not to provide his descriptions in full, which often take the form of suggestive phrases rather than complete sentences. The ellipses [. . .] below are the composer’s and not signs of omission.

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Note by the composer

Contemplation of the Infant-God of the manger and Gazes that fall on him: from the inexpressible Gaze of God the Father to the multiple Gaze of the Church of Love, passing through the extraordinary Gaze of the Spirit of Joy, through the very tender Gaze of the Virgin, then the Angels, the Wise Men, and the incorporeal or symbolic creatures (Time, the Heights, Silence, the Star, and the Cross).

The Star and the Cross have the same theme because one opens and the other closes the earthly existence of Jesus. The Theme of God is found, of course, in the Gazes of the Father, of the Son, and of the Spirit of Joy, in *Him All Has Been Made*, in *The Kiss of the Infant-Jesus*; it is present in *The First Communion of the Virgin* (she carried Jesus within her); it is expanded in the *Church of Love*, which is the body of Christ. Not to mention the songs of the birds, bells, spirals, stalactites, galaxies, photons, and the texts of Dom Columba Marmion, St. Thomas, St. Jean of the Cross, St. Theresa of Lisieux, the Gospels, and the Missal that influenced me.

A Theme of Chords circulates from one piece to another, split up or concentrated into a rainbow; also rhythmic canons, polymodalities, nonreversible rhythms amplified in both directions, note values progressively accelerated or slowed, asymmetric enlargements, changes of register, etc.

The writing for piano is very mannered: inverted arpeggios, resonances, diverse strokes.—Dom Columba Marmion (*Le Christ dans ses mystères* [Christ in His mysteries]) and after him Maurice Toesca (*Les douze regards* [The twelve gazes]) spoke of the gazes of the shepherds, the angels, the Virgin, the heavenly Father; I have taken up the same idea, treating it a bit differently and adding sixteen new gazes. More than in all my preceding works I have sought here a language of mystical love, at once varied, powerful, and tender, sometimes brutal, in multicolored arrangements.

Theme of God



Theme of the Star and Cross



Theme of Chords



1. Regard du Père [Gaze of the Father] The statement of the Theme of God in its entirety. And God said : “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. . . .”

2. Regard de l'étoile [Gaze of the Star] Theme of the Star and Cross. The impact of grace . . . the Star shines naively, surmounted by a cross . . .

3. L'échange [The exchange] Descent in a cascade, ascent in a spiral; terrible trading of the human-divine; God made man to make us gods . . .

God, this is the passage in alternate thirds: that which does not move, that which is very small. Mankind, these are the other fragments, which grow, grow and become enormous, according to a development procedure I call “asymmetrical enlargement.”

4. Regard de la Vierge [Gaze of the Virgin] Innocence and tenderness . . . the woman of Purity, the woman of the Magnificat, the Virgin gazes at her child . . .

I wanted to express purity in music: there had to be a certain energy—and especially a great deal of innocence, of childlike tenderness.

5. Regard du Fils sur le Fils [Gaze of the Son upon the Son] Mystery, rays of light in the night—refraction of joy, the birds of silence—the person of the Word in a human nature—marriage of the human and divine natures in Jesus Christ . . .

This is, of course, the Son-Divine Word contemplating the Son-Child Jesus. Three sonorities, three modes, three rhythms, three superimposed musics. The Theme of God and rhythmic canon by the addition of the note value of a dot. Joy symbolized by the songs of birds.

6. Par Lui tout a été fait [By Him all has been made] Expansion of spaces and durations; galaxies, photons, reversed spirals, inverted thunderbolts; by “him” (the Word) all has been made . . . at one moment, the creation has opened for us the luminous shadow of his Voice . . .

It is a fugue. The subject is never presented the same way: from the second entry it is changed in rhythm and registers. Note the *divertissement* where the upper voice treats the subject in nonretrogradable rhythm taken out to the left and right, where the bass repeats fortissimo a fragment of the subject in asymmetrical enlargement. Middle [section] on very short and very long values (infinitely small and infinitely large).

Reprise of the retrograded fugue, a “crab” canon [the second voice enters with the notes of the leading voice in reverse]. Mysterious strettos [layered entries]. The Theme of God fortissimo: victorious presence, the face of God behind the flame and the gushing out. The creation takes up and chants the Theme of God in a canon of chords.

7. Regard de la Croix [Gaze of the Cross] Theme of the Star and Cross. The Cross says to him: you will be a priest in my arms . . .

8. Regard des hauteurs [Gaze of the heights] Glory in the heights . . . the heights descend to the manger like the song of a lark . . .

Songs of birds: nightingale, thrush, warbler, chaffinch, goldfinch, Cetti’s warbler, canary, and, above all, the lark.

9. Regard du temps [Gaze of time] Mystery of the plenitude of time; Time sees born inside itself one who is eternal . . .

Short, cold, strange theme like the egg-shaped heads of Chiroco; rhythmic canon.

10. Regard de l'esprit de joie [Gaze of the spirit of joy] Vehement dance, drunken sound of horns, rapture of the Holy Spirit . . . the joy of the love of God happy in the soul of Jesus Christ . . .

I have always been very struck by the fact that God is happy—and that this ineffable and continuous joy lived in the soul of Christ. Joy is for me a rapture, a drunkenness in the *maddest* sense of the term.

Form: Eastern dance, in the lowest range, in unequal neumes, like a plainchant. First development of the Theme of Joy. Asymmetrical enlargement. A sort of hunting air in three variations. Second development of the Theme of Joy and Theme of God. Reprise of the eastern dance, shrillest and lowest ranges together. Coda on the Theme of Joy.

11. Première communion de la Vierge [First communion of the Virgin] A tableau in which the Virgin is shown kneeling, bowed down in the night—a luminous halo around her womb. Eyes closed, she adores the fruit hidden within her. This comes between the Annunciation and the Nativity: it is the first and greatest of all communions.

Theme of God, gentle scrolls, in stalactites, in an inner embrace. Recall of the theme of *La Vierge et l'Enfant* from my *Nativité [du Seigneur]* for organ, 1935]. Magnificat more enthusiastic. Special chords and durations of two and two in which the weighty pulsations represent the heartbeats of the Infant in the breast of his mother. Disappearance of the Theme of God.

After the Annunciation, Mary adores Jesus within her . . . my God, my son, my Magnificat!—my love without the sound of words.

12. La parole toute puissante [The all-powerful word] Monody with low percussion.

This child is the Word who bears up all things by the power of his utterance.

13. Noël [Christmas] Carillon—the bells of Christmas say with us the sweet names of Jesus, Mary, Joseph . . .

14. Regard des anges [Gaze of the angels] Scintillation, percussion; powerful sound of immense trombones; your servants are the flames of fire . . . —then the song of the birds who drink of the blue,—and the amazement of the angels grows: for it is not to them but to the human race that God is united . . .

In the first three strophes: blazing, rhythmic canon and fractioning of the Theme of Chords. Fourth strophe: songs of birds. Fifth strophe: the amazement of the angels grows.

15. Le baiser de l'Enfant-Jésus [The kiss of the child Jesus] At each communion the child Jesus sleeps with us near the door; then he opens it onto the garden and runs into the light to embrace us . . .

Theme of God in a lullaby. Sleep—the garden—arms outstretched toward love—the kiss—the shadow of the kiss. An etching inspired me, representing the child Jesus leaving the arms of his mother to kiss little sister Theresa. All this is a symbol of communion, of divine love. One must love to love both this subject and this music, which would like to be as tender as the heart of the sky—and there is nothing else.

16. Regard des prophètes, des bergers, et des Mages [Gaze of the prophets, shepherds, and Wise Men] Exotic music—tam-tams and oboe, enormous and nasal concert . . .

17. Regard du silence [Gaze of silence] Silence in the hand, reversed rainbow . . . each silence of the manger reveals music and colors that are the mysteries of Jesus Christ . . .

Polymodality, rhythmic canon by the addition of the note value of a dot, special chords, the Theme of Chords. The entire piece is highly figured like the piano writing. The ending: alternating chords, multicolored and impalpable music, in confetti, in light jewels, in colliding reflections.

18. Regard de l'Onction terrible [Gaze of the awesome Unction; referring to Christ's coronation] The Word assumes a definite human nature, selection of the flesh of Jesus by the appalling Majesty . . .

An ancient tapestry represents the Word of God battling under the images of Christ on horseback: one sees only his two hands on the sheath of the sword, which he brandishes amid the lightning. This picture influenced me.

In the Introduction and the Coda, progressively slowing note values are superimposed on progressively accelerating values and the reverse.

19. Je dors, mais mon coeur veille [I sleep, but my heart lies awake] Poem of love, dialogue of mystical love. Here *silences* play a major role.

It is not an angel's bow that smiles,—it is the sleeping Jesus who loves us on Sunday and who gives us oblivion . . .

20. Regard de l'Église d'amour [Gaze of the Church of love] Grace of God compels us to love God as God loves himself; after the cascades of night, the spirals of agony, here are the bells, the glory and the kiss of love . . . all the passion of our arms around the Invisible . . .

Form (the development here precedes the exposition):

Development: First theme in nonretrogradable rhythm. Amplified to the left and right; it is interspersed with the strokes of the piano in contrary cascades. Three summons of the Theme of God separated by asymmetrical enlargements. Development of the third melodic theme. First theme with cascades, new asymmetrical enlargement. Peeling of bells forming a dominant pedal and recalling the chords of the preceding pieces.

Exposition: Complete phrase on the Theme of God, in fanfare, in glory. Long coda on the Theme of God—triumph of love and joy, tears of joy.

—Olivier Messiaen
translated by Jane Vial Jaffe
musical examples rendered by Peter Jaffe