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Unity through Duality: An Exploration of Paradox in Olivier Messiaen’s *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*  

Volume I/II  

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Dublin Institute of Technology  

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Abstract

Olivier Messiaen is one of the major musical figures of the twentieth century. His music draws on a diverse set of influences, yet always remains unique and entirely his own. His unwavering religious beliefs constitute the source of inspiration behind most of his music.

Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus for solo piano was composed in 1944. It forms a powerful and personal musical statement concerning one of the central mysteries of the Catholic faith, the Incarnation. As such, it is an important work within Messiaen's output. Its musical language and spiritual message are typical of Messiaen’s style.

Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus can be considered a meeting of opposing components, such as symmetry and asymmetry, or simplicity and complexity. This thesis aims to examine how these components are presented within the musical context of the work. It also investigates how these dualities become unifying forces. Paradox emerges as a fundamental part of Messiaen’s method of musical expression.

This thesis comprises two volumes. Volume I is divided into two parts. Part One assesses the place of Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus in the context of Messiaen’s oeuvre. Chapter One explores the background of the work through a discussion of important influences on Messiaen's compositional style. Chapter Two examines Messiaen’s compositional approach, with particular reference to Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus. Chapter Three outlines the subject-matter and structure of the work.

Part Two of Volume I investigates the concept of duality in Messiaen’s music, establishing five dualities that are found in Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus. Chapters Four to Eight individually explore each issue of duality, examining how its opposing components emerge as sources of unity.
in the work. Chapter Nine considers paradox as an integral part of Messiaen's mode of expression.

The conclusion highlights a link between the core issues of unity, duality and paradox in Messiaen's musical language and the subject-matter of *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*.

Volume II provides a full score of *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*. 
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Introduction

I have had to put up with the most terrible criticism! I was abused and slandered by music critics for twenty years, particularly from 1944-45 onwards. From then on the critics became very hostile. For ten years they took their dustbins and emptied the contents on my head. It was terrible!

It is now over ten years since Messiaen's death. His music no longer causes the controversy it once did, and is becoming more and more accepted into the mainstream. Modern audiences have become somewhat accustomed to his colourful sound-world and the theological messages it professes to portray, and Messiaen is now rightly regarded as one of the major musical figures of the twentieth century.

To date, there has been a considerable amount of research conducted on Messiaen's music. It focuses on a variety of issues that arise, including birdsong, nature, colour and Eastern influence. Invariably, however, any discussion of Messiaen's music returns to one theme: his Catholic beliefs as the stimulus behind almost all of his compositions.

_Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus_ is entirely typical of Messiaen's style. Focusing on the Catholic mystery of the Incarnation, it is his first outwardly religious work for solo piano. All of the issues mentioned above play an important role in this cycle, which is probably the best known of all Messiaen's piano music. Much of the literature written to date focuses on general issues in relation to the work, such as influences, theological inspiration, structure, and noteworthy stylistic developments contained within the cycle. Peter Hill in _The Messiaen Companion_ and Siglind Bruhn in _Messiaen's Language of Mystical Love_ provide the two most complete discussions of the work, dealing with the cycle as a whole and with each of the movements in turn. Other writers discuss specific individual

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movements. However, to this author's knowledge, there has been no study to date that specifically focuses on the issues of unity, duality and paradox in *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*.

This thesis adopts a holistic approach. It does not attempt to provide a detailed musical analysis of each movement, but examines Messiaen's musical language and musical approach as a meeting of opposing components. However, at the core is a common purpose: the desire to express the mysteries of the Catholic faith. Paradoxically, opposing elements serve to unify the work.

This research was carried out first and foremost through a study and analysis of the score. The many writings by, and recorded interviews with, the composer were an equally important source. Previous research on the composer and his music, and a variety of recordings also aided the analysis of the work. An in-depth knowledge of the score, acquired through a complete performance of the work, was a vital part of this approach - in fact, it was only through performing the music that issues of duality revealed themselves so strongly as sources of unity. While listening to the work, analysing it and reading about it brings a certain degree of knowledge, it is only through performing it that one experiences it at its deepest level.

The thesis comprises two volumes. Volume I is structured in two parts. In order to appreciate the relationship between unity, duality and paradox in *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*, it is necessary to place the work in context. This is developed in Part One. Chapter One provides background information on the work, illustrating where it fits into Messiaen's compositional output as a whole. It also examines Messiaen's approach to his faith, and outlines other major influences on his style of composition, with reference to *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*. Chapter Two examines Messiaen's compositional approach, and refers to the use of specific devices.

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2 Robert Sherlaw Johnson in *Messiaen*, Paul Griffiths in *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time* and Roger Nichols in *Messiaen* all provide analyses of specific individual movements of the cycle.
in the cycle. Chapter Three considers the subject-matter of *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* and its overall structure.

Part Two of this volume examines the concept of duality in Messiaen's music, investigating a number of apparently opposing components. Chapters Four to Eight deal respectively with five issues of duality identified in the work. The aspects of each issue of duality are individually examined at first and then as sources of unity. Chapter Nine examines the paradox arising from the unity created by apparently opposing components. A number of other paradoxes inherent within Messiaen's method of expression are also identified.

The conclusion draws together the core issues of unity, duality and paradox, and considers how appropriate a means of expression they provide for the mystery of the Incarnation.

Volume II provides a full score of *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*. 
Chapter One

Part One

Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus in Context
Chapter One

Messiaen: the Composer

1.1. - Messiaen's Compositional Style: placing *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* in Context

Olivier Messiaen was born in Avignon, France on 10 December 1908. His musical talent was evident from an early age: he began composing and playing the piano between the ages of seven and nine. At this time his family were living in Grenoble. Messiaen's love of nature, which manifests itself in much of his music, probably stemmed from his time spent there.

In 1919, at the age of eleven, Messiaen entered the Paris Conservatoire. Teachers at the Conservatoire who particularly influenced him included Maurice Emmanuel, Marcel Dupré and Paul Dukas. Messiaen professed that after hearing Emmanuel's *Trente chansons bourguignonnes* Op. 15 (1913), he was 'at once converted to modal music' ¹. Messiaen's particular brand of modality became a fundamental part of his means of musical expression. Emmanuel was also an expert on Greek rhythm, which undoubtedly influenced him. The influence of Dupré, who Messiaen once described as 'the Liszt of the organ' ², can be heard in the technical demands and improvisatory element of much of the latter's organ music. Messiaen describes the influence of Dukas as follows:

> He developed in me a sense of artistic probity and gave me an orchestral technique of which I am...very proud.³

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² Ibid., 26.
³ Ibid., 27.
While in the Conservatoire, Messiaen also studied timpani and percussion: evidence (even from this early age) of his interest in rhythm.

Messiaen became principal organist at La Trinité in Paris in 1931, a post he was to hold for over sixty years. In 1932 he married Claire Delbos,\(^4\) and he became a teacher at École Normale de Musique in Paris. Four years later he began teaching at Schola Cantorum. At this time he formed a group called ‘La jeune France’.\(^5\) In their manifesto the group propose[d] the dissemination of works that are youthful, free, as far removed from revolutionary formulae as from academic formulae...their only unqualified agreement is in the common desire to be satisfied with nothing less than sincerity, breadth of feeling and artistic good faith.\(^6\)

Nichols suggests that as well as asserting musical independence, this manifesto seems to suggest disapproval of other musical developments occurring at this time, such as the compositional systems of the Second Viennese School and the flavour of irony found in the music of Satie and ‘Les Six’.\(^7\)

In 1940, Messiaen was taken as prisoner of war to a prison camp at Görlitz, in Silesia. It was at this time that he composed *Quatuor pour la Fin du Temps* (1940-41). On his release in 1941 he became Professor of Harmony at the Paris Conservatoire. He published *The Technique of My Musical Language* in 1944, which is a substantial work consisting of a summation of his musical processes and thought up to that time. In the preface he outlines his musical philosophy, asking for:

> a true music, that is to say, spiritual music which may be an act of faith; a music which may touch upon all subjects without ceasing to touch upon God; an original music, in short, whose language may open a few doors, take down some yet distant stars.\(^8\)

\(^4\) Delbos was a violinist to whom Messiaen dedicated some of his works, in particular the song cycle *Poèmes pour Mi.*

\(^5\) Lézur, Baudrier and Jolivet were the other members of this group.


\(^7\) Ibid., 27.

With these words, Messiaen emphasises the vital role his faith plays in his compositional ethos. *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* (hereafter referred to as *Vingt Regards*) was also composed in 1944: the intense focus on religion found in this work is testament to his preoccupation with his faith at this time.

*Vingt Regards* was composed very quickly, being completed in less than six months (between 23 March and 8 September 1944). It is often considered to be something of a stylistic plateau within Messiaen's output. It can be regarded as a summation of his compositional style up to 1944, as all major compositional devices that he used up to this stage in his life are found in it. Yet it also points the way forward for Messiaen: it contains within it the seeds of further developments and new directions, mainly in the realm of rhythmic organization, the important role assigned to cyclic themes and the increased use of birdsong as a musical source. It can be considered 'a compendium of his musical, philosophical and religious concerns...reviewing Messiaen's music of the last sixteen years and pointing forward into the next decade.'9 Hill writes 'on the one hand it sets a seal on one phase of Messiaen's life...on the other it proclaims Messiaen's excitement in charting new territory.'10

Between 1943 and 1947, Messiaen gave composition classes in the house of Guy Delapierre.11 These meetings were important as they brought together a number of key people in Messiaen's life, amongst them Yvonne Loriod. Loriod was a pianist whose virtuosity was the inspiration behind much of Messiaen's piano writing, and her influence is clearly seen in *Vingt Regards*. In Messiaen's words, she was

> a unique pianist, noble and of genius, whose existence transformed not only [my] writing for the piano but also [my] style, [my] view of the world and [my] way of thinking.12

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11 Delapierre was a musician and friend of Messiaen's.
She was to become a champion of Messiaen's piano works and later his second wife. Messiaen said that he knew *Vingt Regards* (and later *Catalogue d'Oiseaux*) would be played by Loriod, and 'I could thus allow myself the greatest eccentricities because everything is possible to her. I knew that I could imagine things that were very difficult, very extraordinary and very new, and that they would be played and played well.'\(^{13}\) *Vingt Regards* is dedicated to Loriod, and she gave its first performance in Paris on 26 March 1945.

In 1947, Messiaen began teaching a music analysis class in the Conservatoire. This class became world-famous, both for the breadth of material discussed in it and the original approach to analysis that he adopted. It provided an open discussion forum, and Messiaen explored many different types of music in it, including his own and that of the Second Viennese School.

Messiaen's wife died in April 1959. In 1962, Yvonne Loriod became his second wife. Also in that year, he visited Japan with Loriod. Messiaen was by this stage fascinated with birdsong and had written numerous works inspired by the calls and songs of various birds. This journey gave him the opportunity to hear and notate birdsong (usually by ear) from this part of the world.\(^{14}\)

Messiaen was appointed Professor of Composition at the Paris Conservatoire in 1966. He retired from the Conservatoire in 1978, having taught many important composers of the time, including Boulez, Stockhausen and Xenakis. He spent the rest of his life travelling around the world, both for concerts and to further his knowledge of birds from different countries.\(^{15}\) He died in Paris on 28 April 1992, a major musical figure of the twentieth

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\(^{13}\) Claude Samuel, *Conversations with Olivier Messiaen*, Felix Aprahamian (trans.), (London: Stainer and Bell, 1976), 73.

\(^{14}\) The influence of this journey can be heard in *Sept Haïkaï* for piano and orchestra (1962).

\(^{15}\) The influence of these trips can be heard in Messiaen's music. For example, his opera *Saint François d'Assise* (1975-83) contains examples of birdsong from New Caledonia.
century. *Vingt Regards* remains one of Messiaen's most important works for solo piano, due to its scope and intensity of vision.

### 1.2. - The Religious Influence

*Vingt Regards* is an intense expression of Messiaen's Catholic beliefs. In the preface to this work he identifies a number of different influences: he includes the writings of the Benedictine monk Dom Columba Marmion, St Thomas Aquinas, St John of the Cross and St Thérèse of Lisieux, together with the Gospels and the Roman Missal. Catholicism was the single most important influence on Messiaen’s life and his music. Many of his works focus expressly on aspects of the Catholic faith, and are preceded by quotations from religious texts outlining their source of inspiration. Messiaen believes that it is the Holy Scriptures ‘which alone contain the Truth.’

Messiaen’s solid and unwavering belief as a Catholic appears to be spontaneous, and unshaken by events in his life:

> The first idea that I wished to express, the most important because it is placed above all else, is the existence of the truths of the Catholic faith. I have the good fortune to be a Catholic; I was born a believer and it so happens that the sacred texts have struck me even from my earliest childhood. A certain number of my works are destined therefore to highlight the theological truths of the Catholic faith. This is the main aspect of my work, the most noble, without doubt the most useful, the most valid, the sole aspect which I will not perhaps regret at the hour of my death.

Messiaen has stated that even those works that do not appear to be outwardly religious are in fact on a religious theme. In the works that focus on the theme of human love (for example *Harawi, Turangalîla-Symphonie* and *Cinq Rechants*), a connection can be seen between human love and divinity:

> A great love is a reflection, a pale reflection, but nevertheless a reflection of the one true love, the divine love.

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Birdsong is another important element, both within *Vingt Regards* and within Messiaen's output as a whole. This element also functions as a depiction of Messiaen's faith: he 'sees in it, as God's Creation, a manifestation of the divine'. The three ideas around which Messiaen's music revolves (the theme of human love, nature and the Catholic faith) 'are resolved finally in one and the same idea: Divine Love!'

Messiaen's music is often described as both theological and mystical. However, when interviewed Messiaen has been adamant that the word 'mysticism' should not be applied to him. He outlines his reasons for this as follows:

Personally, I deeply distrust this word. It doesn't suit me at all.... As soon as one starts talking about mysticism, people think of a diseased state, of a neurotic who has vague sentiments and ecstasies. I don't like that; I'm a devout man and I love the sound, solid gifts of Faith. There were real mystics with real visions and ecstasies, like St. John of the Cross, for instance.... But no-one is a mystic by the power of his own will; a person who is one isn't conscious of it and doesn't have the right to say he is one.... What can be said is that I believe and that I've done theological work and that I've tried to bring the realities and the mysteries of Faith into my music.

It is clear that Messiaen wishes to view his work as theological rather than mystical, and indeed most of his works would appear to fall into the descriptive mould rather than the experiential one. Johnson links this approach with that of medieval scholars:

In emphasizing the theological rather than the mystical aspects of religion, Messiaen is influenced by Western scholasticism which has been characteristic of Roman Catholic Christianity since the time of St. Thomas Aquinas. Just as the scholastic mind preferred to define articles of faith in terms of self-contained ideas which can be understood in terms of human reason and logic, so Messiaen reflects this attitude by selecting specific theological ideas as the subject matter of specific movements.

However, as Messiaen himself says 'no-one is a mystic by the power of his own will; a person who is one isn’t conscious of it'. Accordingly, there are a

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19 Ibid., 41.
21 'Theological' implies description of, or objective scientific study of religious subjects, while 'mystical' implies subjective spiritual experience.
22 Almut Rössler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen: with original texts by the composer*, Barbara Dagg and Nancy Poland (trans.), (Duisburg: Gilles and Francke, 1986), 89.
24 Rössler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen*, 89.
number of movements in the composer’s compositional output that the word ‘mystical’ could be applied to. One such movement in Vingt Regards is the penultimate movement (Je dors, mais mon cœur veille), which even Messiaen describes as ‘a dialogue of mystical love’.

Many writers and researchers have commented on the representation in much of Messiaen’s music of two aspects of his faith: that which is terrifying and that which is joyful. Messiaen comments on this opposition of elements:

I allowed myself to be stimulated by the Book of the Apocalypse for my work “Quatuor pour la Fin du Temps”. The Apocalypse is a terrible book in which two aspects confront each other: one, the catastrophes which bring about the end of the world and the other, the adoration, the ecstasy and the glory and majesty of God.

This type of dual representation is found in Vingt Regards: compare the apocalyptic, surreal visions of the eighteenth movement (Regard de l’Onction terrible), or the suffering found in the seventh movement (Regard de la Croix) with the exuberant, almost wild sense of unhinged joy found in the tenth movement (Regard de l’Esprit de joie).

However, on the whole, Messiaen’s music tends to focus on the joyful and glorious aspects of his faith rather than the pain and suffering. When this was suggested to him he responded:

You said that I express only joy and glory in my music. Well, I’m afraid I’ve no aptitude for their opposites.... It isn’t my nature to bury myself in suffering.

Messiaen also stated

Since I’ve worked in the realm of theology, I know that it’s said: God is Spirit and God is also Glory. Grace is a Glory which became visible when Christ ascended to his Father. Glory, Grace, Light: it’s all linked up together. For that reason, my music is cheerful, it contains glory and light. Of course suffering exists for me, too, but I’ve written very few poignant pieces. I’m not made for that. I love Light, Joy, and Glory in the divine sense.

This tendency is reflected in Vingt Regards – there are many more movements that seek to express joy or glory rather than suffering.

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26 Rossler, Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen, 53.
27 Ibid., 52.
28 Ibid., 92.
Plainchant was an important influence on Messiaen. Its influence can be seen in *Vingt Regards*. He uses the rhythmic suppleness and freedom found in plainchant as a source of inspiration for his own rhythmic style.

The marvelous thing about plainsong is its neumes. The neumes are melodic formulae.... And the admirable quality of the neume is the rhythmic suppleness which it engenders.... This brings about extremely delicate variations of rhythm and tempo. 29 30

Messiaen also uses the melodic shape of plainchant as a source of inspiration. In *The Technique of My Musical Language* he writes 'Plainchant is an inexhaustible mine of rare and expressive melodic contours...' 31 Not only do the rhythmic and melodic shapes of plainchant inspire Messiaen: certain forms found in plainchant also influenced him. He gives a full account of these in Chapter XII of *The Technique of My Musical Language*.

Of course, as one would expect from such a devoutly religious man, it is not only the musical qualities of plainchant that interest Messiaen. It is also the religious intent behind it. He sees plainchant as the most suitable means of religious expression:

There's probably only one really religious music, because it's detached from all exterior effect and all intention, and that's plainsong. 32

He also says:

Only plainsong possesses all at once the purity, the joy, the lightness necessary for the soul's flight toward Truth. 33

In *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur et d’Ornithologie*, Messiaen's treatise outlining his compositional approach in minute detail, he refers to the plainchant influence in some passages in *Vingt Regards*. One of the main recurring themes of the cycle, the theme of the star and the cross is inspired by plainchant. He compares this theme to the plainchant melody *Ante*

29 Ibid., 58.
30 *The term neume is derived from the short melismatic melodic groups found in plainchant* (Johnson, *Messiaen*, 104).
33 Rössler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen*, 57.
Birdsong is a particularly important influence on Messiaen and this is reflected in *Vingt Regards*. Amongst the influences mentioned in the preface to the cycle are birdsong, stalactites, galaxies and photons. Messiaen's use of birdsong as an expression of divinity has already been noted. He values birdsong not only for symbolic reasons, but also on a purely musical level:

It's probable that in the artistic hierarchy birds are the greatest musicians existing on our planet.  

Messiaen has admitted that, for him, 'human music' pales in comparison to that of birdsong. When he hears birdsong:

my uselessness is brutally revealed to me and all the musical languages of the world seem to be merely an effort of patient research.

1.4. - Colour as Inspiration

Messiaen had the unusual ability of being able to see colours when hearing or reading music. This type of response to music is called synaesthesia, and it exerted a significant influence on all of his music, including *Vingt Regards*. Jonathan W. Bernard has undertaken an in-depth study of Messiaen’s colour associations, and has established that ‘Messiaen’s color responses are not whimsical or arbitrarily in flux. Quite the contrary: they are firmly fixed.’  

In fact, it emerged that Messiaen’s colour responses were so firmly fixed that Bernard has been able to produce a table outlining the colours associated with any given mode or transposition of a mode.

Messiaen described his sound-colour experiences as follows:

When I hear a score or read it, hearing it in my mind, I also see in my mind’s eye corresponding colours which turn, mix and blend with each other, just like the sounds which turn, mix and intermingle, and at the same time as them...

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42 Nichols, *Messiaen*, 56.
44 Samuel, *Conversations with Olivier Messiaen*, 14.
Messiaen's colour associations are so vivid that they influence his choice of chords:

I try to translate colours into music: for me certain complexes of sound and certain sonorities are linked to complexes of colour, and I use them in full knowledge of this.\(^{45}\)

One of Messiaen's most frequently used scales in *Vingt Regards* is his second mode of limited transposition.\(^{46}\) It is likely that his tendency to use this mode is linked to his colour-associations, as Messiaen associates this mode with shades of violet, a colour he particularly likes:

The modes are linked for me to very precise colourings: Mode no. 2 revolves around certain violets, blues and violet-purple.... Ever since my birth I've been devoted to violet; it seems that this is a normal phenomenon, for I was born under the sign of the Sagittarius.\(^{47}\)

Another reason for his frequent use of mode 2 may be that the colours mentioned in the Bible often include violet and related colours, such as red and blue (which are the constituents of violet). His use of mode 2, with its associations of violet is therefore a link to the colours of the Bible.

The poetry of the Bible...is very often composed of colours. The loveliest Book and the one which dominates all others, the Revelation of St. John, contains many colours: the Celestial City is built of many colourful precious stones, of violet amethysts, red rubies, blue sapphires, etc.\(^{48}\)

The colours found in stained glass also had an important impact on Messiaen, and have greatly influenced his compositional style.

Something which has influenced me greatly in my music has been the cathedral windows. In France especially, there are many very beautiful Gothic cathedrals with magnificent windows, I'll mention only Chartres, Bourges, Notre Dame de Paris and, above all, the Sainte Chapelle....That [Sainte Chapelle] was a shining revelation, which I've never forgotten, and this first impression as a child - I was 10 years old - became a key experience for my later musical thinking.\(^{49}\)

Messiaen describes the experience of stained glass as follows:

First of all there is a crowd of characters, great and small, which tell us of the life of Christ...it is a sort of catechism by image....with a thousand intentions and a thousand details. Now, from a distance, without binoculars, without ladders, without any object to come to the aid of our failing eye, we see nothing: nothing but a stained-glass window all blue, all green, all violet. We do not comprehend, we are dazzled.\(^{50}\)

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 17.

\(^{46}\) See Chapter Two p. 21 for an explanation of this term.

\(^{47}\) Samuel, *Conversations with Olivier Messiaen*, 19.

\(^{48}\) Rössler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen*, 79.

\(^{49}\) Ibid., 77-78.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 64.
He connects the experience of being 'dazzled' by stained glass to the experience of being close to divinity:

Stained glass is one of the most wonderful creations of man. You are overwhelmed. And I think this is the beginning of Paradise, because in Paradise we are overwhelmed. We don’t understand God, but we will begin to see Him a little…

It appears that the experience of looking at the colours of stained glass is, for Messiaen, akin to an experience of God, because to be in the presence of God is also to be dazzled. He refers to knowledge of God as 'a perpetual dazzlement, an eternal music of colors, an eternal color of musics'.

Perhaps Messiaen tries to emulate the colours of stained glass in his music, in this way ‘dazzling’ the listener with colour and sound, and therefore bringing the listener closer to God.

Colored music does that which the stained-glass windows and rose-windows of the Middle Ages did: they give us dazzlement. Touching at once our noblest senses: hearing and vision, it shakes our sensibilities into motion, pushes us to go beyond concepts, to approach that which is higher than reason and intuition, that is to say FAITH.

The influence of colour was fundamental to Messiaen's musical style and its influence permeates the harmonic basis of his music. As such, it is important in Vingt Regards, in helping to portray the 'music and colours that are the mysteries of Jesus-Christ'. Messiaen describes one of the main recurring themes of the cycle, the theme of chords, as follows:

It forms a complex of notes which are...musically concrete and very easily recognisable by its colours (a steely grey-blue crossed with red and bright orange, a mauve-ish violet spotted with leather brown and ringed with purplish blue).

This description reveals the significant influence of colour on the themes found in Vingt Regards.

51 Peter Hill (ed.), The Messiaen Companion, 4.
52 Rössler, Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen, 66.
53 Ibid., 65.
54 Messiaen, Vingt Regards, 128.
55 Messiaen, Traité de Rythme, de Couleur et d'Ornithologie Volume 2, 438.
1.5. - The Cross-Cultural Influence

*Vingt Regards* illustrates the influence of a number of cultures outside the Western music tradition. The most important of these is the influence of ancient Indian music, in particular, ancient Hindu rhythmic patterns (or deči-tālas). Many of these rhythms are ametrical, and by European standards, unpredictable, a quality which appealed to Messiaen. The ametrical unpredictable nature of these rhythms destabilises a sense of regular recurring rhythmic pattern. This gives an experience of time that is out of the ordinary; in this way the music is (in Messiaen’s words) ‘touching God’, and is therefore a suitable means of expressing the Christian faith. Deči-tālas, which appear for the first time in *La Nativité du Seigneur* (1935), are used extensively in *Vingt Regards*. Although there is a symbolism found behind the names of these rhythms, Messiaen was unaware of this symbolism for many years, including at the time of composition of *Vingt Regards*. He acknowledges their symbolic use for the first time in *Couleurs de la Cité céleste* (1963).

It is important to note that while the materials of Indian music influence Messiaen, he is not influenced by its underlying philosophy. He remains resolutely Catholic.

I have a great admiration for Hindu rhythms, but only for the rhythms, not for Indian philosophy. I’ve studied it in order to understand the rhythms, but I’m not at all Hindu or Shivaist. As for Buddhism, it’s all about a theory of emptiness, of passivity, which has a certain value…. But it isn’t really sufficient for someone who has faith: one has to act as well.

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56 In *The Technique of My Musical Language* Messiaen refers to Shāṅgadeva, a thirteenth century Hindu theorist who constructed a table of one hundred and twenty deči-tālas. Messiaen found the table in Lavignac’s Encyclopaedia of Music while in the Conservatoire (Messiaen, *The Technique of My Musical Language*, 14).


59 This is discussed by Johnson (Messiaen, 44).


Greek music was another strong influence on Messiaen, influencing his very conception of rhythm (as illustrated in *Vingt Regards*). While specific Greek rhythms become more important in later works, they are found in *Vingt Regards*. These are referred to in passing in *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur et d’Ornithologie* Volume 2.

The sound of the Balinese gamelan orchestra was another strong influence on Messiaen, and is one that is found in *Vingt Regards*. The device found in movement XVIII whereby rhythms simultaneously increase and decrease is an example: it is ‘an extremely rare effect and hardly exists except in Bali’. The influence of the gamelan orchestra was evident from a relatively early age:

> In the same year [when he was 20] I was at the World Exhibition and heard the music of Bali for the first time. Naturally that influenced me. I’d already had such ideas earlier, but that confirmed things which I’d already liked for a long time.

Other important cross-cultural influences were those of Japanese birdsong and Japanese Nō music-drama. In Nō music-drama, everything unfolds at an extremely slow pace. This slowness and static quality is an integral part of the art form. Although Messiaen’s visit to Japan occurred in 1962, the static quality of Japanese music was already reflected in his music prior to this date. This quality is evident in *Vingt Regards*, through the use of extremely slow tempos and devices that blur a feeling of regular tempo.

> There is, if you like, something oriental in my music: the use of unusually slow tempi; this doesn’t exist in Europe, whereas in lands of the Far East, it’s perfectly well understood and also applied. The performances of the “Nō” in Japan, for example, take a whole day and people accept that.

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63 For example, Messiaen mentions a Greek rhythmic influence in his analyses of the sixth movement (p.456) and the tenth movement (pp. 467-8).
64 Samuel, *Conversations with Olivier Messiaen*, 75.
65 Rössler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen*, 84.
66 See Chapter One p. 5.
67 Rössler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen*, 99-100.
1.6. - The Influence of Other Composers

The influence of a number of composers can be traced in Messiaen's style, many stemming from childhood musical experiences: 'I remained true to my childhood loves: Debussy, Mozart and Berlioz.'68 One of the scores that influenced him the most was Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*. His harmony teacher, Jehan de Gibon gave him a copy of this score in 1918, when Messiaen was just ten years of age. The effect of this score (which Messiaen described as 'a real bombshell') on him was profound: he has described the impact as follows

For me, that score was a revelation, love at first sight; I sang it, I played it, and sang it again and again. That was probably the most decisive influence I've received.70

In Messiaen's analysis of *Vingt Regards* in *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur et d'Ornithologie* Volume 2 he identifies the influence of many different composers. The following diverse influences are all mentioned in the treatise: the harmony of de Falla, Debussy and Bartók, Honegger's use of a pounding bass, Chopin's style of accompaniment and filigree-type writing, Liszt's use of the full range of the piano, Rameau's simplicity of style, Mozart's ornamental writing and Ravel's pianistic style.71 Messiaen also points out several instances of direct quotes from the music of previous composers or folk music, and their subsequent transformation into his own idiomatic style. He refers to specific instances where melodic contours taken from different sources have influenced certain melodic shapes in *Vingt Regards*. For example, he refers to a melody in the seventeenth movement, *Regard du silence*, and identifies a connection between this and melodies from Beethoven's *Sonata Pathétique* and Grieg's *Chanson de Solvieg*. However, they remain passing references – they are so transformed into

68 Samuel, *Conversations with Olivier Messiaen*, 70.
71 These influences are identified in volume 2 of the treatise on the following pages: 440, 446, 454, 460, 468, 469, 480, 488, 489 and 507.
Messiaen’s unique language that they would never be discernible on a casual listening.

In conclusion, the influences described above were all immensely important to Messiaen’s compositional approach as a whole and to his approach as manifested in Vingt Regards in particular. All of these influences are passed through what Messiaen calls ‘the deforming prism of our language’, to such an extent that the original influence can be traced but always within the context of Messiaen’s unique style. These influences led him to develop a range of compositional devices in order to portray that which he wished to express. The devices he developed are outlined in the next chapter.

72 Messiaen The Technique of My Musical Language, 32-33.
Chapter Two

Messiaen's Compositional Style in *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*

Messiaen's music is easily distinguished from that of other composers. Although he was preoccupied with different aspects of music at different stages of his life, the uniqueness of his language and style is evident from his earliest works. It is expressed through his use of core compositional devices that show development and refinement in the later works, but the fundamental elements of which can be traced to the early works. It was suggested to Messiaen that a stylistic curve might be seen in his music throughout his compositional career. He refuted this:

I don't think I have experienced this curve.... I have never renounced my past.... I have held on to everything that I have done in the past, not only the works but the procedures, the attachments and the enthusiasms.... There has been no curve. Instead I possess a very rich, well supplied ensemble of materials which is growing all the time, but without renouncing what has been in the past and without ignoring what will be in the future.1

Almost all of Messiaen's work shares the same purpose: the expression of Catholic doctrines. Some works express this more explicitly than others. *Vingt Regards* is Messiaen's most outwardly religious work for piano. The varied devices that he uses function as spiritual symbols that, for him, are expressive of his faith.2 He is very vocal about the symbolism underlying his methods. Any of his analyses of his own works (such as those found in *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur et d'Ornithologie*) usually develop from a spiritual basis, to which Messiaen often returns. In his interviews, such as those in collections by Samuel and Rössler, he does not hesitate to explain over and over again - and with a remarkable consistency - the underlying theological philosophy behind his compositional methods.

1 Nichols, 'Messiaen', *Music and Musicians*, 20.
2 A symbol of something (such as, in music, a chord, a number, a tonal area) that stands for, or represents an idea or a concept.
Messiaen's compositional approach is illustrated below, with particular reference to *Vingt Regards*.

### 2.1. - Messiaen's Conception of Rhythm

I consider that rhythm is the primordial and perhaps essential part of music; I think it probably existed before melody and harmony, and in fact I've a secret preference for this element.\(^3\)

Rhythm was obviously a very important compositional element for Messiaen. The amount of time devoted to the subject in his writings (in both *The Technique of My Musical Language* and in *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur, et d'Ornithologie*) is a measure of how much this particular element occupied his compositional thought. During the period in which *Vingt Regards* was composed, rhythm was becoming increasingly important to Messiaen as a means of organising his musical material.

Ancient Greek music was an important source of interest for Messiaen: it shaped his very conception of rhythm and metre. In the music of ancient Greece, the metre arises from the combination of short and long durations. This can be contrasted with the conception of metre in most Western classical music from the seventeenth century until the start of the twentieth century, which results from the subdivision of larger beats. Instead of resulting from a division of time, rhythm for Messiaen is 'first and foremost the change of number and duration',\(^4\) that is, rhythm arises from the addition of durations of time. Messiaen writes:

> We shall replace the notions of "measure" and "beat" by the feeling of a short value (the sixteenth-note, for example) and its free multiplications, which will lead us toward a music more or less "ametrical".\(^5\)

Accordingly, Messiaen's definition of rhythmic music is somewhat different from the conventional definition. The Western conception of rhythmic music

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\(^3\) Samuel, *Conversations with Olivier Messiaen*, 33.


is usually of music that has a regular repetition of beats: for Messiaen, rhythmic music is

music that scorns repetition, straightforwardness and equal durations.... It is music inspired by the movements of nature, movements of free and unequal duration.\(^6\)

Other rhythmic influences include those of Indian rhythmic theory, plainchant and nature, which were discussed in the previous chapter. Messiaen also professed admiration for the flexible use of rhythm found in both Debussy's and Mozart's music, referring to Mozart as 'the greatest rhythmician in classical music' and Debussy as 'one of the greatest rhythmicians of all time'.\(^7\) However, Stravinsky was the composer who most influenced in terms of rhythmic procedure.

There is a common thread between all the above apparently disparate influences: rhythmic suppleness and freedom from bar-lines. This was Messiaen's aim.

I've worked out a language of rhythm in detail, have researched Greek metres and Indian rhythms, etc. and in that process I've attained a rhythmic language of ever greater freedom, which comes ever closer to Nature, for example to the undulating motion of the sea, to the wind, to the movements of clouds etc.\(^8\)

Messiaen's use of rhythm in *Vingt Regards* can be considered typical of his works up to this time. Indian rhythms are used throughout, and the rhythmic freedom of birdsong is an important feature. Rhythm also becomes increasingly important as an organising force and rhythmic canons abound. The most striking aspect of Messiaen's use of rhythm in *Vingt Regards* is his quest for the 'end of time', which is discussed below.

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\(^6\) Samuel, *Conversations with Olivier Messiaen*, 33.

\(^7\) Ibid., 35.

\(^8\) Rössler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen*, 122-3.
2.2. - Symmetry: a Symbol of Eternity

Symmetry is an important part of Messiaen's compositional approach, and is found in all areas of his music, including his harmony, melody, rhythm, and formal structures.

Modes of limited transposition form the basis of Messiaen's harmony and melody in Vingt Regards. These are scales that are built on a repeating set of intervals, and are mostly of Messiaen's invention. Due to their symmetrical nature they can only be transposed a certain number of times before the same set of notes repeats itself. There are seven modes in all (see Example 1).

Example 1 - Messiaen's seven modes of limited transposition

Messiaen tends to avoid mode 1, as it is the whole tone scale. In The Technique of My Musical Language he wrote:

The first mode is...the whole-tone scale. Claude Debussy...and after him Paul Dukas...have made such remarkable use of it that there is nothing more to add. Then we shall carefully avoid making use of it, unless it is concealed in a superposition of modes which renders it unrecognisable.10

9 Johnson, Messiaen, 16.
Messiaen favours mode 2: it is used frequently in *Vingt Regards*. He acknowledges the use of this mode by composers before him, but he uses it in a different way: a way that is not dependent on the established tonal tradition.

One already finds traces of it in 'Sadko' by Rimsky-Korsakov; Scriabine uses it in a more conscious fashion; Ravel and Stravinsky have used it transiently. But all that remains in the state of timid sketch, the modal effect being more or less absorbed by classified sonorities.

He uses these modes both melodically and harmonically. It is possible to create major and minor chords from them, thereby giving an impression of tonality, if the composer so desires. Messiaen writes:

...the modes of limited transposition are "in the atmosphere of several tonalities at once, without polytonality, the composer being free to give predominance to one of the tonalities or to leave the tonal impression unsettled." Thus, mode 2 in its first transposition can hesitate between the four major tonalities of C, E-flat, F-sharp, and A.

A comparison between mode 2 and the 'tonalities' mentioned above suggest two things about Messiaen's use of the modes. Firstly, he uses the notes of the mode enharmonically. This is evident as an F sharp major tonality cannot be created unless the B flat in the first transposition of mode 2 is considered the same as A sharp, and the D flat the same as C sharp. Secondly, as dominant chords of these keys cannot be formed within this transposition of mode 2, the suggestion is that, for Messiaen, a particular chord is sufficient itself, if it is repeated often enough, to suggest that particular tonality. He further clarifies his position on this:

By the frequent return of the tonic of the chosen key... we mix the mode with the major tonality.

So the modes can be used to suggest tonality, or more accurately, tonal areas. Alternately, the modes can be used in such a way that the impression is of polymodality, or of atonality. Messiaen uses the modes in all these ways. The modes of limited transposition are found from the time of his first published work, *Le banquet céleste* (1928). They are subsequently used in

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11 See Chapter One p. 12 for the reasons for this.
13 *Ibid.*, 64.
14 *Ibid.*, 64.
works spanning Messiaen’s entire oeuvre, and are an important means of musical expression in *Vingt Regards*.

Non-retrogradable rhythms are an important formal element of *Vingt Regards*, and are used as the basis of many canons or ostinatos. They are symmetrical (or palindromic) rhythms, which read the same backwards as forwards, and therefore cannot be reversed or ‘retrograded’. The rhythms are built outwards from a central value or axis, around which the rhythm is built. Movement VI uses these rhythms frequently in canon (see Example 2).

![Example 2 - VI, 13-20 (p. 26).](image)

Non-retrogradable rhythms are indicated by brackets.

A parallel is found between Messiaen’s modes of limited transposition and his non-retrogradable rhythms. He writes of the ‘charm of impossibilities’ found in both. He explains this as follows:

This charm, at once voluptuous and contemplative, resides particularly in certain mathematical impossibilities of the modal and rhythmic domains. Modes which cannot be transposed beyond a certain number of transpositions, because one always falls again into the same notes; rhythms which cannot be used in retrograde, because in such a case one finds the same order of values again—these are two striking impossibilities…. Immediately one notices the analogy of these two impossibilities and how they complement one another, the rhythms realizing in the horizontal direction (retrogradation) what the modes realize in the vertical direction (transposition).\(^{15}\)

\(^{15}\) The referencing system used in all musical examples is as follows: movement of work, bar numbers of movement, page number as found in Volume II of this thesis.

progressively to that sort of theological rainbow which the musical language...attempts to be.\(^{21}\)

*Vingt Regards* focuses on, amongst other themes, the portrayal of the eternal nature of God. Accordingly, symmetries abound in this work.\(^{22}\)

### 2.3. - Messiaen's Desire to 'End Time'

Messiaen's desire to represent eternity through symmetry has already been discussed. The expression of eternity was also achieved through the creation of an alternative experience of time. The desire to 'end time' preoccupied Messiaen from his earliest works, and it forms part of his expression of divinity in *Vingt Regards*.

The quest to 'end time' is first confronted in *Quatuor pour la Fin du Temps* (1940-1), which is a particularly significant work in Messiaen's output, as it focuses on his approach to time in music. The title of this work is interesting: it could be a reference to the 'end of time' of the Apocalypse, or, even more importantly, to the end of ordinary, unidirectional, progressive time. This was a constant preoccupation of Messiaen's: how to express the eternal and timeless (God) through a medium that is measured and temporal (music). This idea forms one of the central paradoxes of his music, and Messiaen came up with many solutions to this problem. He wrote in the preface to the work:

> Its musical language is essentially immaterial, spiritual and Catholic. Modes which achieve a kind of tonal ubiquity, melodically and harmonically, here draw the listener towards eternity in space or the infinite. Special rhythms, beyond metre, contribute powerfully in dismissing the temporal.\(^{23}\)

Not only are modes and rhythms used to express eternity: this work also features the use of extremely slow tempi, which are sometimes so slow as to verge on the static. Where very slow tempi are used, the effect can be of time

\(^{22}\) See Chapter Five for a more specific discussion of symmetry in *Vingt Regards*.
\(^{23}\) Olivier Messiaen, *Quatuor pour la Fin du Temps*, (Paris: Durand, 1942), i.
being suspended. Both listener and performer are drawn into an almost 'meditative' state.

*Vingt Regards* can be considered as a continuation of the quest for the end of time that is first articulated in the quartet. In the piano cycle, Messiaen often writes in such a way as to annul the effect of the bar-line and disrupt the sense of rhythmic placing usually created by the bar-line. In this way, the listener's regular experience of orderly, progressive time is transformed into an experience that is beyond time, and therefore closer to God. The specific ways Messiaen uses these procedures in *Vingt Regards* are described in Part Two of this volume.

2.4. - Harmonic and Rhythmic Expansion

'*Agrandissement asymétrique*' [asymmetrical enlargement] is important in *Vingt Regards*. This is a compositional device whereby a motif is progressively transformed by the strict application of a process. In this process some notes of the motif move consistently up a semitone on each subsequent repetition, whereas others move consistently down a semitone on each subsequent repetition. Still others stay consistently the same on each repetition. In such a process harmony becomes somewhat irrelevant: what becomes important is the direction of growth. It is possible that Messiaen sees in this process technical perfection, which could for him reflect the perfection of divinity. It is used throughout the work: Messiaen even constructs an entire movement (movement III, *L'Échange*) from it. Here he applies the process eleven times to a motif, and stops where the next repetition brings the process back to where it started (see an excerpt from this movement in Example 3).
Example 3 - III, 1-4 (p. 8).

Just as there is a parallel between modes of limited transposition and non-retrogradable rhythm, there is also a parallel between Messiaen's use of asymmetrical enlargement and his use of 'rhythmic characters'. 'Rhythmic characters' or 'personnages rythmiques' is the term he uses to describe a process involving the manipulation of rhythmic groupings. While this is influenced by Stravinsky's use of rhythm in the Sacrificial Dance of 'The Rite of Spring', it is not an important process in Vingt Regards. Asymmetrical enlargement realises harmonically what Messiaen's 'rhythmic characters' realise rhythmically.

2.5. - Organization Through Number and Cyclic Theme

Number symbolism is a fundamental part of the organization of Vingt Regards. This is a form of symbolism whereby movements are ordered
according to the symbolism attached to certain numbers. It is based on tradition.

Combinations of numbers aren’t the sole property of Bach; they’ve already existed for a very long time and go back, I think, as far as Archimedes or Pythagoras, back to all the originators of mathematics and geometry, perhaps even as far as the Arabs. The mysteries of numbers have occupied the minds of mathematicians, geologists and astronomers and even certain religious souls ever since Man’s existed — there are even numerical riddles in the Bible such as the 144 fishes... In a certain era, there existed a complete number-symbolism which was very complicated, a bit magical and verging on religion.24

Number symbolism permeates Vingt Regards, on a micro and a macro level, greatly assisting the structural organization of the cycle.25

Cyclic themes play an important role in Messiaen's compositional approach. They are used in many works between 1943 and 1948, and are vital in Vingt Regards as they provide an important method of unifying the work. Cyclic themes also appear in Visions de l'Amen (1943), Harawi (1945) and Turangalîla-Symphonie (1946-48). In discussion of Visions de l'Amen Nichols suggests that the cyclic theme 'stands like a landmark, a reference point among the exotic proliferation of ideas'.26 The same comment could be applied to cyclic themes in Vingt Regards: they are a means of binding twenty contrasting movements into a coherent whole.27

2.6. - Other Compositional Developments

The most important aspects of Messiaen's compositional approach found in the works composed up to and including Vingt Regards have been highlighted above. While he continued to use these devices in works composed after this time, his compositional style continued to evolve, and the 'very rich, well supplied ensemble of materials' referred to at the start of this chapter continued to grow. The main developments include the move towards total serialism with Mode de valeurs et d'intensités (from Études de

24 Rössler, Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen, 112-113.
25 See Chapter Eight pp. 105-106.
26 Nichols, Messiaen, 31-32.
27 See Chapter Three pp. 34-38.
rythme for solo piano, 1949), the increased use of birdsong (along with a mounting preoccupation for realism), and the introduction of aleatory technique.

In summation, Messiaen’s music contains many diverse aspects. Some elements (such as his use of modes, his rhythmic manipulation, his use of palindromes, and his fascination with Hindu rhythm) are fundamental to his style. Other elements (such as serialism, communicable language and aleatory technique) are more fleeting. *Vingt Regards* was composed when Messiaen's preoccupation was with sensuous, mainly modally-based music. His works up to about 1948 are increasingly concerned with the ‘end of time’, and *Vingt Regards* represents an important step on this journey. In the early 1950s Messiaen embarked on more abstract experiments, before returning to the mainly large-scale works written from the 1960s until the end of his life, that integrate aspects of his style more closely. There is a common thread that binds almost all his works in some shape or form: the desire to express his religion. This unswerving commitment and intense dedication to one aim throughout a lifetime of composition is especially remarkable. The next chapter will examine Messiaen’s expression of his faith through an examination of the subject-matter and construction of *Vingt Regards* in particular.
Chapter Three

Content and Structure in

_Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus_

3.1. - Subject-Matter of the Work

_Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus_ is based on the story of the birth of the infant Jesus. The word 'regard' in the title has been translated in many different ways, such as 'contemplation', 'gaze', 'look', 'aspect' and 'viewpoint'. 'Contemplation' is the preferred translation for this thesis, as it reflects the fact that Messiaen's approach is neither superficially narrative, nor purely descriptive, but rather attempts to get to the very essence of what he wishes to portray. Pople writes: 'Messiaen's music does not use its 'language' to narrate, to dramatize, nor even to express, but rather to represent.' He continues with the observation that in _Vingt Regards:

Such stories stand transformed into icons: their language is that of reflection and contemplation; they may be viewed from different angles or aspects.... Messiaen chose not to disentangle their details in such a way as to be able to articulate them more clearly by means of a time-bound, left-to-right exposition. He preferred to reach inside them only so as the better to understand -- and therefore to represent their essence.\(^1\)\(^2\)

This cycle therefore presents twenty separate (yet unified) 'contemplations' of the child Jesus, focusing on the mystery of the Incarnation in particular. The Incarnation is one of the central beliefs of the Christian faith: it is the belief that God became man through Jesus. It also encompasses the paradoxical belief that Jesus is both fully divine and fully human. Accordingly, paradox emerges as an important part of Messiaen's method of

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2 Note that it is likely that Messiaen avoided this type of unfolding of detail and narrative because he wanted to get away from the traditional unidirectional nature of music, towards a type of music that is more representative of eternity.
expression in *Vingt Regards*. He has said that the mystery of the Incarnation is one that is most important to his faith:

God...came to us and tried to make Himself comprehensible in our language, in our sensations, in our attitudes of mind. That's the most beautiful aspect of the Godhead: the Mystery of the Incarnation, and that's why I'm a Christian.³

In the preface to the work, Messiaen describes this cycle as expressive of 'the various contemplations of the Child Jesus in the crib and the Adorations which are bestowed upon him'. He goes on to mention in particular

the inexpressible contemplation of God the Father...the multiple contemplation of the Church of love...the extraordinary contemplation of the Spirit of Joy...the contemplation of such tenderness of the Virgin Mary, that of the Angels, the Magi and immaterial or symbolic creatures (Time, the Heights, Silence, the Star, the Cross).⁴

### 3.2. - Structure of the Work

The work is structured in twenty movements. Each movement is given a title and is preceded by a quotation outlining its source of inspiration. There is also a preface that outlines influences on the cycle and contains some additional commentaries on individual movements. These commentaries further identify the inspiration behind, and the structure of, some movements.

Messiaen has said that the quotations at the start of each movement are very important in achieving an understanding of the work and that it is imperative that the performer be aware of them in order to be able to understand and communicate the music at a deeper level.

These quotations are of the greatest significance; I’d go so far as to say that, if that were not the case, I might just as well pack up; I wouldn’t compose any more music. These quotations are inseparable from the origins... of most of the work I’ve written which have a religious content. Generally speaking, I’ve allowed my thoughts to revolve around a specific subject...I’ve tried to find everything which has to do with the subject I’ve chosen and then have tried to translate it into music – not just into notes, not just into sounds and rhythms, but into sound-colours as well, into colours. And, of course, I require the interpreting artist to make a close study of all these things, of all the ideas I want to express – indeed, I even ask that he believe in them to a certain extent, in order to be able to convey them to the listener.⁵ ⁶

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³ Rössler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen*, 96.
⁴ Messiaen, *Vingt Regards*, i.
⁵ Rössler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen*, 28.
In *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur, et d’Ornithologie* Volume 2 Messiaen writes that the structure of *Vingt Regards* is ordered according to contrasts of tempo, mood and colour. Each movement has its own, individual character and mood.

There is room here for a complete survey of the composer’s manners, including massive, pounding fugato (‘Par Lui tout a été fait’), warm, sweet stillness (‘Le Baiser de l’Enfant-Jésus’), severe automatic system (‘L’Échange’), and surrealist vision (‘Regard de l’Onction terrible’).

The cycle is structured in such a way that it seems to fall naturally into two halves, with the midway point after movement X. Messiaen intended it to be performed in this way, with a break after movement X. There appears to be a number of parallels operating within the two halves. The opening movement of each half (movement I and XI) features the theme of God. Although movement XI is not as tranquil as movement I, a calm feeling permeates both movements. There is a further parallel between movements X and XX – both movements represent structural peaks within the cycle. Movements V and XV are both significant slow movements that are based on the theme of God. A further parallel is found between movements VII, VIII and IX and movements XVII, XVIII and XIX. Although the latter group of three is a longer group, the middle movement in each case (movements VIII and XVIII) is a more dynamic and active movement, which is framed by more inwardly reflective or static movements.

Hill provides an alternative way of viewing the structure of the cycle. He views the first five movements as a type of exposition. Once these movements have been heard, all the main elements and compositional devices of the cycle have been presented. Movement V takes up where movement I leaves off, and is almost an exact repetition of the material of

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6 Although Messiaen implies the performer must be a ‘believer’, note that he says elsewhere ‘My work is addressed to all who believe – and also to all others’ (Rössler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen*, 51).


movement I (but with different material superimposed on it). Hill mentions
the predominantly calm feeling of the first five movements:

This calm, sustained over some twenty-five minutes, is part of Messiaen's design, for it enables him to spring the ambush in No. 6—'Par Lui tout a été fait', the 'big bang' (as Messiaen described it to me) of creation.  

The second half of the cycle is dominated by slow movements (movements XI, XV and XIX), which are evenly spaced. Inner groups of three exist, namely movements XII, XIII and XIV and movements XVI, XVII and XVIII respectively. Movements XII-XIV 'form a compact, powerful unit...climaxing in the closing pages of no. 14...as the music of the angels collides with and is symbolically routed by the torrential virtuosity of the birds.' The cycle 'reaches another culmination' in the eighteenth movement, Regard de l'Onction terrible.

Movement XX can be seen as a counterpart to the first five movements. The first five movements, as a type of exposition, present all the recurring themes, motifs, and compositional devices. Accordingly, movement XX (the final movement of the cycle) acts as a type of Recapitulation—all major themes and devices found in the cycle are recalled. There is nothing in this movement that has not appeared elsewhere in the cycle in some shape or form. Hill writes that in this final movement 'everything (with the exception of the initial flourishes) is a fulfillment.'

Another aspect of the organisation of Vingt Regards is that many of the even-numbered movements feature more brilliant writing. This becomes more obvious in the second half of the cycle, although it is also present to a certain extent in the first half. Hill mentions this fact, with reference to movements X, XII, XIV and XVI, which feature 'hard-edged piano writing' that is reminiscent of Stravinsky's writing in 'The Rite of Spring'.

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10 Ibid., 89.
11 Ibid., 90.
12 Ibid., 90.
13 Ibid., 101.
14 Ibid., 95.
Siglind Bruhn provides a full and convincing analysis of the structure of *Vingt Regards*, pointing out a large number of symmetries and cross relationships between movements.\(^{15}\) In the same way as Hill, she views the first five movements as a type of exposition. She considers movements VI and XX as ‘complex syntheses of large numbers of symbols’.\(^{16}\) The remaining odd-numbered movements are devoted to ‘further exploring single aspects or groups of symbols’,\(^{17}\) while the remaining even-numbered movements represent a group that, together, furnishes moments of contrast within the cycle.\(^{18}\)

### 3.3. - The Role of Cyclic Themes and Recurring Motifs

The length of the work combined with the variety of moods and material means that a binding force is necessary for the cycle’s success. This cohesive force is found in the form of cyclic (or recurring) themes, which serve to mould individual movements into a unified whole.

Messiaen identifies three different recurring themes in the preface to the work: *thème de Dieu* (theme of God), *thème de l’étoile et de la croix* (theme of the star and the cross) and *thème d’accords* (theme of chords).\(^{19}\) He also mentions another theme in his analysis of the cycle found in *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur et d’Ornithologie* Volume 2 – *thème de l’amour mystique* (theme of mystical love).\(^{20}\) Another theme is labelled in the score – *thème de joie* (theme of joy).\(^{21}\) (See Examples 4a, 4b, 4c, 4d, 4e.) The theme of love develops from the theme of God (see Example 5).

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 256.
\(^{17}\) Ibid., 256.
\(^{18}\) Ibid., 261.
\(^{19}\) Messiaen, *Vingt Regards*, i.
\(^{21}\) Messiaen, *Vingt Regards*, 69.
Example 4a - The theme of God

Example 4b - The theme of the star and the cross

Example 4c - The theme of chords

Example 4d - The theme of mystical love, VI, 170 (p. 39).

Example 4e - The theme of joy, X, 132-133 (p. 69).
Example 5 - The theme of love develops from the theme of God: compare this excerpt (which is from the theme of God, I, 15 (p. 4)) with the theme of love found in Example 4d above.

In the analysis of Vingt Regards found in the Traité Messiaen writes:

The theme of God occurs in the three pieces devoted to the three persons of the Holy Trinity: 'Regard du Père', Regard du Fils sur la Fils', 'Regard de l'Esprit de joie'. It is also heard in 'Par Lui tout a été fait' (since the Creation is attributed to the Word, without whom nothing was made). It is present in 'Le Baiser de l'Enfant-Jésus' and in 'Première Communion de la Vierge' (she was carrying Jesus within her), it is extended to form the final 'Gloria' in 'Regard de l'Église d'amour' (the Church and all her believers are the body of Christ). The theme of mystical love recurs in 'Par Lui tout a été fait', 'Je dors mais mon cœur veille', 'Regard de l'Église d'amour'. The Star and the Cross have the same theme, because one opens and the other closes the earthly sojourn of Jesus (see 'Regard de l'étoile' and 'Regard de la Croix'). The theme of chords occurs throughout...transformed and transmuted in all kinds of ways....

Messiaen uses the power of association to suggest the presence of cyclic themes without actually stating them. For example, the theme of God occurs many times in F sharp major, and at a soft dynamic level in the mid-range of the piano. It is found in this form in movements I, V, XV, and in B flat major in movement XI. By the time the penultimate movement is reached all that is needed is an F sharp major chord in first inversion at the same dynamic level, and in the same area of the keyboard to subliminally suggest the concept of divinity to the listener (see Examples 6a and 6b).

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22 Messiaen, Traité de Rythme, de Couleur et d'Ornithologie, Volume 2, 438.
23 Siglind Bruhn establishes B flat major as 'a key that in light of mode 2 is loosely related to F sharp major' (Bruhn, 'The Spiritual Layout in Messiaen's Contemplations of the Manger', 258).
Example 6a - the first appearance of the theme of God in *Vingt Regards*, I, 1-3 (p. 1).
Similarly, at the end of the last movement, the interval A sharp – C sharp over an F sharp major tonality (which is the melodic outline of the theme of God) serves to suggest divinity to the listener (see Example 7).

A number of other motifs also recur throughout the cycle. Bells are cited in the preface to the work as a source of inspiration. Accordingly, bell-like chords recur in many movements. These are often heard three times and are usually built on a C sharp. They feature prominently between phrases of the theme of God in the first movement (see Volume II, I, bar 8, p. 3 and bar 16, p. 5). They also occur in the second movement (this time on a C and marked...
The idea of a repeated note heard three times may develop from the first three chords of the theme of God (where A sharp is heard three times). See Example 8. The development of the bell motif from the theme of God could be Messiaen's way of musically representing that all things come from God.

Example 8 - II, 19-22 (p. 6) - compare the bell-like chords found in bars 20-22 of this example with the repeated notes of the theme of God found in Example 4a.

The use of the twelve-note complex is another feature that recurs throughout the work. Messiaen often makes a point of filling in the missing notes of the complex at the end of a movement in such a way that suggests that this 'filling in' is intentional. Messiaen's use of the twelve-note complex relates to his ability to see colours when he hears music, and he has often used chords in his music that create complementary colours (such as those used by painter Robert Delaunay).

Since last year, I've noticed during the replaying [of] some of my works, that I'd unintentionally employed the well known phenomenon of complementary colours, called "simultaneous contrasts" in the painting world, and used most of all by Delaunay. An example: if I have a chord made up of seven notes, one also hears the other 5 which are missing - played by other instruments or in another register, be it in a high register like a bell-resonance, or in a low register like an "houm" [humtone] of a bell.

Messiaen further clarifies:

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24 The 'bell chords' are also suggested in the mid-section of movement XI (see Volume II, p. 81, bars 43-60), and a similar effect appears again in bars 1-7, 53-57 and 65-76 of movement XIII. Movement XX further develops the bell-like harmonies heard in the second movement (see Volume II - compare p.6 bars 3-5 to pp. 170-171, bars 112-142).
25 The twelve-note complex is found used in this way at the end of movements II, III, VI, IX, X and XX
26 Rössler, Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen, 79.
In a bell there’s one main frequency, that’s the note which one hears...and besides that, there are countless additional overtones. Whenever I have a chord in my music, I’ve these overtones and a kind of “under-tones” as well. In this way, I have the twelve notes but not as a tone-row, not as a cluster, but rather as a simultaneous contrast of colours, with one real colour and with another one which one hears only very faintly above and below it, a glow at the top and bottom.27

The complementary colours that Messiaen sees when he uses the twelve notes of the chromatic scale in the way he describes above may be a representation for him of the complementary colours described in the Bible when in the presence of God. He refers to a passage in the Bible which:

touched me especially: where it says that that One is seated on the throne and His appearance is like fire or like jasper – and fire and jasper are red. And round about Him is a rainbow like an emerald, which is green: two complementary colours, then.28

Another possible reason for Messiaen’s use of the twelve-note complex is that, through the use of all the notes of the chromatic scale, he wants to suggest the all-embracing nature of God. The use of the twelve-note complex could also be considered a development of the theme of chords, which uses all twelve notes of the chromatic scale. All of the above suggestions are likely - perhaps the twelve-note complex functions as a multiple symbol, portraying all the ideas above simultaneously.

Aside from the cyclic themes and recurring motifs mentioned above there are countless cross-references to be found between movements. For example, in movement IX a chordal idea and a three-part chordal canon alternate. The chords forming the basis of the canon can be traced back to movements II and IV: the chords of the top two layers of the canon are found at the end of the second movement, and in a different format in the fourth movement. See Examples 9a, 9b and 9c. The lowest part of the canon is based on tritones, a very common feature in Messiaen’s harmonic world. This example illustrates the way Messiaen uses subtle cross-references to further unify separate movements within the cycle as a whole, even if it just the performer who is aware of them.

27 Ibid., 80.
28 Ibid., 79.
Example 9a - Three part chordal canon, IX, 9-11 (p. 55).

Example 9b - II, 39-41 (p. 7) - compare the last three chords in bar 41 of this example with the upper two parts of the canon in Example 9a.

Example 9c - IV, 56-59 (p. 15) - compare the melodic outline in bar 59 of this example with the upper parts of the canon in Example 9a.

This unity (created by means of thematic cross-referencing between movements) found within diversity (in the form of separate, contrasting movements) can be seen as a symbol of the three separate persons embodied in a unified whole, as expressed by the Mystery of the Trinity. It could also
be a symbol of the two states of being (divinity and humanity) found unified in Jesus, as expressed in the Mystery of the Incarnation. Part Two of this thesis will explore how the very essence of Messiaen’s musical language is a further expression of the Mystery of the Incarnation.

Part Two

Unity, Duality and Paradox in "Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus"
Part Two

Unity, Duality and Paradox in

*Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus*
Introduction: Duality Explored

Key Words
Opposite: as different as can be...particularly applies to two things so far apart in position, nature, meaning, or other characteristic that they can never be made to agree.
Duality: dual condition or quality.
Dual: composed or consisting of two parts; double; twofold.
Dichotomy: division into two parts
Unity: the fact, quality, or condition of being one; oneness; singleness
Paradox: a statement that may be true but seems to say two opposite things. ¹

Metrical rhythm and ametrical rhythm, symmetry and asymmetry, reflection and emotion, simplicity and complexity, control and freedom: Messiaen’s music can be considered a meeting of opposites. However, on closer examination it becomes apparent that these elements are not set against each other as opposites. Instead, apparent opposites evolve from a common basis, strive for a common aim, or are intertwined to such a degree that one is in essence the same as the other. Therefore, they must be considered dualities, or dichotomies, rather than opposites. Both parts of the dichotomy are, in fact, one. Herein lies one of the central paradoxes of Messiaen’s music: apparent opposites are fused into a unified whole.

Part One of this thesis outlined issues commonly discussed in relation to Messiaen's music as a whole, and Vingt Regards in particular. Part Two investigates a series of dualities identified in Vingt Regards. While other writers have identified some of these dualities,² there has been a lack of research that focuses entirely on the concept of duality in Messiaen’s music.

² Nichols refers in passing to a number of opposing qualities, such as 'freedom and discipline, simplicity and complexity', the 'conflict between head and heart', and 'the friction of opposites'. (Nichols, Messiaen, 30, 38, 39.)
The dualities identified in this thesis as being of particular importance in *Vingt Regards* are:

- Metrical rhythm and ametrical rhythm
- Symmetry and asymmetry
- Inward reflection and outward emotion
- Simplicity and complexity
- Control and freedom

Each of these dualities is considered individually in the succeeding chapters.
Chapter Four

Metrical Rhythm and Ametrical Rhythm

As outlined in Chapter Two, rhythm played a very important part in Messiaen's compositional style. It was through this element that he was able to express the 'end of time' and the eternity of divinity. Both ametrical rhythm and metrical rhythm played an important role in this.

4.1. Ametrical Rhythm in Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus

Most of Vingt Regards is composed in an ametrical style. Through additive rhythm, asymmetrical rhythm and the use of constantly changing metres, Messiaen achieves the freedom from the bar-line that he desired. He wished to do this in order to unsettle the regular 'human' experience of progressive, unidirectional time. There are countless examples of this type of writing in the cycle. The following examples are typical of his approach to ametrical rhythm.

The theme of the star and the cross, heard for the first time in the second movement, Regard de l'étoile features additive rhythm. Messiaen explains this as follows:

What is the added value? It is a short value, added to any rhythm whatsoever, whether by a note, or by a rest, or by the dot.

In this theme, the regular rhythm is disturbed by the addition of extra rhythmic values. The listener feels he has a grip on the sense of pulse, only to have that feeling disturbed by the extra rhythmic values added in, either in the form of extra semiquavers or dotted values (see Example 10).

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1 Nowhere in the work is an actual metre specified. Therefore, the reference to 'constantly changing metres' refers to implied metres only.
2 Messiaen, The Technique of My Musical Language, 16.
Example 10 - An excerpt from the theme of the star and the cross as found in movement II, 10-13 (p. 6). Added rhythmic values are marked with an x.

The opening of the tenth movement, Regard de l’Esprit de joie is inspired by plainchant rhythm and melodic contour. The unequal bar lengths and unequal rhythmic groupings, combined with the fortissimo, accented chords marked violent (which occur as unexpected punctuation marks at irregular intervals) destroy any sense of pulse (see Example 11).

Example 11 - X, 1-7 (p. 58).
The eighth movement, *Regard des hauteurs*, is based almost completely on birdsong. The rhythmic style of birdsong is reflected in the use of additive rhythm, constantly changing metre, and use of unpredictable rhythmic (and melodic) motifs, illustrated respectively in Examples 12a, 12b and 12c. These devices help to create a spontaneous, unpredictable rhythmic style, where any sense of regularly repeating pulse is lost, reflecting the improvisatory style of birdsong.

Example 12a - Additive rhythm, VIII, 2-3 (p. 49).

Example 12b - Continuously changing metre, VIII, 26-32 (p. 51).
4.2. - Metrical Rhythm in *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*

The 'pillars' of the cycle (namely movements I, V, X, XV and XX) feature metrical writing more prominently. As has been stated above, although no metre is specified anywhere in the work, a metre is implied in certain passages. Messiaen's use of rhythm in the first movement of the cycle is almost completely metrical, and as such, is quite unusual in the context of the work as a whole. This movement (*Regard du Père*) presents the birth of Jesus from God's viewpoint. There are eight quavers in every bar, except for the first bar, which has seven. Each quaver is subdivided into triplet semiquavers. The metronome marking indicates an extremely slow tempo - at the indicated speed one note or chord is heard per second, which is extremely slow in musical terms. This extreme slowness of tempo makes it somewhat difficult for the listener to establish connections between chords (see Example 6a, Chapter 3, p. 37).

Messiaen has described his view of God 'as different, as distant, as terrible, as motionless, as eternal'. The constancy of rhythm and the repetition found in this movement present that 'eternal' aspect of God. The extreme slowness of tempo, combined with the rhythmic and thematic repetition creates an effect that is almost hypnotic, portraying the constancy and 'motionless' quality of the divine. The fact that this movement, in its metricality, stands

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3 Rössler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen*, 96.
apart from most of the other movements of the cycle helps to portray the distance of God from all other things.

Movement I thus presents us with a paradox: the constant metrical rhythm and use of a metronome marking which articulates every second that passes seem, on paper at least, to wish to articulate the passage of time very clearly. Yet somehow, in performance this movement seems to defy time. It does so through the use of hypnotic metrical rhythm, thematic repetition and extreme slowness of tempo. In their combination, these devices serve to suspend the usual experience of progressive time to a certain extent, creating instead an illusion of stillness and eternity. As such, this movement could be considered a further development of the quest articulated by Messiaen in *Quatuor pour la Fin du Temps* for 'the cessation of time', doing so in a similar way to the fifth and eighth movements of the quartet.

Messiaen's use of rhythm in the fifth movement of the cycle, *Regard du Fils sur le Fils*, is particularly interesting. This movement is completely metrical: although no metre is actually marked in, it could be considered to be in 2/4. It presents the theme of God, on top of which a two-part rhythmic canon alternates with melody based on birdsong. The lower layer of the rhythmic canon presents the same rhythm as the top layer, except with the rhythmic values augmented one and a half times. The complex combination of these two rhythms creates a 'floating' effect, which somewhat annuls the metricality of the writing (see Example 13).

The birdsong has the same effect: it is free, improvisatory-sounding and virtuosic, and seems to float above the theme of God. The overall effect is quite unusual: it is of two different musics being heard simultaneously. One is metrical and measured; the other is free from such constraints. It is as if the two are occurring in different time-frames, or even in different worlds. In this movement the audience is given the privilege of hearing these two

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4 The notated metronome mark means that one note or chord is heard per second, which would appear to mark the passage of time very noticeably and definitely.
worlds combine, and is thus allowed, in a sense to experience the 'earthly', measured progress of time (in the theme of God) and the 'heavenly' suspension of time (in the canon and birdsong) simultaneously: the temporal meets the eternal.

Example 13 - V, 1-11 (p. 18).

\(^5\) Pople, Messiaen: Quatuor pour la Fin du Temps, 12.
The fifteenth movement of the cycle, *Le Baiser de l'Enfant-Jésus* presents the use of rhythm as a means of highlighting a moment of particular importance. It was inspired by a picture of Jesus leaving his mother's arms to embrace St Thérèse of Lisieux. The movement depicts *Le sommeil* [the sleep of the child Jesus], *Le jardin* [the garden], *Les bras tendus vers l'amour* [the arms outstretched towards love], *Le baiser* [the kiss] and *L'ombre du baiser* [the shadow of the kiss]. The first three sections (bars 1-62, 63-78 and 79-94 respectively) are mostly ametrical. The third section contains a massive build-up of tension in increasingly atonal language, which is suddenly released in the ringing, resonating F sharp major chord at the start of the following section (in bar 95). This fourth section (bars 95-118) not only has strong tonal implications, it is also completely metrical, and is clearly heard as such: Messiaen uses none of the devices here (which he uses elsewhere) that cloud the metre (as described below). This section is 24 bars in length, and it is the most extended passage of metrical writing heard in this movement. This helps to set this passage apart from all that came before. As this is the high point of the movement ('the kiss'), and the moment of fulfilment towards which everything before has been directed, this is entirely suitable (see Example 14).

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6 Messiaen, *Vingt Regards*, iii.
Example 14 - XV, 92-96 (p. 117).

The movements outlined above (movements I, V and XV) are the three movements of the cycle where metrical rhythm is heard most clearly as such. However, there are passages in other movements that are metrical, but Messiaen seeks to hide their metrical quality through the use of other rhythmic devices. It is possible that in these cases his intent is to provide a symbolic expression of the meeting of the temporal with the eternal, in a similar way to that in the fifth movement, as described above.

An example of such a case is found in the opening section of the sixteenth movement, *Regard des prophètes, des bergers et des mages*. The opening section (bars 1-21) is metrical. The right hand plays an ostinato quaver motif, which would, if heard on its own, quickly establish the metrical nature of the passage. However, due to the progressively accelerating rhythmic values in the left hand (whereby the values decrease by one semiquaver each time,
from 16 semiquavers to one), the sense of pulse in the passage is somewhat disrupted (see excerpt from this opening section in Example 15).

Example 15 - XVI, 1-14 (p. 122).

The opening section (bars 1-19) of the eighteenth movement, *Regard de l'Onction terrible* contains a similar process and is also metrical. However, unlike movement XVI, where the right-hand ostinato serves to 'ground' the pulse and act as a stabilising force, there is no ostinato in this movement. Almost all sense of pulse disappears, because from bar 3 this section features simultaneously accelerating and decelerating rhythmic values, in the left and right hands respectively. The effect is similar to that found in the music of Bali. Griffiths describes this as a presentation of 'two streams of time of
which one races towards the other’s past’ (see an excerpt from this section in Example 16).7

Movement XVII, *Regard du silence* presents another example of a passage written in a metrical style that is conceived in such a way that the effect of the metre is subsequently undermined. Although bar-lines are included in the score Messiaen proceeds to write in a way that completely annuls the regularising effect of the bar-line. This is not unusual in Messiaen’s music: in his discussion of different styles of notating music (found in chapter VII of *The Technique of My Musical Language*) it is clear that he views bar-lines primarily as an aid to the performer and as a means of reducing accidentals, rather than as a means of providing a regularly recurring rhythmic emphasis. The opening section of this movement (bars 1-19) is a two-part rhythmic canon. In fact, it presents exactly the same rhythms as found in the canonic writing of the fifth movement, but with different chords. However, in this movement the canon is heard alone, with no theme of God present to ‘ground’

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7 Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, 123.
the sense of pulse. The result is that often no chord is struck on strong beats, and all that is present is a kaleidoscopic texture of ever-shifting harmonies and colours, with no discernible pulse or temporal sense. This is intended as an expression of the eternal silence of Heaven, where the earthly progress of time becomes irrelevant (see excerpt from this section in Example 17).

Example 17 - XVII, 1-5 (p. 128).

The ending of this movement (bars 88-109) is also metrical. Repeating patterns of chords are heard, but the beginnings and endings of the patterns are difficult to establish due to the separation of rhythm from melody. Again, the effect is kaleidoscopic and circular, of ever-changing subtleties of sound and colour, with no beginning and no end. Once more, this is intended to express the eternity of Heaven (see excerpt from this section in Example 18).

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8 This section is metrical with the exception of the last seven bars, where the pulse changes from four crotchet beats per bar to two.
Many other movements feature passages which could be described as metrical, but because the passages are very brief, and are surrounded by ametrical writing, the sense of pulse is not given sufficient time to establish itself. This mixing of rhythmic style again arises from the desire for rhythmic freedom.

4.3. - Messiaen's Use of Rhythm: Conclusion

In conclusion, Vingt Regards features mainly ametrical writing, with some instances of metrical writing. Sometimes the metre is allowed to establish itself firmly, but in many cases the feeling of the pulse is intentionally obscured, in a variety of ways. However, paradoxically, both metrical and ametrical rhythm are unified: underlying this dichotomy is always the common aim of creating an experience of time that is something out of the ordinary, thereby bringing us a step closer to the divine.
Chapter Five

Symmetry and Asymmetry

5.1. - Messiaen’s Use of Symmetry

...For a long time, mirror-symmetrical motifs arranged around a “free” centre have been used in the decorative arts (architecture, ...art...). This arrangement is found in the veins of leaves, in the wings of butterflies, in the human face and body and even in ancient magic formulae. The “non-retrogradable rhythm” does exactly the same thing.1

As suggested by the above quotation, Messiaen parallels the symmetries found in everyday life with those found in his compositional approach. Rhythmic, formal, melodic and harmonic symmetries all play an important role in his music and, as outlined in Chapter Two, function as a symbol of eternity.

Rhythmic symmetry may be seen in Messiaen’s use of non-retrogradable rhythms, which are evident from the piano Préludes of 1929. His interest in non-retrogradable rhythm developed alongside his interest in Indian classical rhythm, as many Indian deći-tâlas (rhythmic patterns) are non-retrogradable, either in whole or in part.

In Vingt Regards Messiaen uses three Indian rhythms in particular: râgavardhana, candrakalâ and lackskmiça. His tendency to use these three rhythms rests on the fact that they are ametrical and that some contain non-retrogradable cells (see Examples 19a, 19b and 19c).

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1 Rössler, Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen, 42.
Messiaen often uses these three rhythms consecutively. This rhythmic grouping is found in a number of movements of *Vingt Regards*, often as the basis for rhythmic and melodic canons. An example is found in the opening of the fifth movement, *Regard du Fils sur le Fils*, where the two upper parts appear in a rather unconventional two-part rhythmic canon based on these rhythms (see Example 13, Chapter 4, p. 51).

According to the quotation at the head of the movement, the aim of this movement is to portray 'the person of the Word in human form – marriage of the divine and human natures of Jesus-Christ' ('... la personne du Verbe dans une nature humaine – mariage des natures humaine et divine en Jésus-Christ...'). In order to do this there is a number of complex, overlapping

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2 This rhythm is found with the values doubled, in retrograde form, and with the dotted minim divided into three crotchets in the canon in movement V of *Vingt Regards*.

3 The values of this rhythm are halved in the canon in movement V of *Vingt Regards*.

4 This rhythm occurs with the values doubled in the canon in movement V of *Vingt Regards*.

5 Examples of where this rhythmic grouping occurs in *Vingt Regards* includes the rhythmic canons in movements V, VI (bars 26-33 and bars 97-104), XIV, and XVII.

6 As mentioned in Chapter Four p. 50, in this canon the rhythmic values of the upper part of the canon appear augmented by one and a half times in the lower part. A further peculiarity is found in the fact that both parts of the canon start simultaneously rather than one after another.

7 Messiaen, *Vingt Regards*, 18.
spiritual symbols at work. Symmetry forms an important part of this symbolism. The canon in the two upper parts portrays the eternity of divinity through the use of non-retrogradable symmetrical rhythmic cells. The theme of God, in the lowest part, has a dual symbolism. As the first movement was based exclusively on the theme of God, and was called *Regard du Père*, this theme is automatically associated with divinity. However, as outlined in Chapter Four,⁸ in this fifth movement the theme of God could also be intended as a portrayal of humanity: it is metrical and clearly heard as such.⁹ Therefore, it measures the 'human' progress of time.

To return to the canon in the top two layers; if examined rhythmically and as a whole, it is a symbol of eternity (because of the non-retrogradable symmetrical nature of the rhythms). However, if examined harmonically as two separate parts the top layer represents divinity and the second layer represents humanity. This is because the top layer contains three-part chords and is in the third transposition of mode 6. The number three (and its multiples), as the number of the Trinity, has divine associations for Messiaen. The second layer is constructed from four-part chords in the fourth transposition of mode four. Bruhn points out that the number four is often associated with humanity:

> Often contrasted with the Trinitarian 3, the numeral 4 is, since Presocratic cosmological speculations about the four elements as building blocks of the world, semantically connected with the idea of the earthly, the worldly, the material.¹⁰

This use of number as symbol is hardly coincidental: the careful labelling of modes in the score is evidence of the importance that Messiaen attached to such numerical associations.

The use of dual symbolism that is found in this movement, whereby one idea (such as rhythmic canon) or theme (such as the theme of God) can be seen as an expression of two apparently opposing ideas (both are symbolic of

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⁸ See Chapter Four p. 50-51.
⁹ Although no metre as such is identified in the score, 2/4 time is implied
¹⁰ Bruhn, 'The Spiritual Layout in Messiaen's Contemplations of the Manger' in *Messiaen's Language of Mystical Love*, 252-3.
humanity and divinity), is perfect as an expression of a concept which encompasses two apparently opposing ideas: the complete union of divinity and humanity in Jesus as found in the Incarnation. This is the paradox that Messiaen sets out to depict in this movement. The very means of expression portrays the concept.

A portion of the sixth movement (*Par Lui tout à été fait*) uses the same rhythmic sequence as the canon in movement V, and therefore contains symmetry in the form of non-retrogradable rhythms (see Example 20).

Example 20 - Excerpt from canon, VI, 26-31 (p. 26).

Not only are non-retrogradable rhythms used in the many rhythmic canons found in this movement, but Johnson points out that the overall structure can be seen to include a form of the Indian rhythm râgavardhana (which contains a non-retrogradable cell).\(^\text{11}\)

This movement is in two main sections: bars 1-129, and 130-231. The first section resembles a non-retrogradable rhythm as it presents a central section

(bars 62-68, marked ‘milieu’ or ‘middle’ in the score), either side of which is material based on the so-called ‘subject’ and ‘counter subject’. The section marked ‘middle’ is comparable to the central value around which a non-retrogradable rhythm revolves. The material following the central section (bars 69-129) is the exact retrograde or reverse of the material preceding the central section (bars 1-61). This gives an outline of the first, non-retrogradable part of the rhythm rāgavardhana (see Example 19a p. 59). Perhaps Messiaen uses this process as a means of destroying the very essence of the medium in which he is writing: music is a temporal, unidirectional medium. Paradoxically, in music Messiaen expresses eternity through time. The non-retrogradable rhythm (or in this case, the non-retrogradable form) allows him to do this to a certain extent:

The musician possesses a mysterious power: by means of his rhythms, he can chop up Time here and there, and can even put it together in the reverse order, a little as though he were going for a walk through different points of time, or as though he were amassing the future by turning to the past, in the process of which, his memory of the past becomes transformed into a memory of the future. The...“non-retrogradable rhythms” utilise this power.

To move onto the second part of the rhythm: this is reflected in the second main section of movement VI. Although this section is slightly shorter than the first section in terms of bars, it contains the climax of the movement, and therefore represents the longer second half of the rāgavardhana rhythm.

Johnson notes that ‘Messiaen is not aiming for mathematical precision in the proportions of this movement but in a total structural balance suggested by the shape of "rāgavardhana".’ Movement VI reflects the increasing importance of rhythmic organisation in Messiaen’s music (which was yet to reach its pinnacle), but also illustrates the magnitude attached by him to non-retrogradable rhythms as an image of eternity. However, it is very unlikely that in performance an audience would be aware of the high level of organisation at work in this piece. This is of little consequence for Messiaen.

12 The opening themes of this movement are labeled ‘sujet’ and ‘contresujet’ after the manner of a fugue. However, as they do not appear in their original form after the first statement, they cannot be considered a ‘subject’ and a ‘countersubject’ in the traditional sense.
13 Rössler, Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen, 41.
14 Johnson, Messiaen, 39.
He feels that the impossibility of retrogradation inherent in non-retrogradable rhythm has a 'great power, a kind of explosive force, I would say, a magical strength',\textsuperscript{15} and the effect of the rhythm will be present, whether the listener is aware of it or not. To repeat his commentary on this found in \textit{The Technique of My Musical Language}:

\begin{quote}
Let us think now of the hearer of our modal and rhythmic music; he will not have time at the concert to inspect the nontranspositions and the nonretrogradations, and, at that moment, these questions will not interest him further; to be charmed will be his only desire. And that is precisely what will happen; in spite of himself he will submit to the strange charm of impossibilities...which will lead him progressively to that sort of theological rainbow which the musical language...attempts to be.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

Another aspect of Messiaen's use of symmetry, which is used with even more consistency than non-retrogradable rhythms, is his use of what he termed "modes of limited transposition". As already outlined,\textsuperscript{17} the modes can only be transposed a certain (limited) number of times before the same set of notes repeats itself. The symmetry found in the modes, which are used as an integral part of Messiaen's compositional language, creates a feeling of stasis rather than progression. Harmonies and melodies derived from the modes form the basis of the musical language used in \textit{Vingt Regards}. Messiaen's extensive use of the interval of the tritone arises from his use of the modes. As the tritone divides the octave exactly in half, it is another symmetry, which he exploits to the fullest. There are many examples in \textit{Vingt Regards} of melodies and harmonies based on the tritone; the main recurring theme in the cycle (the theme of God) uses it melodically and the canon in movement IX uses it harmonically (see Example 21 below and Example 9a Chapter Three, p. 41).

\textsuperscript{15} Rössler, \textit{Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen}, 42.
\textsuperscript{16} Messiaen, \textit{The Technique of My Musical Language}, 21.
\textsuperscript{17} See Chapter Two p. 21.
Example 21 - I, 6-7 (pp. 2-3) - this example illustrates melodic use of the tritone.

5.2. - Messiaen's Use of Asymmetry

Messiaen's continual quest was for rhythmic freedom, as epitomised by the movements found in nature. He wanted to escape from the 'regularising' effect of the bar-line that had dominated most Western music for the previous number of centuries, and in so doing, provide an experience that was different from the usual experience of time. It is clear that asymmetry formed an important part of this quest, and there are many instances of asymmetrical writing found in Vingt Regards.

The opening of the fourth movement, Regard de la Vierge features asymmetrical phrases. This movement depicts Mary as she gazes at her newborn child. The opening section (bars 1-15) is based on a four-note
descending melodic motif in the right hand. This section can be subdivided into three five-bar phrases. The ametrical rhythm and asymmetrical phrase lengths combine with the repetition to create a hypnotic effect. The effect on the audience is a sense of dislocation from the ordinary experience of time. This is perhaps intended as a reflection of the feeling of suspension of time for a mother as she gazes, almost hypnotised, at her new-born child (see excerpt from this section in Example 22).

Example 22 - IV, 1-10 (p. 12).

It is interesting to note that, while the non-retrogradable rhythms are symmetrical when examined in isolation, they combine to form asymmetrical phrases. For example, in bars 50-58 of the sixth movement, the 'subject'

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18 It is clear that this four-note melody is what Messiaen intends the listener to hear, as he writes the following direction in the score: 'Faites sortir la chant à la main droite: sol, fa, mi, ré' (Messiaen, Vingt Regards, 12).
appears in the right hand in non-retrogradable rhythm, a fact that is highlighted in the score. Underneath this the left hand plays a fragment of the subject with a regular rhythm, to which the process of asymmetrical enlargement is applied. The left hand seems to be the regularising force in the passage, causing the right hand to sound asymmetrical and almost random. So, while this part is very carefully constructed from symmetry (in the form of non-retrogradable rhythm), at the same time it paradoxically gives the effect of asymmetry (see excerpt from this section in Example 23). The intent appears to be the same as that in the fourth movement: the suspension of regular time.

The subject appears with added motifs on either side to form a series of symmetrical, non-retrogradable rhythms. The motifs diminish in length on each consecutive repetition (Messiaen refers to this process as 'a development by elimination of extremities'). Messiaen analyses exactly how this happens in *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur et d'Ornithologie* Volume 2, 32-35.
5.3. - Messiaen's Use of Symmetry and Asymmetry: Conclusion

*Vingt Regards* is based on both symmetry and asymmetry. Messiaen uses both intentionally as a means to express a common objective: an alternative experience of time. The symmetries found in his music provide an image of
eternity in their irreversibility; the asymmetries provide an experience of the suspension of the regular experience of time, in this way bringing the listener closer to God. As with Messiaen's use of metrical and ametrical rhythm, the unified aim behind these apparently opposing components is to bring the audience closer to an experience of divinity. Whether or not the listener is consciously aware of the symmetry or lack of symmetry is irrelevant: together they create that experience of the temporal that is uniquely Messiaen.
Chapter Six

Inward Reflection and Outward Emotion

*Vingt Regards* presents us with an expression of the Mystery of the Incarnation. Messiaen’s means of expression revolves around two different approaches: one is inwardly reflective; the other depicts outward emotion.

The ‘reflective’ approach is represented by contemplative, ‘inward-looking’ music. Although all the movements attempt to transcend time in some way or another, this reflective approach is often found in those movements focussing specifically on an expression of eternity. Messiaen attempts to suspend time, therefore drawing the listener to reflection or meditation. The effect of this could almost be considered a mystical experience; the aim appears to be to draw the listener closer to God, through the medium of music. Messiaen believes:

> The one sole reality is of a different order: it is to be found in the realm of Faith. Only by encountering another Being can we understand it. But to do that, we have to pass through death and resurrection, and that implies the leap out of temporal things. Strangely enough, music can prepare us for it, as a picture, as a reflection, as a symbol.... The musician who thinks, sees, hears, speaks, is able, by means of these fundamental ideas, to come closer to the next world to a certain extent. And, as St. Thomas says: music brings us to God through "default of truth", until the day when He Himself will dazzle us with "an excess of truth". That is perhaps the significant meaning ... of music... ¹

The ‘outward’ or ‘emotive’ approach is, in a sense more direct. ² Rather than being drawn towards a personal experience of God, Messiaen depicts the emotions stirred by contemplation of the divine and spiritual experience. These movements could be considered more descriptive, or theological, than

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¹ Rössler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen*, 10.
² The use of the word ‘emotive’ here is not intended to imply that ‘inwardly reflective’ movements do not stir emotions in the performer or listener. Rather, those movements considered inwardly reflective have as their primary intent an alternative experience of time, in this way allowing reflection and contemplation. Emotion is a by-product. In contrast, those movements considered expressive of outward emotion (or emotive) have as their primary intent description of aspects of Messiaen’s faith, in this way stirring emotions.
mystical. Extreme ends of the emotional spectrum (in the form of joy and sorrow) are represented. The emotions expressed are intense: be it exuberant joy or deep despair; exultant hope and glory or awesome fear. Emotions are felt intensely and expressed outwardly and directly.

Some movements in Vingt Regards can be considered completely ‘interior’ (inward looking); others can be considered completely ‘exterior’ (depicting outward emotion). A number of movements combine elements of both.

This type of classification (into ‘interior’ or ‘inward’ and ‘exterior’ or ‘outward’) could be considered very subjective. It is difficult to see on the basis of the printed score alone. It is more obvious through listening to the music. However, it only really becomes apparent in performing the music. The more the performer gets to the heart of this music, and the more the music is lived, and experienced, the more obvious this dichotomy of ‘inward’ and ‘outward’ becomes.

The main movements that are considered ‘interior’ are movements I and V. Extended passages of movement XIX can also be considered ‘interior’. There are many more ‘exterior’ movements than ‘interior’ ones: movements III, VI, VIII, X, XII, XIV, XVI, XVIII and XX can all be considered predominantly ‘exterior’. On first impressions and to the uninitiated listener this may be somewhat surprising; surely a ‘religious’ work should consist mainly of reflective, contemplative music? However, as already outlined, Messiaen’s music is not intended primarily as mystical; it is intended as theological. In the main, its intention is not experiential, but rather descriptive: his aim is to ‘reveal’ his faith.

In general, many of the inward-looking movements feature tonally or modally-based harmonies, quite slow tempi and rhythmic devices that serve to blur the passage of time. In addition, the dynamic level is usually quite

3 The distinction between theological and mystical has already been made (see Chapter One p. 7).
soft and often operating within a comparatively narrow range. In general, the outward movements often feature faster tempi, the rhythm is often more clearly delineated and the harmony features more atonal writing.

6.1. - Inward Reflection in *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*

The first movement of the cycle, *Regard du Père* is perhaps the most inward looking of the entire cycle. As described in Chapter Four, this movement presents the birth of Jesus as viewed by God. It is marked *mystérieux, avec amour*. The hypnotic rhythm and the very slow tempo create a feeling of stillness. This combines with the thematic repetition to create a feeling that time is irrelevant. Time is, for the duration of the movement, suspended. The listener can only wait for the slow, gradual, imperceptible unfolding of events. The listener becomes passive, as Messiaen ‘reveals’ the form to us. The listener is not required to do anything; all he can do is allow himself to be almost ‘hypnotised’ by the inevitability of what is occurring. Messiaen's intent seems to be to draw the listener into a state of calm; a meditative state where he can be in quiet contemplation of the entity being presented.

However, it can be argued that there is also a sense of progression through the two extended phrases and the coda. There is a sense of journey, and of fulfilment in the rise to the final F sharp major chord (see Example 24a). The listener emerges from his meditative state feeling something inexpressible has occurred; something has changed.

The contrast between the first and second movements of the cycle presents a particularly vivid illustration of the ‘inward-outward’ dichotomy at work. The last bar of the first movement is very slow, *ppp* (followed by a *diminuendo*), and consists of seemingly never-ending repeated octaves heard over an F sharp major chord with an added sixth. In direct contrast, the first bar of the second movement consists of an upward *forte* flourish in a much
faster tempo on chords based mostly on augmented seconds and perfect fourths. The contrasts between tempi, dynamic level and harmony are clear and effective; these elements together form the inward-outward dichotomy that forms the basis of Messiaen's music (see Examples 24a and 24b).

Example 24a - I, 19 (p. 5).

Example 24b - II, 1-2 (p. 6).

While the first movement inspires inward reflection mainly through rhythmic and melodic repetition, the opening of the nineteenth movement (Je dors, mais mon cœur veille) does so through harmonic repetition. The opening of this movement is very special and quite unusual: the first eight bars are based entirely on an F sharp major harmony (see Example 6b, Chapter Three, p. 38). No notes extraneous to this harmony are heard. At the notated tempo, this translates as over a minute's duration of pure F sharp major harmony. This is spread out over a melody that seems to remain static: because there is only one harmony, the tensions automatically created by the juxtaposition of

See Chapter Four pp. 49-50.
two chords are absent. Instead the melodic lines revolve continuously around the notes of F sharp major. The rhythm is ametrical and gently unpredictable — any sense of time is abolished. This harmonic repetition, static melody and supple rhythm combine with the soft dynamic range (pianissimo) to draw the listener towards reflection. This section re-appears in a more extended section at the end (see Volume II, XIX, bars 69-76, p. 157).

The sections that follow the opening eight bars are more dynamic. However, they may still be considered 'inward-looking', but more actively, intensely so. In the preface to the cycle, Messiaen described this movement as ‘a poem of love, a dialogue of mystical love’.

Perhaps the dialogue referred to is that between the static, peaceful opening idea and the more dynamic ideas that follow. Whatever the case, this movement seems to be a very personal meditation on divinity and humanity. While other movements can be seen as pictorial and descriptive this movement appears to be on a much more intimate level. It would appear that the ‘Je’ (‘I’) of the title is of particular significance.

6.2. - Outward Emotion in Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus: joy, suffering and pain

Many movements of the cycle stand in complete contrast to both movements I and XIX. Movement X, Regard de l'Esprit de joie is a noteworthy example. The quotation at the head of this movement reads:

A vehement dance, the intoxicating sound of horns, transport of the Holy Spirit...the joyful love of God in his blessedness, in the soul of Jesus-Christ.

What emerges forcefully in this movement is the pure unbridled joy that Messiaen associates with his faith. He writes in the preface to the cycle:

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5 Messiaen, Vingt Regards, iv.
6 This movement is the only movement of the cycle that contains the personal pronoun ‘je’ in the title.
7 Messiaen, Vingt Regards, 58.
I have always been astonished by the fact that God is happy - and that this incessant and inexpressible joy lives in the soul of Christ. This joy is for me a rapture, an ecstasy, in the craziest sense of the term.8

Messiaen’s use of words such as ‘vehement’, ‘intoxicating’, ‘rapture’, ‘ecstasy’, and ‘crazy’ in both the preface and the score, points to the energy that Messiaen feels compelled to express in this movement as part of his faith. This stands in polar opposition to the type of calm, quiet, meditative music that typically might be expected in music of a religious nature. It is also in polar opposition to the type of expression of his faith found in the ‘inward’ movements described above.

Movement X represents joy as one aspect of Messiaen’s faith. However, another duality exists within the inward-outward duality: as already noted,9 Messiaen also expresses the fear and the terror that are found in the Bible and states that violence and awe-inspiring power exist in the Scriptures ‘...and I’ve expressed it such as it is’.10 This side of Messiaen’s faith finds expression in movements III, VII, XII and XVIII.

Movement XII (La Parole toute-puissante) focuses on the child Jesus and his all-powerful nature. The quotation at the head of the movement reads:

This child is the Word who bears all things by the strength of his word...11

It is based on a theme that is influenced by Korean, Hindu and Greek music. The use of one idea for the whole movement may symbolise the all-powerful nature of the Word. The melody is based on a melodic mode that uses all twelve notes of the chromatic scale,12 again perhaps a symbol of the totality of God’s power. The whole movement is marked ff and is heavily accented; the strength of dynamic symbolises the 'strength of its word'. The piano is treated orchestrally, with a rhythmic pedal in the form of a three-note cluster in its extreme register, representing a tam-tam (see Example 25).

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8 Ibid., ii.
9 See Chapter One p. 8.
10 Samuel, Conversations with Olivier Messiaen, 8.
11 Messiaen, Vingt Regards, 84.
Example 25 - XII, 1-6 (p. 84).

The influence of the Book of Apocalypse, where 'two aspects confront each other: one, the catastrophes which bring about the end of the world and the other, the adoration, the ecstasy and the glory and majesty of God' has already been noted in Chapter One (p. 8). Movements III and VII seem to depict the 'confrontation' of both these aspects. Both contain powerful emotions, outwardly expressed. Messiaen refers to a verse from the Gospel of John: 'Light which shines in the darkness and which the darkness does not understand.' Movements III and VII seem to depict both light and darkness simultaneously. The ending of the third movement does so particularly powerfully. This movement, *L'Échange*, focuses on the exchange between humanity and divinity in Jesus. The quotation at the start of the movement reads:

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12 See Messiaen's analysis of this movement outlining its construction and the influences on it in *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur et d'Ornithologie* Volume 2, 472-473.
13 Rössler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen*, 53.
Descent in a shower of sparks, ascension in spirals; awesome traffic between the human and divine. God is made man in order to make us gods.  

This movement is structured as a crescendo, and the build-up from the initial pianissimo to the accented, $fff$ chords at the end is truly terrifying. The repeated reiteration of the three-note motif E-E flat-F (bars 25-30) and the A-B dissonance heard in the final bar appear to encapsulate human suffering, despair and darkness. It could be argued that the final chord represents a shard of light – perhaps this is a symbol of the entry of Jesus into humanity, or a precursor of the joy that is to come when humanity is ‘made into a god’. It could also be a representation of two extremes found on earth: joy and suffering, good and evil, light and dark. There is a further spiritual symbol to be found in this bar: the ‘shard of light’ combines with darkness to complete the twelve-note series: a representation of the complete union and merging of humanity and divinity found in Jesus (see Example 26). Gone is the passive inward reflection that is found in the first movement. In this movement emotions are directly and intensely expressed.

Example 26 - III, 28 - 31 (p. 11).

Movement VII, Regard de la Croix depicts the pain and suffering of Jesus and humanity. This movement is based on the theme of the star and the cross that was first heard in the second movement of the cycle, Regard de l’étoile. Here the theme is harmonised by dragging, dissonant chords. These chords could be interpreted as a symbolic depiction of the weight of the cross Jesus carries, and the burden of sin carried by humanity; they represent the
darkness Messiaen refers to above in the verse from the Gospel of John (see p. 75). Yet the octaves that embrace the chords (and spell out the theme of the star and the cross) seem to represent light. In their purity they represent hope and the Resurrection – the life that is to come after death (see Example 27).

Example 27 - VII, 1-3 (p. 46).

The final chord of the movement has no thematic connection with what came before. It seems to be comparable to the ‘shard of light’ that is heard so strongly at the end of the third movement, except here it is heard quietly, almost like an afterthought. Out of darkness comes light (see Example 28).

Example 28 - VII, 27-29 (p. 48).
6.3. - Inward Reflection and Outward Emotion Combine

Some movements combine both the inward and the outward in a very obvious way. For example, the fourth movement, *Regard de la Vierge*, is built on two main ideas. The opening features ametrical rhythm, thematic repetition and a quiet dynamic level; this represents the internal, private joy of a mother gazing at her new-born child (see Example 22 p. 65). The contrasting *Modéré* section (see Volume II, IV, bars 35-62, p. 14-15) is louder, more metrical and constantly changes ideas. Bruhn suggests this represents the sense of foreboding and premonition Mary feels for her child:16

Mary's pure joy over the child just born to her is overshadowed by the premonition that a sword will pierce her heart as her son meets his destiny.17

Alternately Hill suggests this middle section, with its allusions to bells and birdsong, could be a celebration of motherhood (see excerpt from this section in Example 29).18

Example 29 - Excerpt from *Modéré* section, IV, 36-43 (p. 14).

16 This is also suggested by Philip Carty in 'Olivier Messiaen's *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus: Their Inspiration and Representation* (MA diss., N.U.I. St. Patrick's College Maynooth, December 1993), 28.
18 Hill, 'Piano Music 1' in *The Messiaen Companion*, 98.
The eleventh movement, *Première Communion de la Vierge*, is another example of this combination of inward reflection and outward emotion: inward reflection here transforms into exuberant joy. The quotation at the head of the movement reads:

After the Annunciation, Mary is in adoration before Jesus within her... my God, my son, my Magnificat! - my love without the sound of words.¹⁹

This reflects the presence of the two elements in this movement: on the one hand is the 'adoration', expressed 'without the sound of words'; on the other hand is the joy and praise found in the 'Magnificat'. Markings in the score support this labelling as 'inward' or 'outward'. The outer sections are actually marked 'intérieur' [interior] (see Example 30a), and the words 'embrasement intérieur' [interior embrace] appear in the closing section (see Volume II, XI, bar 76, p. 83). It could be argued that these sections are intended both as a depiction of the inner, private joy of an expectant mother, and an opportunity for audience and performer to reflect on the intimacy of the event. Messiaen describes this intimacy in the preface to the cycle:

A picture of the Virgin on her knees, at night, in contemplation of her own body - a halo of light hanging over her womb. With eyes closed, she worships the fruit that is hidden inside her.²⁰

Example 30a - XI, 1-2 (p. 77).

In contrast, the middle section from bar 21 (which differs from the outer sections in tempo, dynamic level, rhythmic style and texture) is described in

¹⁹ Messiaen, *Vingt Regards*, 77.
the score as 'Magnificat - with a breathless enthusiasm' (see an excerpt from the middle section in Example 30b). Notably, although both sections are completely contrasted in character, they are based on the same thematic material, the theme of God. This is discussed in the next section.

Example 30b - XI, 29-32 (p. 79).

6.4. - The Changing Role of Recurring Features: from inward reflection to outward emotion

It is interesting to note the changing role of some recurring features in Vingt Regards. For example, the theme of God is heard as a reflective, inward-looking calm theme in movements I, V, and the opening and closing sections of movement XI; while in movement X and the middle section of XI, it appears transformed into an exuberant dance of joy. It is further transformed in the final movement of the cycle, Regard de l'Église d'amour, where it becomes an all-consuming apotheosis of everything that has gone before – here it seems almost apocalyptic in nature. (See Examples 31a and 31b, and compare these to Example 6a p. 37.)

20 Ibid., iii.
The role of birdsong also undergoes a change in the course of the cycle. It is a less obvious change than that of the theme of God, but it is nevertheless noticeable in a comparison between movements V and VIII, the two main movements based on birdsong in the cycle. Movement V, *Regard du Fils sur le Fils*, depicts ‘*les oiseaux du silence*’ (‘the birds of silence’)\(^{21}\) – the birds represent ‘the experience of a...mystical joy’.\(^{22}\) They are heard as distant (*piano* dynamic), and are heard floating over the theme of God – there is something almost ecstatic and ‘other-worldly’ about these birds (see Volume II, V, bars 22-33, pp. 19-20 and bars 53-65, pp. 22-23). No bird species are identified in the score - the reference is simply to *comme un chant d'oiseau* (see excerpt from this section in Example 32).

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\(^{22}\) *Johnson, Messiaen*, 42.
Example 32 - V, 53-56 (p. 22).

Contrast this with movement VIII (Regard des hauteurs), which is almost completely based on birdsong. Specific birds are named in the score, indicating that these birds are much more real.\(^{23}\) Messiaen writes at the head of the movement:

Glory in the highest...the highest comes down to the crib like the song of the lark.\(^{24}\)

These birds are singing of the glory of God. The birdsong in this movement is more 'present' and less distant than in movement V (the birdsong in movement VIII is marked mostly \textit{mf} or \textit{f}). (See Examples 12a, 12b and 12c pp. 48-49.)

To conclude, movement V may be considered to represent ecstatic, inwardly reflective music that is symbolic of birdsong, while movement VIII

\(^{23}\) 'Le rossignol', 'l'alouette' and 'le merle' are all identified in the score (bars 4, 9 and 59 respectively) – other birds are mentioned in the preface (Messiaen, \textit{Vingt Regards}, ii).

\(^{24}\) Messiaen, \textit{Vingt Regards}, 49.
represents more outwardly exuberant, joyful birds that are, importantly, intended to be more realistic.\textsuperscript{25}

6.5. - Messiaen’s Approach - Inward Reflection and Outward Emotion: Conclusion

In conclusion, Messiaen expresses his faith through a dual approach: both inward reflection and outward emotion have their place in this work. Movements that fall into the former category focus on a mystical experience that cannot be tangibly described and therefore must be experienced; those that fall into the latter category offer a more objective theological description. Within those movements that can be considered outwardly expressive, Messiaen expresses two extremes of the emotional spectrum; as the Bible expresses both joy and suffering, so Messiaen’s music reflects this.

Whatever Messiaen wishes to express - be it meditative reflection, exuberant joy or overwhelming despair - the intensity of expression and conviction are always there. This intensity arises from his fervent desire to sincerely express the mysteries of his faith. Thus, inward reflection and outward emotion represent two wholly different, yet equally valid means of expressing a common aim: Messiaen’s faith.

\textsuperscript{25} This increasing desire for a realistic representation of birdsong is an important development in Messiaen’s style, considering his overall compositional development towards a more realistic ‘bird-style’.
Chapter Seven

Simplicity and Complexity

Messiaen’s music may be listened to, or interpreted in terms of varying degrees of simplicity and complexity. Accordingly, *Vingt Regards* can be considered in a number of different ways.

There are occasions of extreme musical simplicity in Messiaen’s music, specifically in the areas of harmony, melody, rhythm, form, thematic ideas and texture. However, it is rarely simple in all these ways simultaneously. Often those passages that are musically extremely simple are transformed through a complex system of symbols and cross-references into something that is invariably of spiritual significance.

However, not all of Messiaen’s music sounds simple on a purely musical level. Indeed, on first impression, and to those unfamiliar with his music in particular, most of it can seem highly complex musically. Ideas, usually of religious inspiration, are expressed through complex harmonies that frequently defy conventional harmonic analysis. The rhythmic structure sometimes seems bizarrely random, and the textures are occasionally so complex as to appear chaotic. However, in this chaos one cannot help but feel that there is a logic governing it; just as there are laws governing physical phenomena in this world, there is a ‘divine order’, a logical simplicity behind much of Messiaen’s music (even if it is not immediately apparent). The apparently complex musical ideas combine either in a direct simply pictorial way, or in a more complex way using a range of symbols and cross-references. Sometimes even the ordering and organisation of the material may function as a complex spiritual symbol.
Whether the material used is simple or complex, what it expresses (which is spirituality) can be interpreted as either simple or complex, depending on the listener's point of view. Messiaen's faith was a fundamental, elemental part of his life. It appears to have been beyond doubt, and therefore can be considered simple on a certain level:

What do I believe? That doesn't take long to say and in it everything is said at once: I believe in God.\(^1\)

An examination of his many writings and interviews reveals that his beliefs appear to be unwavering: 'I have the good fortune to be a Catholic; I was born a believer.'\(^2\)

7.1. - Musical Simplicity; Symbolic Complexity

The opening of movement XIX of *Vingt Regards, Je dors, mais mon cœur veille* is an example of extreme harmonic and melodic simplicity in Messiaen's music. As has already been outlined,\(^3\) the first eight bars (which recur in extended form as the closing section of this movement) are based entirely on an F sharp major harmony, with no extra notes (see Example 6b, p. 38). This section is marked *pianissimo* and there are no significant dynamic changes in these eight bars. The placing of this movement between the harmonic and rhythmic complexities of the end of the eighteenth movement, and the flourishes of the start of the twentieth movement serves to highlight the simplicity of the material being used (see Examples 33a, 33b and 33c).

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\(^1\) Rössler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen*, 39.


\(^3\) See Chapter Six pp. 72-73.
Although this thematic material sounds extremely simple there are complex symbols and references at work. Tonality is of particular significance in this movement. Certain keys have certain associations for Messiaen – F sharp major, which is the key signature used throughout this movement, is of particular significance to him. In this cycle, the overall tonality may be considered to be F sharp major.\(^4\) Because the main recurring theme of the

\(^4\) This is for a number of reasons: almost any time a key signature is written it is F sharp major that is chosen (movement X is an exception); the main recurring theme of the cycle (the theme of God) occurs in F sharp major on its first hearing (in movement I), and is
cycle, the theme of God is usually in F sharp major (and in the mid-range of
the keyboard, and at a soft dynamic level), this tonal area is - from the very
first movement - associated with divinity. By the time this movement of the
cycle is heard, the tonal area has been sufficiently established to be enough
in itself to suggest subliminally to the listener divinity and the theme of God.

Why does Messiaen seem to associate this tonal area so strongly with
divinity? A possible reason is that he describes the colours he associates with
F sharp major as ‘a sparkling of all possible colours’.5 As already noted,6
Messiaen has also referred to knowledge of God as ‘a perpetual
dazzlement, an eternal music of colors, an eternal color of musics’.7 This may explain
why Messiaen associates this key so strongly with divinity: both the key of F
sharp major and experience of God provide an experience of dazzlement
through colour.

Another symbol that is found in the opening section of this movement is the
falling perfect fourth, which emerges as an important interval (see bars 2, 4
and 7 of Example 6b p. 38). This interval recurs throughout this movement,
and it also occurs in inversion as a falling perfect fifth (for example in bar
10). It is likely that this interval is an allusion to the theme of Love, a theme
that plays an important part in this movement. There are many allusions to
this theme before a variation of it is finally ‘revealed’ in bars 24-25, where it
becomes the main thematic material (see Example 34).

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5 Rössler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen*, 118.
6 See Chapter One p. 13.
7 Rössler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen*, 66.
As already discussed, the theme of Love developed from the theme of God. In this way, a simple interval (a falling perfect fourth) serves to function as a complex symbol of love, and God's love in particular.

And so, this opening material of movement XIX, which is musically very simple, is in fact symbolically quite complex. It works on associations built up in the listener's mind throughout the experience of the entire cycle to suggest much more than is apparent on examining this movement in isolation, or on a purely musical level.

The first movement of the cycle, Regard du Père, is another example of apparent simplicity. Simplicity is found in the structure: formally it is based on two extended phrases and a Coda. Conventional formal procedures are even suggested, as the close of the first phrase (bars 1-9) suggest a move to the dominant, and the close of the second phrase (bars 9-17) suggests a return to the tonic. Thematically there is little contrast: once the idea is set up it is kept consistently for the entire movement. This consistency of thematic material may be considered a type of simplicity. The idea used is simple in itself: the theme of God is stated in the middle register and echoed in a higher register. The melodic outline is further echoed in bare octaves. The two phrases and the Coda are very similar melodically and harmonically — the turn to the dominant and the return to the tonic require certain harmonic

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8 See Example 5 p. 36.
9 The move to the dominant is suggested in bar 7, which rests on a dominant chord in root position with added minor ninth.

Example 34 - XIX, 24-25 (p. 153).
shifts, but the idea is the same. Rhythmically the movement is very simple – it is almost completely metrical\textsuperscript{11} and a semiquaver ostinato is heard throughout.

Formally, thematically, harmonically, melodically and rhythmically this movement is very simple, as described above. Yet it is marked \textit{mystérieux}. Through musical and symbolic means it seeks to express one of the most complex aspects of the Catholic faith: the eternal, omnipresent nature of God. The way Messiaen does this is often surprisingly simple: the lack of thematic contrast serves to illustrate the omnipresence of God.\textsuperscript{12} The extremely slow tempo and the use of repetition help to break the connections between chords and create a feeling of suspension of regular time, giving an experience of eternity. There are also examples of number symbolism found in this movement: the music is notated on three staves; three different layers are heard (theme, echo of theme and echo of melodic outline); each beat is subdivided into triplets; the form is tripartite (phrase one, phrase two and coda) and three 'bells' are heard between sections (see Volume II, I, bars 8 and 16, pp. 3 and 5). Three is the number of the Trinity and, as has been stated above, is of special significance for Messiaen (see Example 6a p. 37).

\textsuperscript{10} The return to the tonic is suggested in bar 15, which rests on a tonic chord in second inversion with Messiaen's typical added sixth.

\textsuperscript{11} As outlined in Chapter Four, although no time signature is specified in movement I, it may be considered to be in 8/8, except the first bar, which contains seven quavers.

\textsuperscript{12} Many movements, particularly in the first part of the cycle (movements I-X) contain a minimum of thematic material and contain simply one or two ideas. For example, movement I is based mainly on the theme of God, movement II on the theme of the star and the cross and movement III on the process of asymmetrical enlargement. Movement V concentrates on the theme of God, with rhythmic canon and birdsong alternating over it. Movement VII focuses on the theme of the star and the cross (harmonised by dragging chords), movement VIII on birdsong. Movement IX alternates a 'short, cold, strange' theme with a rhythmic canon. All the movements described above are thematically and formally quite simple.

It is interesting to note that in the second half of the cycle there appears to be many more themes and ideas in each movement – the focus is not so strongly on a particular idea or process in each movement. Perhaps in this way the first half of the cycle may be considered a type of exposition of ideas; the second half of the cycle a development of these ideas. The last movement may be considered a summation, or a compendium of all the ideas heard throughout the cycle – there is nothing in this movement that cannot be traced to previous movements in some way. See Chapter Three for alternative ways of viewing the structure of the cycle.
To sum up, in *Regard du Père*, apparent musical simplicity (in the areas of form, thematic material, harmony, melody and rhythm) is used to express a spiritual concept of extreme complexity - the very nature of God. This is achieved through a variety of ways some of which can be regarded as simple (such as a lack of thematic repetition); others can be regarded as more complex (such as number symbolism and devices to 'end time').

### 7.2. - Musical Complexity Concealing Simplicity: Messiaen’s ‘divine order’

As outlined at the start of this chapter, Messiaen’s musical approach often sounds as if it is built on complexities. This is due to the wide range of musical elements used and the manner in which they are combined. However, there exists a logic behind his use of materials. It is through an understanding of the logical manner in which these elements are structured that the underlying simplicity of the music is revealed. This simple sense of order is discovered through examination of his modes of limited transposition, from which his harmonies and melodies are carefully constructed. Similarly, his rhythms (while they may at first seem random), usually, on closer examination, reveal a logical thought process. This often takes the form of rhythmic canon, additive values, non-retrogradable rhythm, Indian deçî-tâlas and use of rhythmic values that progressively increase or decrease. The clarity of thought and simple sense of order behind Messiaen’s harmonic and rhythmic procedures are obviously important to him, as indicated in *The Technique of My Musical Language*, where he gave a full account of his use of both elements. Furthermore, he often labels specific modes or rhythmic procedures in the score, indicating that such details are important to him.

13 Messiaen does this throughout *Vingt Regards*. For example specific modes are labelled in movement V (pp. 18-24), and he identifies his rhythmic procedures in the opening page of the last movement (bars 2, 4 and 6, p. 158).
There are a number of rhythmic canons to be found in the cycle. Rhythmic canon is a good example of musical complexity concealing simplicity. The effect may be complex but the actual process of rhythmic canon is simple and straightforward - a rhythm is set up in one part and the other parts imitate it. In the fifth movement, *Regard du Fils sur le Fils*, the theme of God is heard with two layers of chords floating above it (see Example 13, p. 51). On first listening, these chords may seem to intertwine randomly and in a complex fashion, without any discernible sense of order. However, the chords are ordered in such a way as to form a rhythmic canon - but as already noted it is not exactly a conventional one. The same canon occurs at the opening of the seventeenth movement. What initially sounds complex and random is in fact ordered according to a simple principle, that of canon (however unconventionally it is used).

The fourteenth movement of the cycle, *Regard des anges* is headed:

Shimmering, percussion; powerful breath in immense trombones; your servants are flames of fire...then birdsong devouring blue, -and the amazement of the angels grows: -for it is not to them but to the human race that God has united himself...14

The musical elements used in this movement can sound quite complex. A variety of thematic material is used, including rhythmic canons (see Volume II, XIV, bars 9 – 13, pp. 98-99), and a final section that follows the principles involved in asymmetrical enlargement without actually following the process exactly (see Volume II, XIV, bars 134-156, p. 107).

However, despite the complexity found in the proliferation of musical ideas, a level of simplicity is found in the way Messiaen portrays the ideas in the quotation at the start of the movement. He does so in a straightforward, simple way, and in a very direct, pictorial manner, where the elements of the quotation are easily identifiable on hearing the music. The opening four bars (and similar sections) represent the ‘shimmering’ (see Example 35a). Bars 5-13 (and similar sections) represent the ‘percussion’ (see Volume II, XIV, bars 5-13, pp. 98-99). The following five bars (bars 14-18) are the

14 Messiaen, *Vingt Regards*, 98.
‘trombones’ (which Messiaen has even notated as such in the score). (See an excerpt from this section in Example 35b.) The ‘birdsong’ is heard from bars 78 to 127 (see excerpt from this section in Example 35c). Again, Messiaen writes this in the score (comme un oiseau). The final section (from bar 134) illustrates the ‘growing amazement of the angels’. Messiaen identifies this in the score as ‘La stupeur des anges s’agrandit’.

Example 35a - XIV, 1-4 (p. 98).

Example 35b - XIV, 14-15 (p. 107).
Example 35c - XIV, 92-97 (p. 104).

This movement may be seen as a simple direct pictorial representation of the elements described in the quotation at the start of the movement, achieved through the use of a variety of complex musical elements and processes.

A further level of complexity may be identified in this movement in the manipulation of formal proportions. Many of the ideas recur extended (in length) on each repetition. For example, the first time the rhythmic canon is heard it is five bars long (see Volume II, XIV, bars 9-13, pp. 98-99). On subsequent repetitions it is extended to 9 and 14 bars (see Volume II, XIV, bars 29-37, p. 100 and bars 55-68, p. 102). Similarly the 'trombone' theme is 5 bars long at first (see Volume II, XIV, bars 14-18, p. 99), then 6 and 9 bars long (see Volume II, XIV, bars 38-43, p. 100-101 and bars 69-77, p. 102-103). The final two-bar statement of it (see Volume II, XIV, bars 132-133, p. 107) leads straight into an extended 23-bar section based on the trombone theme. The increasing formal proportions may be seen as a further representation of the 'growing amazement of the angels' described in the quotation at the head of the movement.

In summation, Regards des anges contains a wide variety of complex musical ideas. However, the way they are used is quite simple - they are used
as simple pictorial representations of the ideas expressed at the start of the movement. There is, however, a further level of complexity found in the use of formal proportions to symbolically represent an idea.

The sixth movement of the cycle, *Par Lui tout a été fait*, is perhaps the most complex. The technical demands made on the performer are great, and the sheer length of the movement, combined with the variety and complexity of musical elements can seem overwhelming to the listener approaching this movement for the first time. The quotation at the start of this movement reads:

Profusion of spaces and durations; galaxies, photons, spirals in contrary motion, inverted lightning flashes; all things were made by Him... at one point, creation reveals to us the luminous shadow of his voice...\(^{15}\)

This movement is intended to portray an idea that is conceptually quite simple and straightforward in itself: Creation, in all its chaos. It does this through complex musical means.

Despite the fact that this movement, on hearing it for the first time, may sound somewhat chaotic and random, unsurprisingly, Messiaen has a 'grand plan' behind its form. It is in this 'grand plan' that a level of simplicity may be found. The movement is in two main sections. The first section (bars 1-129) corresponds to the surreal images of galaxies, photons etc. found in the first part of the quotation. The second section (bars 130 – 231) corresponds to the revealing of God's voice. The importance of proportion and formal organization in this movement is outlined in Chapter Five, where the similarity between the formal proportions and the rhythm rāgavardhana is noted.\(^{16}\) The high degree of organization found in the formal proportions gives complex musical elements a sense of order, and as such, a certain simplicity.

The high level of formal organization found in this movement is remarkable, and once one is aware of it, a level of simplicity emerges in both the whole

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\(^{15}\) Messiaen, *Vingt Regards*, 25.

\(^{16}\) See Chapter Five pp. 61-63.
(in the overall structure of the movement) and the details involved in the construction of that whole. However, the listener is unlikely to become aware of this order through listening to the music alone - the first section of this movement, at least, is likely to sound like a complex depiction of the chaos of the creation of the universe. Some amount of analysis is likely to be necessary to consciously appreciate the degree of organization contained therein. For Messiaen, whether or not the listener is aware of the order or the symmetry is irrelevant - it exists, and will be effective regardless. His opinion on 'the hearer of our modal and rhythmic music' can be extended to this movement: one can surmise that Messiaen feels the listener will feel the 'magical strength' of the movement's organization and will be 'charmed' by it 'in spite of himself'.\(^{17}\) Perhaps a parallel may be made between this organization behind the seeming chaos of the sixth movement and the order and scientific laws that govern seemingly random acts of chance in our world. Paradoxically, in this movement, order gives a sense of disorder; simplicity gives a sense of complexity.

7.3. - Asymmetrical Enlargement: simplicity and complexity combine

Those movements and passages that are based on asymmetrical enlargement are interesting in any discussion of simplicity and complexity in Messiaen's music. As already outlined in Chapter Two,\(^ {18}\) asymmetrical enlargement is a process based on a very simple premise: an idea or motif is repeated, changing slightly on each repetition according to a strict process. The most obvious example of this process at work in the cycle is found in the third movement, \textit{L'Échange} (see Example 3 p. 27). In this movement a two-bar motif is subjected to this simple process. Each note either moves up a semitone, down a semitone or stays the same on each repetition. Simplicity is found in the strictness of application of the procedure. Once the process is set up it is left to automaton. In this movement the idea is repeated until the

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\(^{17}\) See Chapter Two p. 24.

\(^{18}\) See Chapter Two p. 26.
original pattern is about to return. The effect is of gradual metamorphosis, a three-dimensional growth and expansion in terms of ‘space’. This is all achieved within a massive crescendo, which gives a real sense of direction to the changes.

Although the process is based on a simple idea, on first impression the effect of the process may be of extreme complexity, even chaos. However, the growth is gradually revealed on each consecutive repetition of the motif – every time the two-bar motif is heard a little bit more of Messiaen’s simple, overruling ‘divine order’ is revealed.

There is a further layer of complexity found in this movement. Within the simplicity of process, there are many complex symbols at work to depict the exchange between humanity and divinity. Messiaen hints at the symbolism in this movement in the preface to the score, where he writes:

God is represented by alternating thirds: that which does not move, which is very small. Man is represented by the other fragments which grow and grow and become boundless, in accordance with a procedure of development, which I call asymmetrical enlargement.¹⁹

In summation, this movement (and other passages based on asymmetrical enlargement) sounds complex until the sense of order is revealed, at which point the simplicity of the process becomes apparent. As with most of Messiaen’s music, a level of complexity is evident in his use of symbol. Chaos is found within boundaries; complexity is found within simplicity.

7.4. - Simplicity and Complexity in Messiaen’s Music: Conclusion

There are instances of extreme musical simplicity in this cycle. However, this apparent simplicity often conceals complexity in the form of numerous spiritual symbols. Conversely, there are passages built on complexities of harmony, melody, rhythm, texture and process that can sometimes seem random. However, once the rules of Messiaen’s universe are known and
understood, complexity and chaos paradoxically become order. Sometimes Messiaen uses these complexities in a very direct, simply pictorial manner; other times he uses them in a more complex symbolic fashion.

Usually Messiaen's aim is to express his faith. Whether his faith can be considered simple or complex is a matter of opinion and is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, for Messiaen, whose faith was so strong and unwavering, it could probably be considered to contain a certain degree of simplicity.

And so in *Vingt Regards* there is complexity within simplicity, and simplicity within complexity. Paradoxically, what is simple on one level is complex on another; and what is complex on one level is in fact governed by simplicity. And so, the dichotomy is in fact one and the same: duality is unified.

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19 Messiaen, *Vingt Regards*, ii.
In the "Sept Haïkai" – as also in my "Chronochromie", and in most of my works – there's a kind of conflict between rigorous strictness and freedom... I've remained independent, and do not belong to any school. And I believe that the birds' example has helped me not to lose this freedom. Freedom is a necessity for artists... All the same, one has to understand the word freedom in its widest sense. The freedom about which I am speaking has nothing to do with fantasy, disorder, revolt or indifference. It is a constructive freedom, which is arrived at through self-control, respect for others, a sense of wonder of that which is created, meditation on the mystery and the search for the Truth. This wonderful freedom is like a foretaste of the freedom of Heaven. Christ promised it to his disciples when he said: "If you continue in my word, then... you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (John 8)¹

8.1. - What is Freedom?

The words 'control' and 'freedom' are difficult to define. This difficulty lies in the fact that complete freedom does not exist. The generally accepted meaning of the word 'freedom' incorporates an element of control: to be 'free' is to be free to exercise self-control. That is, to be free is to be free to control.

Some philosophers define two types of freedom: negative freedom and positive freedom. Negative freedom is:

the absence of coercion. Coercion is when other people force you to behave in a particular way, or force you to stop behaving in a particular way. If no one is coercing you then you are free in this negative sense of freedom.²

Positive freedom is

freedom to exercise control over your own life. You are free in the positive sense if you actually exercise control, and not free if you don't, even if you are not actually constrained in any way.³

¹ Rössler, Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen, 45-46.
Obviously, in a discussion of freedom in music, it is positive freedom that is of interest to us. It is not the question of whether a composer is free to behave in a particular way that concerns us (except in exceptional circumstances), but rather the question of choice to exercise control over the composition.

8.2. - Control and Freedom in Messiaen's Music

This chapter develops from the principle that there is a basic level of personal freedom found in all Messiaen's music, as he is free to choose to compose in whatever way he wishes. Layers of control are superimposed to varying degrees on this basic freedom. In this context, control refers to use of process, and a clearly defined sense of organization, order and structure. Freedom refers either to a lack of such processes, or the impression that such processes are not present.

On initial hearing Messiaen's music can often give the impression of complete freedom, and a complete lack of restriction in relation to aspects such as structure, melody, rhythm, harmony, etc. Sometimes this first impression reaches a point where any real sense of the underlying compositional structure and thought process is difficult to grasp. Messiaen has stated that he belongs to no particular school of musical thought or musical movement. This freedom from conventional 'rules' is important to him: 'I mistrust fashion, I belong to no movement, I float...'.

However, on closer inspection it becomes apparent that, far from being completely free, there is a high level of self-restraint or control underlying this impression of freedom. Messiaen composes within limitations or structural controls of his own making. He believes that the use of a high level of logical organization is important and essential in the music of our time:

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3 Ibid., 81.
the introduction of mathematics and the sciences into music is a reflection of our time, almost necessary and even inevitable. Consequently, his music is tightly structured according to processes that are, for the most part, of his own creation. The variety of processes that Messiaen uses may seem vast, but revolve mainly around his use of modes of limited transposition and his rhythmic theory. This importance of control and process to Messiaen can be seen in the fact that he often notates the process at work in a particular passage on the score: it is important to him that it is clear to the performer that a particular process is at work. Paradoxically, control and order give a sense of freedom and disorder.

Control, when it takes the form of compositional processes, sometimes acts as a spiritual symbol (see 'Formal Control', section 8.3. below). However, in general, Messiaen's exercising of control is not what is important in itself. Instead, it acts as a means to an end: expression of emotion in a manner that speaks to an audience.

I believe that even people who are not experts, who are not musicians, and are not interested in theology or ornithology, should be affected in some way if the music is sincere. When a piece of music is sincere, when it expresses an emotion faithfully, those who hear it get something from it. Maybe they don't do it consciously, but even so they receive a message which touches them. For me, that's the important thing. They're moved: that's what counts.

The importance of controlled, methodical process varies throughout Messiaen's career. The seeds of it are there in the early works. At the time Vingt Regards was composed, methods of ordering or controlling diverse musical elements were becoming increasingly important. This culminated in the determinism of Mode de valeurs et d'intensités (1949 - 50). The works that follow (Messe de la Pentecôte, 1950 and Livre d'Orgue, 1951) place a similar emphasis on process and organization. In later works, where birdsong becomes more important, one type of control or procedure is replaced by another (see 'Messiaen's Use of Birdsong', section 8.4. below). From Chronochromie (1960), the general trend is towards a music that integrates controlled process more closely with a freer approach.

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5 Samuel, Conversations with Olivier Messiaen, 122.
6 Nichols, 'Messiaen', Music and Musicians, 21.
8.3. - Messiaen's use of Compositional Control in *Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus*

**Rhythmic Control**

Messiaen’s aim was to compose music that was free from the regulating influence of the bar-line. Without the stabilising effect of a regular metre, he had to find an alternative way to control and ‘stabilise’ one of the most basic elements of any piece of music – the rhythm. Accordingly, methods of restraint, and methods of rhythmic control abound throughout Messiaen’s music.

Non-retrogradable rhythms are a type of self-restraint (in the form of rhythmic control) that is used throughout *Vingt Regards*. Once the first part of the rhythm and the axis value is decided upon the rest of the rhythm is left to automaton – the rhythm is simply reversed. There are many examples of these types of rhythms in *Vingt Regards*. Movements VI and IX contain examples of their use.\(^7\)

Another example of rhythmic control is found in Messiaen's use of predetermined rhythmic groupings. These are used frequently in *Vingt Regards* as an automatic controlling framework for melodies and rhythmic canons. Johnson identifies two such groupings:\(^8\) one is composed of three different Indian rhythms (rāgavardhana, candrakalā and lackskmiça),\(^9\) and the other of non-retrogradable cells (see Examples 36a and 36b).

![Example 36a - Rhythmic Pattern 1, built from Indian rhythms.](image)

\(^7\) See Example 23 p. 67 and Example 9a p. 41.

\(^8\) Johnson, *Messiaen*, 37.

\(^9\) This rhythmic grouping was described in Chapter 5 pp. 58-59.
Rhythmic Pattern 1 above is found in the rhythmic canons in the fifth and seventeenth movements of the cycle. It is also found in the rhythmic canons of movement VI (see Volume II, VI, bars 26-33, pp. 26-27, and bars 97-104, pp. 33-34), and movement XIV. Rhythmic Pattern 2 above is found in bars 13-20 and 110-117 of movement VI (see Volume II, VI, p. 26 and p. 34). The rhythmic pedal in the twelfth movement is also based on the first part of example 2 above: rhythmic values of 3, 5, 8, 5 and 3 semiquavers (followed by a 7 semiquaver rest) are heard in the lowest register of the piano (see Example 25 p. 75).

Progressively increasing and decreasing rhythmic values are another element of control used by Messiaen in *Vingt Regards*. This is a process whereby the rhythmic values either progressively increase or progressively decrease by a unit. In *Vingt Regards* the unit used is always a semiquaver. Johnson describes these types of rhythms as 'chromatic rhythms'. Once the decision has been made to use this device, and the starting value and the finishing value have been decided on, the rest of the rhythmic structure is left to automaton. Movement XVI is the first instance of this type of writing in the cycle. In bars 1-17 the rhythmic values of the repeating chords in the left hand progressively decrease by a semiquaver each time, from sixteen semiquavers to one semiquaver (see excerpt from this section in Example 15 p. 54). This is reversed (or retrograded) in bars 78-94, where the values progressively increase. A different version is found in movement XVIII, where the two rhythmic ideas found in movement XVI occur combined.

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10 Johnson, *Messiaen*, 94.

11 From bars 1-19 the values in the left hand progressively decrease from 16 semiquavers to 1 semiquaver. Simultaneously, the values in the right hand progressively increase from one semiquaver to 16 (see Volume II, XVIII, pp. 138-139). Parts are then swapped in bars 180-
Another example is found in movement XX, where the values in both hands progressively increase from one semiquaver to sixteen (see Example 37).

Example 37 - XX, 144-152 (p. 171).

A similar type of rhythmic control or pattern is used in the middle section of movement XI. From bars 53-70 (see Volume II, p. 81-82) the following rhythmic pattern emerges (all units are semiquavers):

1-3-2-4-3-5-4-6-5-7-6-8-7-9-8-10-9-11-10-12-11-13-12-14-13-15.

As with many of Messiaen's processes, the listener is unlikely to be aware of exactly what is going on structurally - in this case the process is perceived as a 'stretching' of time. Again, as with all of his processes and methods of control, the listener's awareness or lack of awareness of process is unimportant to him - he feels the effect of the process will be felt in either case (see excerpt from this section in Example 38).

198 (i.e. the left hand increases in values while the right hand decreases). (See Volume II, XVIII, p. 151.)
In conclusion, it is clear that Messiaen uses a variety of methods of rhythmic control in *Vingt Regards*, including non-retrogradable rhythms, predetermined rhythmic groupings, progressively changing rhythmic values and repeating rhythmic patterns. It is through this control that he finds his means of self-expression, and therefore, his personal freedom.

What is particularly interesting about Messiaen’s use of rhythmic control and process is that even when it is highly structured and organised, it often gives the impression of rhythmic freedom. This is due to the complex nature of his rhythms, (which are often ametrical) and his use of unconventional procedures (such as canons by addition of a dot), which are often difficult for the listener to identify.

It is also worth reiterating the obvious fact that (as with most composition, by its very nature, regardless of how highly structured it is), there is a certain freedom found even within control. There is always an element of choice involved in Messiaen’s use of rhythmic process – indeed, inherent within self-restraint, self-control and self-imposed limitation, is the liberty or freedom to use such methods of self-control. Messiaen never completely relinquishes his freedom for the sake of process.

**Formal Control**

*Vingt Regards* is a large cycle that contains many different ideas and themes. Its success and coherence is dependent on careful control of both overall

Example 38 - XI, 53-57 (p. 81).
form of the work and the form of individual movements of the work. Messiaen uses number symbolism to organise or control on a macro level and processes such as asymmetrical enlargement to control on a micro level.

Number symbolism is probably the single most important factor in controlling the overall form of the cycle. Messiaen indicates in his analysis of the work in Traité de Rythme, de Couleur et d’Ornithologie that many movements are ordered or controlled according to the principles of number symbolism:

Regards referring to divinity recur every five numbers: numbers I, V, X, XV and XX. The Regard de la Croix bears the number VII (a perfect number) because the sufferings of Christ on the Cross restored the order that was disturbed by sin, and the Angels are confirmed in grace in number XIV (two times seven). The Regard du Temps bears the number IX [representing] the nine months of maternity common to all children, and the Regard de l’Oncloction terrible has the number XVIII (two times nine) - here, divinity is poured out over the humanity of Christ in the one person who is the Son of God. The two pieces which speak of the Creation and the Divine Government of Creation are number VI (because six is the number of creation) and number XII (two times six).¹²

Johnson points out that five is also a number of divinity: 'five is the number of the Indian god Shiva who represents the death of death and is therefore a type of Christ.'¹³ Six is the number of Creation because:

God made the world in six days through the Word "without whom nothing was made" (John 1:3); the sixth piece therefore relates to God the Creator...and the twelfth and eighteenth pieces to Christ as the Word of God.¹⁴

Number one, as an indivisible number and the source of all other numbers (all other numbers are multiples of one) is the number of divinity. Accordingly, the first movement of the cycle focuses on God (Regard du Père).

Number symbolism plays its part in controlling or organising at a micro level also. For example, three is a number that can be considered representative of divinity, as three is the number of the Trinity. The number three is important in the first movement of the cycle (Regard du Père), which deals with God, the first person of the Trinity. There are three layers, triplets feature

¹² Messiaen, Traité de Rythme, de Couleur et d’Ornithologie, 438.
¹³ Johnson, Messiaen, 41.
throughout, three bell-like octaves occur between sections and the form may be considered tri-partite (two extended phrases plus Coda). The number three also features strongly in the fifth movement of the cycle, *Regard du Fils sur le Fils*. Messiaen describes this movement in the preface as 'three sonorities, three modes, three rhythms, three strands of music superimposed on each other'.

It is clear from the above examples that number symbolism plays an important part in controlling the form of the cycle, on a micro and a macro level. The value of such symbols and what the numbers purport to symbolise may seem dubious and arbitrary to some. However, Messiaen believes in the numbers as powerful symbols. This is seen from the extent to which, and the consistency with which, number symbolism permeates the work. Their import as a method of formal control cannot be disputed.

Control of the overall cycle is also achieved through use of asymmetrical enlargement. In this process, there is of course a certain freedom found in the composition of the initial motif. However, once the initial motif and the particular way the process is to be applied has been decided on the rest is left to the control of automaton. It is interesting to note that Messiaen often applies this process strictly (as in movement III). Indeed, sometimes he applies the process so obsessively that even when the motif expands beyond the range of the piano he writes his 'ideal' in brackets rather than break the pattern (see Example 39). This is an example of strict control: physical limitations are unimportant; it is the idea of control that is important here.

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14 Ibid., 72.
15 Messiaen, *Vingt Regards*, ii.
Example 39 - VI, 10-12 (p. 25).

However, even in this example of a self-imposed controlling process that is often used rigorously, Messiaen sometimes introduces what appears to be a deliberate element of freedom, or personal liberty. He does this through neglecting to apply the process strictly and consistently. An example is found in movement VI, in the left hand of bars 50-58 (and its corresponding retrograde in bars 72-80), where the procedure applied to the last three notes of each bar in the left-hand changes (see excerpt from this section in Example 23 p. 67). That is, rather than a note moving consistently down a semitone according to the demands of the process, sometimes that note moves down, sometimes it stays the same and sometimes it moves up a semitone. It is difficult to understand why Messiaen writes in this way here: his music demonstrates systematic consistency and logical process in so many other ways that this seems something of an irregularity. Perhaps he does so for harmonic reasons, but as already outlined, harmony is somewhat irrelevant in passages of this type. It is also possible that he does so due to the constraints of the keyboard (in terms of register). However, again this is unlikely, as elsewhere in this movement Messiaen has notated 'the ideal' (in brackets), even when not physically possible on the modern piano (see above). A more likely interpretation is that Messiaen includes this digression as a nod towards the personal choice all humans have: his personal freedom is important to him, and this deviation illustrates that he does not want to relinquish his personal freedom completely to the total control of a process. This is the most plausible explanation: this passage is an example of a controlling process containing within it a small, but important element of freedom.
The manipulation of formal proportions is another type of formal control. Messiaen sometimes manipulates proportions for symbolic reasons. Movement XIV considers the growing amazement of the angels at the fact that God has chosen to unite himself with humanity through Jesus. This movement manipulates formal proportions as a way to illustrate tangibly the growing amazement of the angels. This type of formal control (where formal control is used to symbolise something spiritual in nature) indicates not only the importance of formal control to Messiaen, but also that, once again, everything he composes develops from his desire to express his faith. Formal control is not an end in itself, but rather a means to express something higher.

8.4. - Messiaen's Use of Birdsong in *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant -Jésus*: freedom or control?

The importance of birdsong in *Vingt Regards* is interesting in a discussion of control and freedom. Messiaen's use of birdsong as a source which he then 'translates' as accurately as possible into musical terms raises an intriguing question: is this use of birdsong an example of freedom or control?

Messiaen has said 'Symbolically speaking, the birds mean freedom to me', and the very idea of birdsong brings with it certain connotations of freedom. It is a free, spontaneous source, which is not subject to human control and manipulation.

It is in a spirit of no confidence in myself, or I mean in the human race, that I have taken bird-songs as model. If you want symbols, let us go on to say that the bird is the symbol of freedom. We walk, he flies. We make war, he sings.... I doubt that one

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16 See Chapter Seven, p. 93.
17 Birdsong is used as the main material of movement VIII. It also features strongly in movements V and XIV. Birdsong-type figurations are found scattered throughout other movements, including movements IV (bars 38-39 and 98-99), and XX (176) marked in the score simply as 'oiseau'. Birdsong is also suggested in movement XV (bars 41, 43, 45, 48, 50 and 52), XVI (bars 58 and 98) and XX (bars 18, 30, 173-175, 189-192, 196-198 and bar 219).
18 Rössler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen*, 55.
can find in any human music, however inspired, melodies and rhythms that have the sovereign freedom of bird-song.\(^\text{19}\)

However, through his use of birdsong, Messiaen relinquishes control: he has no control over the outside source. His input as a composer is drastically reduced. He is trading one type of control (composer control) for another (that of outside circumstance). Referring to the ‘control’ of outside circumstance may seem questionable to some – what about the element of chance? But Messiaen was clear that he did not believe in chance – he believed in Fate, or the ‘divine plan’. Therefore, the use of birdsong was possibly, to Messiaen, an instance of divine control.

Personally, I don’t believe in chance...because I’m a Christian; I believe in Providence and I think that all that happens is foreseen. Certainly the freedom of event is respected but, for God who sees everything simultaneously, there’s no chance. Further, I think that in art there is one truth, one version that is good, a choice which is operated automatically by genius...\(^\text{20}\)

However, it is impossible for musical instruments to reproduce birdsong exactly, and Messiaen is aware of this:

The bird...sings in extremely quick tempi which are absolutely impossible for our instruments; I am therefore obliged to transcribe the song at a slower tempo. In addition, this rapidity is allied to an extreme acuteness, the bird being able to sing in excessively high registers which are inaccessible to our instruments; I transcribe the song, therefore, one, two, three or even four octaves lower. And that is not all: for the same reasons, I am obliged to suppress the very small intervals which our instruments cannot play. I replace these intervals of the order of one or two commas by semitones, but I respect the scale of values between the different intervals; that is to say, if several commas correspond to a semitone, then to the true semitone will correspond a whole tone or a third.\(^\text{21}\)

There is of necessity an amount of adaptation required, and there is a certain compositional freedom to be found in the necessity of adaptation. Messiaen takes back control of the musical material from the control of outside circumstance. In conversation with Claude Samuel, when speaking of Catalogue d’Oiseaux he says:

I tried to copy exactly the song of the bird typical of a region, surrounded by the neighbouring birds of its habitat...I am personally very proud of the accuracy of my work...Evidently it is I myself who listen and, involuntarily, I introduce something of my own style, my own way of listening, when interpreting the birdsongs.\(^\text{22}\)


\(^{20}\) Samuel, Conversations with Olivier Messiaen, 123.

\(^{21}\) Johnson, Messiaen, 117.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 117.
Some of Messiaen's birds are more 'real' than others. The focus on providing as direct a representation of birdsong as possible is more intense in the works of the 1950s than in any of the movements of Vingt Regards. The birds in this cycle are stylised impressions of birds, symbolic of the freedom of Heaven. They are not intended as depictions of real specific bird species. This is reflected in the fact that while specific species are notated in later works, in Vingt Regards birds are mostly notated simply as 'oiseau'.

Messiaen's method of adaptation is often through his established methods of self-restriction and self-control (such as his modes of limited transposition or his rhythmic devices). Whether or not he gives us the most authentic reproduction possible is a matter that has come under much discussion. On the one hand, in his article on the composer's use of birdsong Trevor Hold points out many instances where Messiaen's adaptations seem especially liberal. He argues that, although real birdsong is highly improvisatory and free, Messiaen, through adaptation, sometimes destroys this free element, 'caging' his birds. He refers to Messiaen's nightingale in Réveil des oiseaux and notes that:

Messiaen's bird restricts itself to what is uncommonly like the 2nd mode of limited transposition - a phenomenon of which the nightingale is hardly likely to be aware.

He argues that, as Messiaen exerts a high level of composer control, there are actually many more authentic musical adaptations possible:

In none of his bird-song pieces is there the spontaneity of the singing bird. His use of common, strict metres, strictness of tempo and precision of ensemble have the effect of destroying rather than evoking this spontaneity. He has succeeded in caging his birds rather than letting them sing freely.

Although he questions the claims of authenticity he notes that Messiaen stated 'It is futile to copy nature slavishly'. Hold states that comparisons between real birds and Messiaen's birds:

23 An exception to this in Vingt Regards is found in movement VIII, where particular species of birds are specified in both score and preface.
24 Hold, 'Messiaen's Birds', 119.
25 Ibid., 122.
26 Ibid., 116.
are, or should be irrelevant.... The unaided human ear is unable to appreciate the
niceties of bird-song because of its rapidity.... Messiaen often does manage to
capture the "jizz" of a bird's song in a remarkable way.27

Hold concludes the article by commenting that:

His bird-songs, as one would expect, are "imaginative transmutation" rather than
authentic transcription and as such contain many beautiful and imaginative
moments.28

In other words, Hold views composer control as an important factor in
Messiaen's use of birdsong.

On the other hand Yvonne Loriod relates an anecdote where she identified a
bird species by its song, the only time she had ever heard that bird's song
being in one of Messiaen's works.29 This indicates the high degree of
authenticity found by some in Messiaen's birds, implying perhaps that some
of his adaptations contain less personal input, and therefore less personal
freedom (or, paradoxically 'composer control') than others.

In conclusion, birdsong is a spontaneous source, free from human control;
and it represents freedom to Messiaen. However, his use of birdsong
illustrates, to a certain degree, a lack of freedom, as outside circumstances
are dictating what he hears, and therefore what he uses. Composer control is
exchanged for the control of outside circumstance.

There is, of necessity, an amount of adaptation required in the use of
birdsong as a source material, and there is a freedom found in this adaptation.
It has been argued that it is through Messiaen's adaptation that he 'cages' his
birds. Usually he does this through his established methods of rhythmic and
melodic control. This liberty to adapt his material in whatever way he sees fit
through established methods of control is his 'constructive freedom, which is
arrived at through self-control', mentioned in the quotation at the head of this
chapter.

27 Ibid., 121.
28 Ibid., 122.
29 Yvonne Loriod, Piano Masterclasses of July 2002, Acanthes Festival (Avignon, France).
8.5. - Messiaen’s Use of Control and Freedom: Conclusion

Messiaen’s music often sounds, on hearing it for the first time, completely free, sometimes almost random and completely unrestrained. However, on closer examination, it emerges that this music is, in fact, highly controlled and organised through processes of many types (including rhythmic, harmonic and formal processes as outlined above). It is through such rigorous control that Messiaen can express himself, and therefore be free. Of course, the degree of organization or control varies from one piece or passage to another. There is also a level of control found in his adaptation of a free, improvisatory source such as birdsong. Similarly, the degree of adaptation varies from one example to another.

Within such organization, and such a high level of self-restraint there is always an element of freedom to be found, in the freedom to use a particular process at a particular time, or in the choice of material on which to use a particular process. The controls are always self-imposed – to choose to control in a certain way is a type of freedom. Composer control equates with personal freedom. Personal freedom encompasses the choice to use controlling structures. One part of the duality is the same as the other – this is unity.

This type of paradox should hardly be surprising. Music can be defined as ‘organised sound’, implying that a level of control or restraint is found within the very concept of the medium. However, to be a composer is to be one who creates, who chooses materials freely, and who uses them in an inventive, imaginative way. Therefore, to speak of a ‘composer of music’ is to speak of a combination of control and freedom. This is embodied in Messiaen’s music.
Chapter Nine

Paradox: A Fundamental Part of Messiaen's Mode of Expression

Metrical rhythm and ametrical rhythm, symmetry and asymmetry, reflection and emotion, simplicity and complexity, and control and freedom are all present in Messiaen's music. As described in the previous chapters, these elements are all found in Vingt Regards. They interact and intermingle, and are sometimes set in opposition to each other. In their contrast, they provide the source of the success of this substantive work. Yet they also serve as unifying issues. The key to this apparent contradiction is found in Messiaen's unwavering belief in his faith: all of the above dualities have a central role to play in depicting aspects of his faith. Sometimes, as with issues of simplicity and complexity, or control and freedom, one strand of the dichotomy encompasses the other. The issues become so intermingled as to be almost indistinguishable from each other in the finished product. That which is considered simple can also be regarded as complex; that which is a method of control also contains freedom. In these ways, the opposing forces mentioned above emerge as unified. This is one of the central paradoxes in Messiaen's music.

A number of other paradoxes exist in Messiaen's music (some of which have been briefly outlined in the previous chapters), including one that relates to his very mode of expression. Throughout his lifetime, Messiaen was preoccupied with the expression of the divine and, in particular, the expression of eternity. This quest for experience outside the temporal is most notable in the works written around the time of Vingt Regards. Many movements in this work seek to suspend the regular 'human' experience of progressive, unidirectional time. Messiaen achieves this through a variety of
ways: symmetry and asymmetry, repetitive rhythm and unpredictable rhythm, and extremely slow tempi, are all used as part of this quest. It is paradoxical that Messiaen strives to express eternity through a medium (music) that is dependent on time and the progress of time to exist. Yet he succeeds: what is found in much of his music is the expression of eternity through time. This is epitomised in the first movement of the cycle, where he uses a combination of hypnotic rhythm and very slow tempo to draw the listener to an experience of the eternity of God.¹

Messiaen was also fascinated by the experience of the silence of Heaven. Movement XVII (Regard du silence) is devoted to a depiction of silence. It is paradoxical that Messiaen strives to do this through music, a medium that, while embracing silence as an integral part of it, is in essence opposed to it. Messiaen often uses birds as symbols of the silence of Heaven. In the fifth movement of the cycle he refers to 'les oiseaux du silence' (see Volume II, V, p. 18). It is another paradox that Messiaen sees fit to use the exuberance of birdsong as a way to express the calm silence of his view of Heaven.

There are a number of other paradoxes found in Vingt Regards that are specific to the cycle. For example, the quotation at the head of the ninth movement (Regard du temps) reads:

Mystery of the fullness of time; Time sees in itself the birth of Him who is eternal...²

This is a paradoxical statement: one who is eternal is without beginning and end, and therefore cannot be born. In the preface to the cycle, Messiaen refers to the influence of the surrealist painter de Chirico on this movement.³ The contradictory reference to the birth of something eternal illustrates the influence of surrealism, with its unexpected juxtapositions and distortion of reality.

¹ See Chapter Four, pp. 49-50.
² Messiaen, Vingt Regards, 55.
³ Ibid., ii.
There are some instances of dual symbolism in *Vingt Regards*. For example, in movement V, both the theme of God and the canon are simultaneously symbolic of both divinity and humanity, two opposing states of being. 4 Both paradoxically succeed in expressing two opposing ideas.

Messiaen's musical personality and approach also contain their own contradictions. He can be entirely logical, even scientific in his approach, in the mould of the medieval craftsman. Yet he also embraces the mysterious, the unexplained, and the magical: that which defies logic.

As a Catholic I should have no right to speak of magic; but let's admit, it's not devoid of interest... There does exist a white magic, and that's a symbolic quest for the power of language, sounds or colours, for the influence of certain things we own or which surround us. 5

There is a further paradox in the fact that it is the very aspects that depend on logic and mechanical systematic process (such as modes, rhythm, asymmetrical enlargement) that are most effective in creating a sense of mystery and dislocation from ordinary experience. Milsom refers to this paradox: he notes that in Messiaen's music, orderly, systematic, often almost mathematical compositional techniques are used to achieve 'a sense of the bizarre, the irrational, the unexplained, the surreal'. 6

The final paradox is found in the fact that it is these very contradictions, opposing elements and paradoxes that provide one of the strongest unifying factors in Messiaen's musical language: paradox itself becomes a method of unity.

It should hardly be surprising that so many paradoxes exist in *Vingt Regards*. This work expresses the mystery of the Incarnation. The Incarnation encompasses the contradictory belief that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine, and is therefore a supreme paradox. So Messiaen's means of expression (which is through unity, duality and paradox) mirrors that which

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4 See Chapter Five, pp. 59-61.
he wishes to express (the Incarnation, which has at its core unity, duality and paradox).

Conclusion

Messiaen’s musical language in *Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus* is built on a variety of opposing elements. Metrical rhythm is found alongside ametrical rhythm; symmetry is found alongside asymmetry. Moments of intense inward reflection are found alongside instances of impassioned outward emotion (which span the entire range of the emotional spectrum). Simplicity and complexity combine, and both control and freedom have their place in the work.

All of these elements can be considered opposites. Yet Messiaen does not use them in this way. Instead, he uses them as dualities: two strands of the same theme. They are unified either by the desire to express a common idea, or by the fact that one part of the duality can, on another level, be considered the same as the other.

Metrical rhythm and ametrical rhythm are used in such a way that they both disrupt a sense of pulse; they are unified in their expression of the eternity of divinity. Similarly, symmetry and asymmetry provide an alternative experience of time, thereby bringing the listener closer to God. Moments of inward reflection, found alongside more outwardly expressive movements, provide an effective musical contrast, yet at their core is a unified aim: expression of the mysteries of the Bible. Simplicity and complexity combine: what appears simple musically is usually complex symbolically, and what is complex musically often has at its heart a simple concept. Finally, that which is considered an example of control can also be considered freedom, and that which is free, such as birdsong, contains an element of control. Herein lies one of the central paradoxes of Messiaen’s musical language: opposing components emerge as being unified.

A number of other paradoxes are found in Messiaen’s music, not least the fact that the very core of what he wishes to express (eternity) is
fundamentally opposed to the medium through which he wishes to express it (music). Yet somehow Messiaen succeeds in expressing that which appears to be inexpressible.

The essence of Messiaen’s music is found in the meeting of opposing elements that paradoxically combine to give unity. These dual elements, contradictions and paradoxes that unify his musical language are entirely suited to the expression of a concept that encompasses both duality and unity, and is in itself both a contradiction and a paradox: the Incarnation. This is what is found in *Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus*. 
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