

Opaline Reflections:

A Theological Reading of Messiaen's "La Vierge et l'Enfant"

BY MELISSA PLAMANN

Olivier Messiaen's *La Nativité du Seigneur* (The Nativity of the Lord) is not only a landmark composition in 20th-century musical literature, but it also hailed a turning point in the composer's career. Comprising nine movements that explore the incarnation and birth of Christ, the cycle was composed in 1935. In *La Nativité*, Messiaen reveals the building blocks of his idiomatic musical language, which he would continue to hone throughout his career. *La Nativité* is the first work in which Messiaen's titles indicate specific theological messages; he furthermore outlines his theological aims in the preface and assigns Biblical quotations to each movement. Messiaen then employs myriad compositional techniques to symbolically portray the Christian truths around which this cycle centers.

Messiaen's unique musical language is essentially a means for speaking about God; it is the vehicle through which he explores and espouses central tenets of his Christian faith. Therefore, it is fitting to analyze Messiaen's music not only in terms of the compositional components that create his musical language, but moreover as theological narratives that articulate Messiaen's profound beliefs.

This article will focus on the first movement, which Messiaen entitled "La Vierge et l'Enfant." In this first movement, the central character of Messiaen's nativity is made manifest: the infant Christ. To this movement, he assigns the following Scripture:

Conceived by a Virgin, a Child to us is born, a Son to us has been given. Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion! See, your King comes to you, righteous and humble. (Book of the Prophet Isaiah 9:6, Book of the Prophet Zechariah 9:9)¹

In "La Vierge," Messiaen utilizes Greek and Hindu rhythms, plainchant, numerical significance, modes of limited transposition, and his particular conception of colored sonorities to paint a compelling

portrait of the Virgin and Christ Child. Through these musical elements, Messiaen conveys the imperative idea at the heart of the Christmas narrative: Divinity descends in human form and dwells on earth as the infant Jesus.

Elements of Form in "La Vierge et l'Enfant"

This opening movement begins subtly; Messiaen scores the opening for manuals only in two treble clefs. Coupled with the mezzo-forte dynamic level and a "Lent" tempo indication, the opening is gentle and ethereal. To further an otherworldly affect, Messiaen calls for uncommon registrations, noting that he wished to "produce unusual timbres by opposing rather than mixing colors."² The opening section features the combination of a 4' Flute, 2²/₃' Nazard, and 16' Quintaton; this is an unlikely combination for several reasons. This registration is significantly gapped between the 16' and 4' stops, and both the Nazard and Quintaton insistently reinforce the interval of the compound fifth in the overtone series.

The overall form of this movement follows a standard ABA, in which the contrasting middle section "represents the rejoicing of the Blessed Virgin."³ The opening A section relies heavily on Greek rhythms, which Messiaen utilized from the 1930s onward. In conversation with Claude Samuel, Messiaen said that he discovered Greek metrics after leaving the Conservatory, and explained their nature:

Greek meters rely on a simple and essential principle: they're composed of shorts and longs, with the shorts all equal and one long equaling two shorts. . . . Meter is quite simply the grouping of several feet, the foot being a rhythm composed of a certain number of short and long beats, each with its own name.⁴

Messiaen scholar Carla Huston Bell notes that this system of meter complements Messiaen's own rhythmic innova-

tions, as "the added value became instrumental in the notating of Greek rhythms."⁵ In the opening measure of "La Vierge," shown in Example 1, Messiaen utilizes the Greek *antibacchius*, the systematic combination of long-long-short values. To create this rhythm, Messiaen adds value to the previous groupings of two eighth notes; thus, the *antibacchius* rhythm reads eighth-eighth-sixteenth. This added value has significant impact on the overall rhythmic scheme: it makes the opening music ametrical. Without this additional sixteenth note, the A section could quite handily fall into a tidy 3/4 meter.

While Messiaen employs the *antibacchius* pattern of long-long-short at the local level, he ingeniously utilizes the opposite of this pattern (short-short-long) at the larger rhythmic level. In fact, it is his very use of the *antibacchius* that creates the overarching short-short-long pattern, which will feature prominently in the B section of this movement.

This A section simply contains two periods comprising the theme (mm. 1–7) and a variation upon it (mm. 8–15). The entire thematic statement falls into Messiaen's second mode of limited transposition in its first transposition; this collection is the octatonic collection, a symmetrical pattern of strictly alternating whole and half steps. Messiaen favored the octatonic collection throughout his career, and it is featured in several movements of *La Nativité*, including the other bookend, "Dieu parmi nous." The second period (mm. 8–15) varies the theme and travels through several modes and their various transpositions. Bell suggests that one of Messiaen's fascinations was "the ability of modes to modulate freely to themselves or to other modes. He often used various modes and their transpositions to depict emotions he wished to convey in the theological portrait."⁶ By this, Bell alludes to Messiaen's keen ability to switch almost instantaneously from one mode to the next, depending on what the composer wished to communicate.

The first three measures of this second

Ex. 1. “La Vierge et l’Enfant;” from Messiaen, *La Nativité*, m. 1

short (u) short (u) long (-)

Ex. 2. “La Vierge et l’Enfant,” mm. 8–10

mode 3:1 mode 2 mode 3:3

Ex. 3. Mode 3; from Messiaen, “Note by the Composer,” in *La Nativité*

Mode 3, 1st transposition

Ex. 4. “Puer natus est nobis” plainchant; from Messiaen, *Technique*, 36

Pu - er na - tus est no - bis, et - fi - li - us da - tusest no - bis. —

Ex. 5. “La Vierge et l’Enfant,” mm. 16–20, upper staff

Un peu vif G f legato 7

Ex. 6. “La Vierge et l’Enfant,” m. 16, lower staff

short (u) short (u) long (-)

Ex. 7. From Messiaen, *Technique*, 37

Ex. 8. Pitch collections associated with colors in *Sept haïkî*

orange gray/gold red

blue pale green/silver

Ex. 9. “La Vierge et L’Enfant,” mm. 44–45

period, shown in Example 2, demonstrate Messiaen's facility in shifting modes. Measure 8 marks the beginning of the varied material, which falls into the first transposition of Mode 3, shown in Example 3. The next measure (m. 9) reverts back to the original octatonic collection, which is followed by a measure (m. 10) in the third transposition of Mode 3. The labels in Example 3 demonstrate Messiaen's system of analyzing the modes of limited transposition. The first measure depicts Mode 3 in what Messiaen considered its first transposition, followed by Mode 2 in its original form. The final measure again depicts Mode 3, however in its third transposition.

The B section, marked "Un peu vif," contrasts brilliantly as a jubilant celebration of the incarnation. Messiaen remarks, "The middle section represents the rejoicing of the Blessed Virgin and varies the Christmas introit *Puer natus est nobis* by ornamenting it. It is written in the sixth mode of limited transposition and treats the pedal as a carillon."⁷ This laconic and unceremonious summary by the composer does not fully do justice to the thoughtful and noteworthy compositional techniques contained therein.

The B section comprises three main elements assigned to the right and left hand and pedal respectively. The right hand presents the plainchant, a highly ornamented version of the introit of the Mass for Christmas Day. Vincent Benitez notes that here "the mixolydian chant has been adapted into a modal framework," and Messiaen even references this particular use of chant in *The Technique of My Musical Language*.⁸ Messiaen hails plainchant as "an inexhaustible mine of rare and expressive melodic contours," which also holds great religious significance.⁹ Messiaen speaks of plainchant with great reverence, saying: "Only plainsong possesses all at once the purity, the joy, the lightness necessary for the soul's flight toward Truth. Unfortunately. . . plain-song is not well known."¹⁰ While we may question whether it is truly not well known, Messiaen believed that plainchant could and should hold greater significance within contemporary musical and religious spheres.

Ever the innovative composer, Messiaen does not merely include plainchant in his organ works. Rather, as Robert Sherlaw Johnson attests, Messiaen "transform[s] actual plainsong into his own melodic

style."¹¹ In his treatise, Messiaen explains his use of plainchant in general: "We shall make use of them, forgetting their modes and rhythms for the use of ours." He identifies *Puer natus est nobis* as "a single example of this kind of transformation; from a fragment of the *Introit de Noël*," and prints it as an example in *The Technique of My Musical Language*, reprinted here in Example 4. From this plainchant, Messiaen arrives at the highly ornamented right-hand melodic line, shown in Example 5.

If we examine Messiaen's ornamented line as it is illustrated in Example 5, we see its clear association with the original plainchant shown in Example 4. In particular, we note the contour of the melodic line and its emphatic circling around the uppermost pitches D and E in both examples. Messiaen maintains that "the delicacy of plainsong may only be manifest in quickness and joy. If plainsong is sung with appropriate liveliness and rapidity, it will be so loved that it will no longer be passed by."¹³ Perhaps Messiaen's embellishment and treatment of the original plainchant is therefore not surprising. Its quick, chirpy rhythms and jubilant ascending flourishes create a delightfully spry melody that is firmly grounded in Messiaen's unique compositional style.

The left hand provides the harmonic grounding for this section, consisting of a repeating group of 11 chords that systematically ascend and then descend within the framework of each measure, as shown in Example 6. This succinct motive also repeats almost exactly throughout the entirety of the B section with only small discrepancies at cadential points. While Messiaen's compositions are rife with variation, additive rhythms, and subtle changes, he often maintains overarching grounding elements. Musicologist John Milsom argues, "Repetition and invariance are two of the more potent agents through which Messiaen evokes the spiritual."¹⁴

The beaming of these 11 chords is interesting. Certainly one could group 11 notes in any number of ways, but Messiaen chooses to divide them into two groups of three followed by a long group of five. This grouping creates an overarching rhythmic pattern of short-short-long, which Messiaen established from the very first measure of "La Vierge" (see Example 1). Though the local beat divisions and

pitches are certainly different than those found in the A section, Messiaen unifies the movement by returning to this larger rhythmic pattern in the B section.

Messiaen possessed a particular affinity for prime numbers and utilized them to express indivisible divinity. By associating these holy numbers with Mary, Messiaen here indicates her holiness and her singular blessing in serving as Christ's mother. The grouping of five notes is particularly interesting. In later reflection on his musical language, Messiaen reveals, "All rhythms that are divisible by five . . . pertain to Shiva, the god of the destructive and restorative dance."¹⁵ This symbolism is particularly apt given the theme of Christ's incarnation. In the taking of human form, Christ comes to fulfill the Old Testament prophecy and reconcile sinners. However, his mission cannot be entirely restorative. The Cross is, after all, made of the same wood as the manger, and therefore Christ's stay on Earth must ultimately end in destruction and physical death.

But for Messiaen, the story does not end here. While Christ's impending crucifixion looms over his incarnation, so does his resurrection blanket the entire story. Messiaen remarks, "There's symbolical use of Hindu rhythms, for example, a rhythm relating to Shiva as conqueror over Death, because the Resurrection is concerned."¹⁶ Messiaen associates rhythms divisible by five with Shiva, and it is therefore fitting that Messiaen pairs this rhythmic element with Mary's jubilant song. By beaming the 11 beats shown in Example 6 as 3 + 3 + 5, Messiaen emphasizes Mary's holiness by using the number three, and intimates the dance associated with Shiva by using the number five. We can also assign a more general significance to the number five. Musical scholar Mirjana Simundza states, "[Five] is the number of the center, order and balance, the symbol of man, the manifestation of the universe, and the principle of life."¹⁷ Certainly this is appropriate for the incarnation of Christ, as God descends in a physical symbol of man, a literal manifestation of the universe in human form.

The manuals are accompanied by the "shrill carillon of the pedal,"¹⁸ which exemplifies one of Messiaen's favored melodic contours and cadential formulas, as shown in Example 7. This cadence prominently features the tritone, the

symmetrical division of the octave. These pitches repeat in varying order and rhythmic values, but as Bell notes, the overarching “rhythmic pattern of this pedal carillon is 3 + 3 + 5, which corresponds to the 11 chords per measure of the left hand.”¹⁹

Interestingly, in the opening measure of the B section, the rhythmic pattern breaks down as follows: 3 3 2 2 1, in which 1 equals an eighth note. This rhythm is the Hindu *deśitāla nīhśankatāla*, which suggests appropriate Hindu symbolism; Simundza reveals that this *tāla* is the embodiment of “a fearless, carefree game; a type of dance.”²⁰ There could be no more fitting *tāla* to depict the carefree, fearless rejoicing of Mary at the birth of the Christ Child, and we have already examined the symbolic dance of Shiva suggested in this section.

The B section demonstrates a creative motivic economy, as all three parts (right and left hand and pedal) are stated (mm. 16–24), then repeated and extended (mm. 24–34). The left hand and pedal seem to follow as one might expect, simply repeating after they are stated in their entirety. The left hand repeats at every measure, and the pedal begins again after its full statement concludes in m. 23. What is unexpected, however, is the entrance of the right-hand material. Messiaen brings it in “early,” overlapping the pedal’s conclusion in m. 23. As Bell notes, this creates “a completely new vertical alignment. Although the ingredients of the music remain the same for a complete repetition, the resultant music is new.”²¹

While Messiaen does not follow the medieval notion of *color* and *talea* verbatim, the B section certainly reveals similar construction. The heart of this early compositional process is repetition, which Messiaen clearly utilizes here. The isorhythmic model of the Middle Ages features a repeating pattern of pitches (*color*) and a separate repeating pattern of rhythmic values (*talea*). The point of repetition is different for each element, and composers are therefore able to create new vertical alignments throughout the composition. Messiaen does the same in this movement by repeating the three separate musical entities: ornamented plainchant (right hand), 11-chord ostinato (left hand), and pedal carillon.

Messiaen acknowledged this general connection and notes, “I believe that [one

of] the main advantages of my rhythmic language [is] its having totally separated rhythm from pitch. In this I concur with the musicians of the Middle Ages—even if unintentionally.”²² Though Messiaen claims naivety, this medieval structural convention pairs brilliantly with the plainchant he uses in this section. Both underscore strong connections between the Church past and present, suggesting that it is Christ’s incarnation that binds together generations of believers.

Another interesting aspect of the B section is its emphasis on G#. This note is the apex of the five-note carillon (comprising D, E, F, G, and G#) and is the bottom note of the left hand on the downbeat of each measure. Furthermore, to conclude the B section, Messiaen extends the compass of the left hand ostinato until the same treble G# is now the top note of the final chord. G# is also the closing pitch of the ornamented plainchant. This pitch is particularly intriguing given Messiaen’s own interest in the note. Later in his life, Messiaen described his “interest in the music of the Spheres” in an interview with Almut Rössler.²³ In his system of pitch assignment, Messiaen explains: “G#—that’s the Sun. . . . G# is also the Earth One peculiar thing: the Earth and Sun have an octave relationship to each other.”²⁴ If one examines the B section of “La Vierge” in these terms, one sees that the emphasis on G# suggests that Christ descends from Heaven to Earth, connecting the two. This insistence on G# may indicate Christ as the divine light, incarnate in (literally) a heavenly body.

After Mary’s song, the final A section is transposed to fit into the second transposition of Mode 2. Once the theme is stated, Messiaen rests on an open, gentle pianissimo chord at m. 42. Here Messiaen inserts one of the devices of which he writes in his “Note by the Composer” to *La Nativité*, “an enlarged embellishment on D,”²⁵ which is simply a cadenza-like flourish in the right hand that finally comes to rest on the same open, gentle chord comprising pitches A^b, F, B^b, and D. This particular collection of pitches will be discussed in the following section.

Color Significance in “La Vierge et l’Enfant”

Messiaen’s profound connection with color has been widely documented, and he describes it as follows:

I am affected by a sort of synaesthesia, more in my mind than in my body, that allows me, when I hear music and also when I read it, to see inwardly, in my mind’s eye, colors that move with the music; and I vividly sense these colors, and sometimes I’ve precisely indicated their correspondence in my scores.²⁶

This fascination with musical colors occupied Messiaen throughout his life, and it is with these colors that he painted his compositions:

When I hear music—and it was already like that when I was a child—I see colours. Chords are expressed in terms of colours for me—for example, a yellowish orange with a reddish tinge. I’m convinced that one can convey this to the listening public. . . . This expressive possibility helps me to say things which can’t normally be said.²⁷

One cannot definitively address all of the colors potentially present in any given composition by Messiaen, but one can certainly note specific chords about which Messiaen speaks in these terms. Example 8 shows the pitch collections labeled in Messiaen’s 1962 work *Sept haïkî*.

From these labels, we note that for Messiaen, distinct pitch combinations denote the colors orange, gray/gold, red, blue, and pale green/silver. From these chords and other writings on Messiaen’s system of colors, Paul Griffiths conjectures, “One may surmise that reddishness has something to do with E^b” and “blue is evidently linked to A major . . . note also the E^b-minor triad uppermost in the ‘gray and gold’ chord.”²⁸ Perhaps it is not too bold to suggest that cool colors such as blue and green seem to be linked to sharpened notes, while warm or earthy colors like red, orange, and gold feature flatted pitches.

Not surprisingly, Messiaen harbored certain affinities toward some colors and disliked others. He says, “Since birth, I’ve been devoted to violet. . . . Violet is a very complex color because it combines blue, an extremely cold color, and red, an extremely warm color . . . I don’t like yellow very much.”²⁹ It is interesting then, that Messiaen describes the opening A section of “La Vierge” rather simply, as having a “hollow timbre [and] a violet color.”³⁰

One may also note that this section contains notably more flatted pitches

than the following B section. As the B section represents Mary's rejoicing, it follows that the A section presumably depicts the infant Jesus. This further elucidates Messiaen's choice of violet, which has a long association with royalty. Messiaen has commented on violet's historic significance, claiming that it "represents the 'Truth of Love' in medieval symbolism."³¹ Certainly the mystical incarnation of the divine as represented in "La Vierge" contains for Messiaen the greatest expression of love.

Messiaen's variation of the theme (mm. 8–15) gracefully shifts between Modes 2 and 3. While the initial statement of the theme evokes violet hues, the collections involved in the variation evoke a varied color scheme. Measure 8 features Mode 3 in its first transposition, and the following measure utilizes Mode 2 in its original form. Messiaen notes:

The two principal modes are linked to very precise colorations. . . . Mode 2 revolves around certain violets, blues, and violet-purple, while Mode 3, in its first transposition, corresponds to an orange with red and green pigments, to specks of gold, and also to a milky white with iridescent, opaline reflections.³²

It is significant that Messiaen introduces the color gold, as this color is also evoked by the final resting chord of the theme. The seventh measure contains the pitch collection G, B^b, E^b, and A. These pitches are all present in the chord that Messiaen labels "gray or gold."

Messiaen writes, "I use [sound complexes] like colors, juxtaposing them and putting them in relief one against the other, as a painter enhances one color with its complement."³³ Certainly the sound palettes complement one another, but the theological and symbolic implications of these colors are complementary as well. The deep meaning of violet has already been explored, and it is noteworthy that Messiaen introduces other rich hues as its complement. He uses embellished, lofty language to describe the "specks of gold," and "iridescent, opaline reflections." These rich, royal colors quite adeptly express Messiaen's deep reverence for the mystical, divine incarnation.

The movement's final chord is of particular importance and comprises the pitches A^b, F, B^b, and D. The intervals from bottom to top are a major sixth, perfect fourth, and major third. Messiaen

indicates the registration as a single 8' Flute, which creates a much gentler effect than the opening A section. It is noteworthy that the final chord, a relatively simple one, rests low in both the treble and bass registers and lingers at the pianissimo dynamic level. This demonstrates the sweet simplicity of Christ's birth: a great, complex, mysterious miracle made flesh in a tiny infant born to a meek virgin. After all, as Peter Hill so eloquently states, "Faith, as Messiaen repeatedly emphasized, was his sole reason for composing. . . . Even the structure of the music seems permeated by his faith, with complexity of detail embracing truths of great simplicity."³⁴

While the notation bears no aural impact upon the listener, the final chord is nonetheless physically notated in a rather peculiar fashion, shown in Example 9. The second chord is the only chord divisible by three (dotted quarter divides into three eighth notes). Messiaen, always meticulous in his notation, clearly means to convey something to the performer with this final chord. He certainly could have written the last chord under a fermata, or simply tied two half notes together without the intervening rhythm. As this notation cannot be depicted aurally in performance, Messiaen here presents purely visual symbolism. It is the second chord that is divisible by three, and Messiaen may therefore be suggesting Christ's special and complex divinity as the second person of the Trinity, who proceeded from the Father and who precedes the Spirit.

This final sonority rests within Messiaen's "gray/gold" construct, which too implies the earthly and heavenly commingling in the being of Christ. One can make obvious correlations between gray and humanity—the dust from which humanity was formed, the gray matter at the heart of our beings—and there are clear correlations between gold and royalty. In addition to these, Messiaen notes the special presence of gold in his compositions: "It is especially in the rainbow, in the blue-green, red, and gold circle, which seems to flash around Christ."³⁵ Furthermore, the final chord rests solidly on an A^b foundation, which of course is enharmonically G#. The significance of G# has already been discussed in terms of Messiaen's conception of the music of the Spheres: G# represents both the Sun and the Earth (in different octaves). As this final chord is squarely grounded on low

A^b, it suggests Christ's incarnation as a heavenly being descended to Earth in human form.

Though this final sonority can be analyzed simply as a B^b-major 7th chord, it is important to note that Messiaen skews our perception of this harmony through various means. Messiaen arranges the chord in its third inversion, firmly planting A^b in the lowermost voice. Furthermore, he introduces the left-hand pitches (A^b, F, and B^b) three measures earlier and sustains them through a long cadenza-like flourish in the right hand, which finally succumbs to a long *rallentando*. When Messiaen finally allows the uppermost voice to rest on D, thus completing the B^b-major 7th chord in the penultimate measure, our ears have become so accustomed to the undergirding sonority that the newly completed chord arguably does not function in this capacity. The final harmony is left shimmering with light, imbued with Messiaen's hues of gray and gold.

All of these complexities of detail converge in the powerful opening movement of *La Nativité*. Messiaen clearly identifies Mary's joyous outburst in the B section, surrounded by portraits of the newborn Christ in the A sections. Through his deft handling of the modes of limited transposition, Messiaen creates a gorgeous painting of the Virgin Mary and Christ Child, rife with rich colors suitable for the spiritual royalty he depicts. Messiaen's use of plainchant suggests a strong connection between the Church past and present through Christ's incarnation, and his strategic use of numerology, modes of limited transposition, repetition, variation, and colored chords eloquently embraces the truth of Christ's birth.

NOTES

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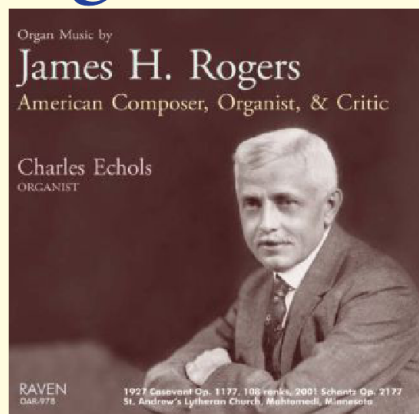
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