

“THEME OF THE STAR AND THE CROSS” – CHRISTIAN SYMBOLS IN OLIVIER MESSIAEN’S “VINGT REGARDS SUR L’ENFANT-JESUS”

RALUCA RAD¹ 

SUMMARY. Olivier Messiaen wanted his music to express of his profound Catholic faith, and many of his instrumental works written for the concert hall have an overt religious message. The Star of Bethlehem and the Cross of Golgotha, the most powerful symbols of Christianity, stand at the beginning and the end of Christ’s earthly life. The connection between the birth of Jesus and His death on the cross in theological texts and pictorial representations in Christian art is briefly surveyed. The study focuses on the way Messiaen gave a musical expression to this connection by using similar motifs and themes in movements depicting the joy of the Nativity and movements expressing the sorrow of the Passion. Relevant movements in which the composer uses the so-called Boris motif are presented, followed by an in-depth analysis of the “Theme of the star and the cross” in the piano cycle *Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus*.

Keywords: Messiaen, theology, Christian symbols, Nativity and Passion, art, musical analysis

Introduction

“To write poetry means to invent Symbols, and to understand poetry means to understand symbols. The truly creative musician can only be understood by viewing him as a poet. He may claim as his right that one penetrates his symbolic world, seeks to open it up and, by participating in it, corresponds to his will for the ideal binding of spirits.”²

¹ Ph.D. Lecturer, National Music Academy “Gheorghe Dima” Cluj-Napoca (Romania), Str. Ion I.C. Brătianu, nr. 25, E-mail: raluca.rad@amgd.ro

² Schering, Arnold. *Das Symbol in der Musik*. Leipzig: Koehler & Amelang, 1941, p. 144-145.



Olivier Messiaen, indisputably one of the most “truly creative musicians” of the twentieth century, and a fervent catholic, makes ample use of symbolism in his instrumental music. In this study we illuminate some aspects of the relationship of Nativity (respectively Epiphany), symbolized by the Star of Bethlehem and Passion, symbolized by the Cross of Golgotha, as well as their conflation in art and in the music of Messiaen.

Messiaen and theology

“Born a catholic”, the composer declared that “the illumination of the theological truths of the Catholic faith, is the first aspect of my work, the noblest, and no doubt the most valuable [...]”³. Messiaen had a broad theological knowledge and is considered by several authors, both religious and secular⁴, to be himself a theologian. “Not only ... do I adhere to the faith, but I have studied theology ... and have tried in many of my works, in fact in most of my works, to depict the mysteries of the faith.”⁵

Among the works of modern theologians who influenced Messiaen most are the writings of Dom Columba Marmion (1858-1923), and in particular his *Le Christ dans ses Mystères* (*Christ in His mysteries*) from 1919. When Messiaen was a novice church organist, his confessor recommended him the book, as a help with understanding of the liturgical cycle. The young musician was in awe. “I have discovered a magnificent book [...] each mystery of Christ is analyzed according to the offices of the liturgical year, [...] Each mystery has its specific beauty, its particular splendor as well as its own grace.”⁶ The book directly influenced Messiaen’s piano cycle *Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus*⁷. Marmion’s “theology of hope, based on an understanding of God’s love for all his creatures⁸ might also have been influential for Messiaen’s “theology of joy”. “In principle I am a musician of joy, and it pleases me above all to meditate on the glorious mysteries.”⁹ Messiaen’s music is based on the

³ Samuel, Claude & Olivier Messiaen. *Musique et couleur*. Paris : Belfond, 1986, p. 20-21.

⁴ Père Pascal Ide, Père Jean-Rodolphe Kars, Andrew Shenton.

⁵ Murray, Michael. “An Interview with Olivier Messiaen.” *Diapason* 70/1 (No. 829), December 1978, pp. 3-5, p. 3.

⁶ Massin, Brigitte. *Olivier Messiaen, un poétique du merveilleux*. Aix-en-Provence: Editions Alinea, 1989, p. 68, 70.

⁷ “Twenty contemplations of the infant Jesus”, henceforth referred to as *Vingt Regards*.

⁸ Moës, Luc, O.S.B. “Dom Columba Marmion. A precursor and logistical survey for Springtime.” *Newsletter of Blessed Columba Marmion*, Courier n° 14, 2008, p. 110.

⁹ Meltzheim, Irène & Ide, père Pascal (1991), « Le musicien de la joie », entretien avec Olivier Messiaen, cited in Joachim Havard de la Montagne, (1992). *Olivier Messiaen. Musica et memoria*, 1991.

"Theologia Glorïae" as opposed to what is called "Theologia Crucis"¹⁰. He wrote two monumental cycles devoted to the Nativity (*La Nativité du Seigneur*¹¹ for organ, 1935 and *Vingt Regards*, 1944), but "surprisingly, there is no actual Passion work by Messiaen, which has earned him the accusation that he emphasizes the "Theologia gloriæ" too much¹². However, a few movements in the composer's oeuvre are devoted to Christ's Passion, among others the first movement (dedicated to the cross) of the symphonic meditation *Les Offrandes oubliées*, (*The forgotten Offerings* 1930, version for piano 1931), *Jésus accepte la souffrance* (*Jesus accepts suffering*, seventh movement of *La Nativité*), *Amen de l'agonie de Jésus* (*Amen of Jesus' agony*, third movement of the cycle for two pianos *Visions de l'Amen* 1943), *Regard de la Croix*¹³ (*Contemplation of the cross*, seventh movement of *Vingt Regards*) and the first scene, intitled "La croix", of the opera *Saint François d'Assise*, (premiere 1983).

In *Vingt Regards*, among the "gazers" that contemplate the infant Jesus, Messiaen lists a few "immaterial or symbolic creatures: the Time, the Heights, the Silence, the Star, the Cross"¹⁴. The composer gives the star and the cross the same musical theme *Thème de l'étoile et de la croix* (Example 5c) "because one opens and the other closes the earthly period of Jesus."¹⁵

Theological texts have pointed to the inherent relationship between the birth of Jesus and His death on the cross. Don Columba Marmion cites Saint Paul: "As St. Paul teaches us, it was from the first moment of His Incarnation that Christ accepted to accomplish His Father's will and to offer Himself as Victim for the human race". Marmion goes on writing: "It is from the Crib that He inaugurates this life of suffering such as He willed to live for our salvation, this life of which the term is at Golgotha, and that, in destroying sin, is to restore to us the friendship of His Father. The Crib is certainly only the first stage, but it radically contains all the others."¹⁶. As a conclusion, in the extended *Contents* at the end of the book we read: "The whole life of Our Lord was ordered in view of His Sacrifice upon Calvary; and marked with the seal of the cross"¹⁷.

¹⁰ Strelan, John G. "Theologia Crucis, Theologia Glorïae: A Study in Opposing Theologies." *Lutheran Theological Journal* 23, no. 3, December 1989.

¹¹ "Nativity of the Lord", henceforth referred to as *La Nativité*.

¹² Walter, Meinrad. "Musik aus dem Geist der Theologie Zum Werk des Komponisten Olivier Messiaen." *Herder Korrespondenz* 61 11/2007, 589-593, p. 593.

¹³ "Contemplation of the cross"

¹⁴ Messiaen, Olivier. *Note de l'auteur* [author's note], in *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*, Paris : Durand, 1947.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Marmion, Don Columba. *Christ in His Mysteries*. tr. Mother M. St. Thomas of Tyburn Convent, 9th ed. London: Sands & Co., 1939, p. 127.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 414.

One of the most popular and highly influential religious works of the Middle Ages, *Legenda Aurea* (*The Golden Legend*), a collection of the legendary lives of the saints compiled around 1260 by blessed Jacobus de Voragine, archbishop of Genoa, tells of the Magi: “On the day of the Christ’s birth, [...] a star came to them above the mountain: it had the shape of a most beautiful child over whose head a cross gleamed”.¹⁸

Star and cross in visual arts

The image of the child Jesus together with symbols of his sacrifice was widely spread in late medieval art.²⁰ The imagery in the South Netherlandish tapestry *Christ Is Born as Man’s Redeemer* (1500–1520) seems to have been influenced by the *Golden Legend*. In the upper right corner, the depiction of the Magi shows above them a star “which has the form of a nude child carrying a cross in the midst of rays of light”²¹. The infant bears the cross on the shoulder, in a manner similar to renderings of the *Way of Sorrows* (Figure 1).

Figure 1



Detail of the tapestry¹⁹

¹⁸ de Voragine, Jacobus. *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, William Granger Ryan (translator) Vol. 1, Princeton University Press 2012, p. 80.

¹⁹ Metropolitan Museum, New York <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/467650>

²⁰ Gertsman, Elina. “Signs of Death: The Sacrificial Christ Child in Late-Medieval Art.” *The Christ Child in Medieval Culture: Alpha es et O!*, edited by Theresa M. Kenney, & Mary Dzon, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012, pp. 66-91.

²¹ Cavallo, Adolfo Salvatore. *Medieval tapestries in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1993. p. 333.

The collapsing of time by showing symbols of Calvary in images of Nativity, has been called Proleptic Passion. One striking example is Roger van der Weyden's so-called St. Columba Altarpiece from around 1455 – "the most influential depiction of the subject [Adoration] in the fifteenth century"²². The central panel of the triptych depicts the Holy Family in a somewhat dilapidated shed and the three Magi with their attendants bearing the gifts (Figure 2).

Figure 2



Rogier van der Weyden: St. Columba Altarpiece (central panel)²³

²² Acres, Alfred. "The Columba Altarpiece and the Time of the World." *The Art Bulletin*, 80(3), 422–451, p. 424.

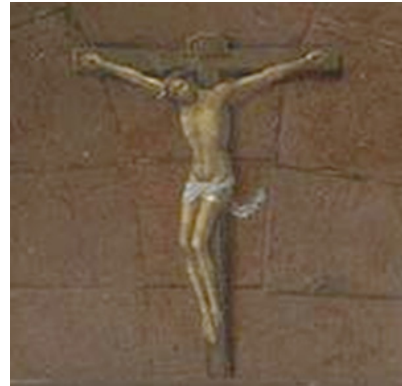
²³ Alte Pinakothek München, <https://www.sammlung.pinakothek.de/de/artwork/jWLpO7nxKY>

The star, partially hidden by the roof of the shed, shines brightly in the dark sky (Figure 3). Hanging of a pier there is a small crucifix (Figure 4). In a detailed analysis of the Altarpiece, Acres considers that the Columba crucifix stands apart from other depictions of the Proleptic Passion as it “intrudes as a piercing anachronism, occupying the center of this expansive scene of Epiphany with singular audacity”²⁴.

Figure 3



Figure 4



Van der Weyden: *St. Columba Altarpiece*: Details of Star and Crucifix

Zink points at several details in the composition of the scene which direct the attention towards the crucifix.²⁵

In the first years of the sixteenth century, two famous series of woodcuts by Albrecht Dürer (*The Small Passion* and *The Life of the Virgin*) include a Nativity scene each. Both depict the Holy Family and feature the Star above the shed. The upcoming sufferings of the Infant are alluded by the cross which is formed by the beams supporting the roof of the shed.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ Zink, Jörg. *Drei Könige unter dem Kreuz: Betrachtungen über das Weihnachtsbild Rogiers van der Weyden*. Gelnhausen: Burckhardhaus-Verlag, 1964. p. 11.

Figure 5



Dürer: *Nativity (Life of the Virgin)*²⁶

Figure 6



Dürer: *Nativity (Small Passion)*²⁷

Messiaen: relationship of joy of the Nativity and sorrow of the Passion

As has been pointed, in the music of Olivier Messiaen there are only a few movements dealing with aspects of the Passion. In a few cases, the composer connected musically the joy of the Nativity and the sorrow of the Passion, mainly by using the same musical motif. This is seen both in the dual use of the so-called "Boris motif" and in the Theme of the star and the cross. Messiaen was an admirer of the idea of the Wagnerian Leitmotif. "This Leitmotif is an extraordinary means of language and expression that makes it possible to depict the past, present and future simultaneously."²⁸

²⁶ National Gallery of Art, Washington, public domain <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.6701.html>

²⁷ *ibid.* <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.6754.html>

²⁸ Rößler, Almut. *Beiträge zur geistigen Welt Olivier Messiaens mit Original-Texten des Komponisten*. Duisburg: Gilles & Franke Verlag, 1984 p. 57.

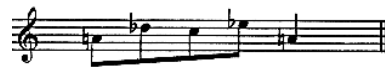
One of the motifs Messiaen used numerous times in his works is the Boris motif, borrowed from the coronation scene in Modest Mussorgsky's opera Boris Godunov. In his *Technique de mon langage musical*²⁹ the composer himself commented on it.³⁰ As was his wont with borrowings, the composer "passed [it] through the deforming prism of [his] language"³¹, mainly by enlarging its range from a perfect fifth to a tritone (Example 1). The motif also undergoes a few rhythmical changes. (see Example 2c, d, e, g).

Messiaen often used the Boris motif accompanied by the same harmonies of the second mode of limited transposition³², as he showed in *Technique* (Example 2a), where he also cites its use in *La Vierge et l'Enfant* (Example 2d). *La Vierge et l'Enfant* ("The Virgin and the Child"), the first movement of *La Nativité*, is preceded by a motto containing the phrase "Rejoice greatly, Daughter of Zion!"³³. In *Première Communion de la Vierge* ("The Virgin's first communion"), depicting the joyful moment between the Annunciation and the Nativity, when the Virgin worships the fruit in her womb, Messiaen brings in a "reminder" (explicitly marked in the score) of this motif from *La Nativité*, albeit transposed (Example 2e). Within the cycle *La Nativité*, the Boris motif is used both in the joyful movement *La Vierge et l'Enfant*, and in the sorrowful movement *Jésus accepte la souffrance*, which is preceded by a motto from St. Paul, stating that Christ has accepted his Father's will since his Incarnation. The same motif is used in *Amen de l'agonie de Jésus*, the poignant rendering of the supplication of Jésus, suffering alone in the Garden of Gethsemane, in *Visions de l'amen*.³⁴

E.g. 2 (a-g)



a) Technique ex 75



b) Technique Ex 76

c) Technique: example 321

d) *La Vierge et l'Enfant* (Nativité), bar 1

²⁹ *The technique of my musical language*, henceforth referred to as *Technique*

³⁰ Messiaen, Olivier. *Technique de mon langage musical* – 2 volumes. Translated by John Satterfield *The technique of my musical language*. Paris: Leduc, 1944, 1956, p. 30-31.

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 39.

³² *ibid.*, p. 32.

³³ Zechariah 9:9

³⁴ Messiaen, Olivier. *Note de l'auteur* in *Visions de l'Amen*. Paris : Durand, 1950.

"THEME OF THE STAR AND THE CROSS" – CHRISTIAN SYMBOLS IN OLIVIER MESSIAEN'S
"VINGT REGARDS SUR L'ENFANT-JESUS"



e) *Première communion de la Vierge (Vingt Regards)*, bar 17-18

Très lent

R: trompette
P: salicional,
unda maris
G: Fonds 16,
8, 4

Péd: basson
16 seul

f) *Jésus accepte la souffrance (Nativité)*, bar 1-2

Un peu plus lent (♩=63)

g) *Amen de l'agonie de Jésus (Visions de l'amen)*, bar 17-18

Messiaen: Boris motif

Star and Cross in Messiaen's *Vingt Regards*

The dual use of the Boris motif within the same cycle (*La Nativité*) in the two movements depicting the joy of the Nativity (*La Vierge et l'Enfant*) and the sorrow of the Passion (*Jésus accepte la souffrance*) respectively is paralleled by the *Theme of the star and the cross* in the *Vingt Regards*. This theme dominates the second movement *Regard de l'étoile* and the seventh movement *Regard de la croix*.

Messiaen, who stressed the symbolic importance of numbers throughout his works, often chose the place of various movements within cycles accordingly. About the place of the movements in *Vingt Regards* he stated that "they are ordered by the contrasts of tempo, intensity, color – and also for symbolic

reasons”³⁵. *II. Regard de l'étoile* is the second movement of the cycle and *VII. Regard de la croix* the seventh. “*Regard de la croix* bears the number VII (7, perfect number) because the sufferings of Christ on the Cross restored the order upset by sin”.³⁶ It is worth mentioning that within the cycle *La Nativité*, the sufferings of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane are depicted in the seventh movement (*VII. Jésus accepte la souffrance*), and in the opera *Saint François d'Assise*, *Les Stigmates* (The Stigmata) is the seventh tableau.

In the *Note de l'auteur* that precedes the score of *Vingt Regards*, Messiaen lists the *Theme of the star and the cross*, alongside the *Theme of God* and the *Theme of chords* as the main themes of the cycle. In the more extended liner notes to Michel Béroff's recording of *Vingt Regards*, Messiaen lists “four cyclical themes which circulate throughout the work”³⁷, adding to the three from the *Note de l'auteur* the *Theme of mystical love*. Naming the *Theme of the star and the cross* “cyclical”, even though it occurs only in the two movements dedicated to star and cross respectively, while the other themes are present in several movements, emphasizes the significance the composer attaches to this theme. This importance is also highlighted by the fact that the two movements are the only ones in the whole cycle for which Messiaen uses his mode 7 of limited transposition. The motto of *Regard de la l'étoile*, which seems to have come down directly from the *Golden Legend*, also stresses the relationship between the star and the cross: “[...] the star shines innocently, surmounted by a Cross”.

Messiaen indicates that the theme is “inspired by the first antiphon of second Vespers of Epiphany (Ante luciferum genitus)”³⁸. He later comments that in the theme “there is a mysterious echo of the Greek metrics and of the neumes of plainchant.”³⁹ The composer considered plainchant to be “an inexhaustible mine of rare and expressive melodic contours”⁴⁰. The small melodic intervals, the even note values, the longer value at the end of each two-bars phrase, as well as the monodical setting of the theme in *Regard de l'étoile* underline its origin in Gregorian chant. The words “flavor” and “inspired” seem to hint at Messiaen's having used his deforming prism on the original.

³⁵ Messiaen, Olivier). *Notes to recording of Vingt Regards sur L'Enfant Jésus*, Michel Béroff (piano), La voix de son maître EMI, 1970, quoted in Rogosin, David (1996). *Aspects of structure in Olivier Messiaen's Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*. Doctoral Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1996, p. 213.

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ Messiaen *Notes to EMI recording* 1970, op. cit., cited in Seifert op. cit. p. 212.

³⁸ *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur et d'Ornithologie* (1994-2002) [Treatise on rhythm, color, and ornithology], en Sept Tomes, henceforth referred to as *Traité*, Paris: Alphonse Leduc, vol II p. 439.

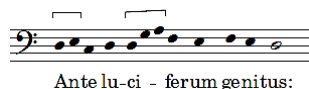
³⁹ Messiaen 1970, op. cit., quoted in Rogosin op. cit., p 213.

⁴⁰ Messiaen, *Technique*, op. cit., p. 33.

E.g. 3 (a-b)



a) neumes (five-line stave)



b) modern notation

Ante luciferum genitus (incipit)⁴¹

As early as 1930, Messiaen had used a melodic line inspired by the neumes of plainchant for the opening of the first movement of *Les offrandes oubliées*. The movement, dedicated to the Cross, is reflected in the composer's poetic preface to the score:

*Arms extended, sad unto death
 on the tree of the Cross you shed your blood.*⁴²

E.g. 4



Les offrandes oubliées, bars 1-3⁴³

The incipit of the *Theme of the star and the cross*, shown in the *Note de l'auteur* (Example 5c), deserves special consideration. The melodic line bears a striking resemblance to the first two bars of *Les Mages* (*The Magi*), the eighth movement of *La Nativité*. This movement, preceded by a (shortened) quote from the Gospel according to Matthew ("they went on their way, and the star went ahead of them"), is a depiction of the caravan of the Magi, guided by the star towards Bethlehem.

The two motifs are highly lyrical ascendant chromatic lines and share a similar tonal material. *Les Mages* is notated in Messiaen's favorite key of F# major, while for both *Regard de l'Étoile* and *Regard de la Croix*

⁴¹ Transcription by Stenberg, Andreas (ed.) Gierolamo Lombardi. Ante luciferum genitus. 2023

⁴² Dingle, Christopher. Forgotten offerings: Messiaen's first orchestral works. *Tempo* 61/241, 2007, pp. 2-21, p. 5.

⁴³ after Messiaen *Technique*, op. cit., Ex. 361

the composer uses his preferred way of notation with local accidentals. If the first two bars of *Les Mages* are rewritten with accidentals to correspond enharmonically the first two bars of *Theme de l'étoile et de la croix*, the similarity is evident at a glance (E.g. 5).

E.g. 5 (a-c)

a) Les Mages (original)



b) Les Mages (rewritten)



c) Theme of star and cross



Incipit *Les Mages* versus incipit *Theme of star and cross*

Both motifs use mainly small melodic intervals, even note values, and have similar modal organization. Michaely⁴⁴ notes that both use six of the eight sounds making up mode 4,3 starting on G: G, A flat, A, B flat, D flat, D, E flat, E. Messiaen's mode 4 belongs to the family of modes based on the division of the twelve semitones of the octave into two (six semitones = tritone). Of these modes (4, 5, 6, 7), mode 7 is the "richest", containing nine sounds. As mentioned, in all of *Vingt Regards* Messiaen used mode 7 exclusively for *Regard de l'étoile* and *Regard de la Croix*.

Both motifs are made of eight sounds, which leads to speculation⁴⁵: might the be a musical depiction of the eight-pointed Star of Bethlehem.⁴⁶ "The eight-pointed star is the Christmas star that shines for the wise men from the East and radiates in all directions. Its figure contains the cross."⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Michaely, Aloyse. "Verbum Caro." *Programmusik – Studien zu Begriff und Geschichte einer umstrittenen Gattung*, edited by Constantin Floros, Hans Joachim Mark & Peter Petersen, Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 1983, pp. 225-346, p. 253.

⁴⁵ Michaely op. cit. p. 253.

⁴⁶ Sach, Hannelore, et al. *Christliche Ikonographie in Stichworten*. [Christian iconography in keywords]. 2nd ed., München: Kösel-Verlag, 1975, pp. 143, 311.

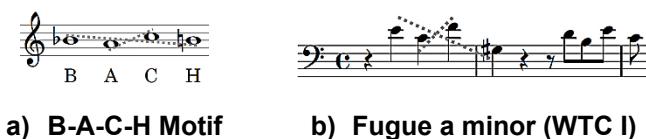
⁴⁷ Lipffert, Klementine *Symbol-Fibel. Eine Hilfe zur Betrachtung und Deuten mittelalterliche Bildwerke*. Kassel: Johannes Stauda Verlag, 1976, p. 144.

In visual art there have been, since early Christian time, countless representations of the Star of the Magi. The star is depicted variously with five, six, eight or more points, as a comet like in Giotto's fresco⁴⁸ or a pulsating golden star in the hands of the guiding angel in Edward Burne-Jones depictions⁴⁹. The star in Dürer's woodcuts is six-pointed (Figure 5-6). The star in van der Weyden's panel, even if partially hidden behind the roof, is eight-pointed, as indicated by the angle between the points (Figure 3).

Commenting on the melodic contour of *Theme of the star and the cross*, Seifert⁵⁰ proposes that, in the tradition of the cross symbolism in the so-called *Augenmusik*⁵¹, "the interlocking of the notes, A to A flat and B flat to G represents the two arms of the cross both sonically and visually."

J. S. Bach is famous for his use of this kind of cross symbolism in several of his works, both sacred and secular.⁵² One of the best-known examples is the B-A-C-H motif; the lines uniting the two outer notes and the one uniting the two inner notes intersect, forming a cross (E.g. 6).

E.g. 6 (a-b)



a) B-A-C-H Motif

b) Fugue a minor (WTC I)

J. S. Bach: Cross motif

Bruhn⁵³ goes further in her interpretation of the melodic representation of a form of the cross. She suggests that for the musical representation of the phrase "the star shines innocently, surmounted by a Cross" from the motto of *Regard de l'étoile* Messiaen does not imagine the cross as it is usually seen, standing and ready to bear the body of the crucifies, but inclines as Jesus must have borne it". To the representation of the cross Bruhn superimposes the "vaguely similar" [silhouette] of the comet of Bethlehem" (Figure 7).

⁴⁸ Giotto di Bondone Adoration of the Magi, Padova, Capella degli Scrovegni (c. 1305)

⁴⁹ *Adoration of the Magi*, design for a tapestry (1888), *The Star of Bethlehem watercolor* (1890)

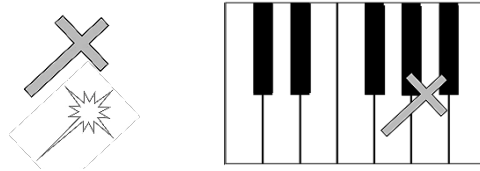
⁵⁰ Seifert, Charles. *Messiaen's Vingt Regards: a historical and pedagogical study*. PhD Thesis University of Illinois, 1989, p. 161.

⁵¹ "Eye music": a graphical feature of the score that is not noticed by the listener

⁵² Bodky Erwin. *The interpretation of BACH's keyboard works*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960 p. 245.

⁵³ Bruhn, Siglind. *Les visions d'Olivier Messiaen*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008, p. 181.

Figure 7



Symbol of the cross on the keyboard⁵⁴

The *Theme of the star and the cross* in its entirety consists of 12 bars (bar 6-17). In *Regard de l'étoile* it appears twice, the second time with variations, framed by five introductory bars which are repeated identically before, between and after the theme, and followed by a coda.

E.g. 7 (a-b)

a) Theme (incipit, bar 6-7)

b) Variation (incipit, bar 23-24)

Regard de l'étoile

Regard de la croix consists of a single statement of the theme, varied to match the somber atmosphere. The most obvious variation is the significant difference in pace. While in *Regard de l'étoile* the theme is marked *Modéré, un peu lent* with a metronome indication of eighth equal to 76, in *Regard de la croix*, marked *Bien modéré*, the theme is augmented rhythmically by a factor two (the eighth becoming a quarter), and the metronome indicates eighth equal to 40. This amounts to a speed almost four times slower. The augmented melody, presented in double octave spanning is accompanied by “by a perpetual chromatic lamentation”⁵⁵ in a chain of sigh-motives. From baroque to romantic music, the sigh-motif consisting of a slurred descending second,

⁵⁴ after Bruhn, op. cit.

⁵⁵ Messiaen, *Traité*, op. cit. vol. II, p. 459.

"THEME OF THE STAR AND THE CROSS" – CHRISTIAN SYMBOLS IN OLIVIER MESSIAEN'S
 "VINGT REGARDS SUR L'ENFANT-JESUS"

often enhanced by short rests, has been a device for expressing pain, sorrow and lamentation. The marking *expressif et douloureux* (expressive and doleful) in the score underlines the composer's intention.

E.g. 8

Bien modéré (♩ = 40)
expressif et douloureux

mf
pp
PIANO
mf

(Thème de l'étoile et de la Croix)

Regard de la croix, bar 1-3

Messiaen had used sigh-motifs in movements dedicated to the pains of Calvary before *Vingt Regards* (E.g. 4). There are a few typical sigh motifs in the plainchant-like incipit of *Les offrandes oubliées*. In the orchestral version the theme, played by the strings in octaves, the descending half steps are slurred, with a stronger first note. The expression marking is "*douloureux, profondément triste*" (painful, deeply sad). In *Amen de l'agonie de Jésus*, the weeping of the abandoned Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane is rendered by several sigh-motifs, the expression marking is "*douloureux, en pleurant*" (doleful, weeping).

E.g. 9

Bien modéré (♩ = 84)
legato douloureux, en pleurant

ff
f expressif, très lié

Amen de l'agonie de Jésus, bar 29-31

The varied statement of the *Theme of the star and the cross* in *Regard de la Croix*, prompts Bruhns to consider the movement together with *Regard de l'étoile* as three “verses” (theme and first variation in *Regard de l'étoile*, *Regard de la croix* as second variation). Her conclusion is that by this “the composer declares, in a symbolic but powerful way, that the Cross is in fact the necessary complement of what began under the star of Bethlehem”⁵⁶. Considering that the coda leaves the second movement somewhat incomplete, Bruhn states: “Messiaen’s unusual strategy – to postpone the missing complement until the seventh movement [...] – creates a musically couched suggestion of theological content: In order to be complete, the aspect represented in the Star of Bethlehem must be supplemented by that of the Cross of Golgotha.”

Conclusions

The conflation of Nativity and Passion, has a long history in Christian theology and arts. In Messiaen’s oeuvre, its musical representation is to be found in the use of the same motif, respectively theme, both for movements depicting the joy of Christ’s birth and for movements depicting the sorrow of Calvary. It is most fully expressed in his monumental piano cycle *Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus*.

Aknowlegements

This research was partially supported by a travel grant from the National Academy of Music “Gheorghe Dima”, Cluj-Napoca. The author would like to express her gratitude to Jochen Meister, M.A., art historian at the *Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen* in München, who provided expertise that greatly assisted the research, and to Dr. Stefana Titeica for useful discussion and insightful comments that helped to improve the manuscript.

REFERENCES

- Acres, Alfred. The Columba Altarpiece and the Time of the World. *The Art Bulletin*, 80(3), 422–451. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3051299>
- Balmer, Yves. “Religious Literature in Messiaen’s Personal Library.” *Messiaen the Theologian*, edited by Andrew Shenton, Burlington. VT: Ashgate, 2010, pp. 15-27.
- Bodky, Erwin. *The interpretation of BACH’s keyboard works*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960.

⁵⁶ Bruhn op. cit., p. 184.

- Bruhn, Siglind. "The Spiritual Layout in Messiaen's Contemplations of the Manger". *Messiaen's Language of Mystical Love*, edited by Siglind Bruhn. New York: Routledge, 1998, pp. 247-268.
- Bruhn, Siglind. *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation: Musical Symbols of Faith in the Two Great Piano Cycles of the 1940s*. Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2007.
- Bruhn, Siglind. *Les visions d'Olivier Messiaen*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008.
- Cavallo, Adolfo Salvatore. *Medieval tapestries in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1993.
- Dingle, Christopher. "Forgotten offerings: Messiaen's first orchestral works". *Tempo* 61/241 2007. pp 2-21. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/tempo/article/abs/forgotten-offerings-messiaens-first-orchestral-works/B62098029C42A859420F4E3E5342BA2F>
- Gertsman, Elina. "Signs of Death: The Sacrificial Christ Child in Late-Medieval Art." *The Christ Child in Medieval Culture: Alpha es et O!*, edited by Theresa M. Kenney, & Mary Dzon. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012, pp. 66-91.
- Havard de la Montagne, Joachim. *Olivier Messiaen. Musica et memoria*. 1992. <http://www.musimem.com/messiaen.htm>
- Ide, Pascal. "Olivier Messiaen théologien." [Olivier Messiaen theologian]. *Portrait(s) d'Olivier Messiaen*, edited by Catherine Massip, Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 1996, pp. 39-46.
- Ide, Pascal. "Olivier Messiaen, musicien de la gloire de Dieu." [Olivier Messiaen, musician of God's glory] *Communio* no. XIX (9-10/1994), pp. 94-117.
- Ide, Pascal. "Olivier Messiaen, un musicien ébloui par l'infinité de Dieu" [Olivier Messiaen, a musician dazzled by the infinity of God], *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 121, 1999, pp. 436-453. <https://www.nrt.be/es/articulos/olivier-messiaen-un-musicien-ebloui-par-l-infinite-de-dieu-254>
- Kars, Jean-Rodolphe. "Olivier Messiaen – ein Musiker der Freude." [Olivier Messiaen – a musician of joy], *Internationale Katholische Zeitschrift, Communio*, 33 (2004), pp. 359-373. <https://ikaz-communio.de/ojs/index.php/ikaz/article/view/5504/5426>
- Kars, Jean-Rodolphe. "The works of Olivier Messiaen and the Catholic liturgy." *Olivier Messiaen: Music, Art and Literature*, edited by Christopher Dingle & Nigel Simeone, London: Routledge, 2007.
- Lipffert, Klementine *Symbol-Fibel. Eine Hilfe zur Betrachtung und Deuten mittelalterliche Bildwerke*. [Symbol Primer. An aid to viewing and interpreting medieval art]. Kassel: Johannes Stauda Verlag, 1976.
- Marmion, Don Columba. *Christ in His Mysteries*. tr. Mother M. St. Thomas of Tyburn Convent, 9th ed. London: Sands & Co., 1939. http://www.liberius.net/livres/Christ_in_His_Mysteries_000001423.pdf
- Massin, Brigitte. *Olivier Messiaen, un poétique du merveilleux*. Aix-en-Provence: Editions Alinea, 1989.
- Meltzheim, Irène & Ide, père Pascal. "« Le musicien de la joie », entretien avec Olivier Messiaen." *Du côté de la Trinité*, journal de la paroisse de la Trinité, n° 2 de mars 1991, repris in *Musica et Memoria*, n° 42 de juin 1991, p. 22-27, quoted in Havard de la Montagne, Joachim. *Olivier Messiaen. Musica et Memoria* numéro 46 de juin 1992.

- Messiaen, Olivier. *La Nativité du Seigneur – Neuf Méditations pour orgue*. Score. Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1935.
- Messiaen, Olivier. *Technique de mon langage musical* – 2 volumes. Translated by John Satterfield *The technique of my musical language*. Paris: Leduc, 1944, 1956.
- Messiaen, Olivier. *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus pour piano*. Score. Paris: Durand et Cie., 1947.
- Messiaen, Olivier. *Visions de l'Amen pour deux pianos*. Score. Paris: Durand, 1950.
- Messiaen, Olivier. "Notes to recording of *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jésus*, Michel Béroff (piano)." *La voix de son maître* EMI 2C 065-10676/78 S, 1970, quoted in the French original in David Rogosin *Aspects of structure in Olivier Messiaen's Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*, 1996, pp. 212-224.
- Messiaen, Olivier (1994-2002). *Traité de rythme, de couleur et d'ornithologie* (1949-1992) en Sept Tomes. Paris: Alphonse Leduc.
- Michael, Aloyse (1983). "Verbum Caro". *Programmusk – Studien zu Begriff und Geschichte einer umstrittenen Gattung*, edited by Constantin Floros, Hans Joachim Mark & Peter Petersen, Laaber-Verlag, 1983, pp. 225-346.
- Moës, Luc O.S.B. "Dom Columba Marmion. A precursor and logistical survey for Springtime." *Newsletter of Blessed Columba Marmion*, Courier n° 14, 2008, pp. 105-110, <https://www.marmion.be/marm2214p.pdf>
- Murray, Michael. An interview with Olivier Messiaen, *Diapason* 70/1. No. 829, December 1978, pp. 3, 5.
- Rogosin, David. *Aspects of structure in Olivier Messiaen's Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*. Doctoral Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1996.
<https://open.library.ubc.ca/soa/cIRcle/collections/ubctheses/831/items/1.0087247>
- Rößler, Almut. *Beiträge zur geistigen Welt Olivier Messiaens mit Original-Texten des Komponisten*. Duisburg: Gilles & Franke Verlag, 1984.
- Sachs, Hannelore, et al.. *Christliche Ikonographie in Stichworten*. [Christian iconography in keywords]. 2nd ed., München: Kösel-Verlag, 1975.
- Samuel, Claude & Messiaen, Olivier. *Musique et couleur. Nouveaux entretiens avec Claude Samuel*, Paris: Belfond, 1986.
- Seifert, Charles. *Messiaen's Vingt Regards: a historical and pedagogical study*. PhD Thesis University of Illinois, 1989.
- Shenton, Andrew. *Messiaen's System of Signs*. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008.
- Shenton, Andrew. *Messiaen the Theologian*. Farnham, UK : Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010.
- Shenton, Andrew ed., *Messiaen the Theologian* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010).
- Stenberg, Andreas (ed.) Gierolamo Lombardi. *Ante luciferum genitus* from "Antiphonarium Vespertinum Dierum Festorum Totius Anni..." 1597, Bd.1, 2023.
<https://www.cpd.org/wiki/images/1/1e/Gierolamo-Lambardi-Ante-luciferum-genitus.pdf>
- Strelan, John G. "Theologia Crucis, Theologia Glorae: A Study in Opposing Theologies." *Lutheran Theological Journal* 23, no. 3, December 1989.

"THEME OF THE STAR AND THE CROSS" – CHRISTIAN SYMBOLS IN OLIVIER MESSIAEN'S
"VINGT REGARDS SUR L'ENFANT-JESUS"

- Voragine, Jacobus, de. *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, translated by William Granger Ryan, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012.
- Walter, Meinrad. "Musik aus dem Geist der Theologie Zum Werk des Komponisten Olivier Messiaen" [Music out of the spirit of theology. The work of the composer Olivier Messiaen]. *Herder Korrespondenz* 61 11/2007, pp. 589-593.
- Zink, Jörg. *Drei Könige unter dem Kreuz: Betrachtungen über das Weihnachtsbild Rogiers van der Weyden* [Three kings under the cross: Considerations of Rogiers van der Weyden Nativity painting]. Gelnhausen: Burckhardhaus-Verlag, 1964.

