

GOD AMONG US

A THEOLOGICAL READING OF MESSIAEN'S "DIEU PARMİ NOUS"

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*The first idea that I wished to express [in my music]—and the most important, because it stands above them all—is the existence of the truths of the Catholic faith. . . . That is the first aspect of my work, the noblest and, doubtless, the most useful and valuable; perhaps the only one which I won't regret at the hour of my death.*¹

Olivier Messiaen

WHEN OLIVIER MESSIAEN passed away in 1992, the musical community mourned the loss of an organ virtuoso, a musical innovator, and an ingenious composer. Above all else, Messiaen was a devout Catholic who considered himself first and foremost a theologian. His compositions display his unique musical idioms, which he systematically defined in 1944 in his treatise *The Technique of My Musical Language*. The compositional tools outlined in this writing provide the musical foundation for Messiaen's works, but they more importantly serve the theological bent of his creativity. His musical language is essentially a vehicle for speaking about God; it is the means through which Messiaen delivers theological truths and explores central tenets of the Christian faith. Therefore, it is fitting to analyze Messiaen's compositions not only in terms of the elements that create his musical language, but moreover as theological narratives expressing his profound faith.

According to Paul Griffiths, Messiaen's faith "was a theology of glory. He was attracted to moments in the Gospel stories when Christ's divinity stood apparent. . . . His favorite themes all hinge on the meeting of the divine and the human."² It is therefore not surprising that one of his favorite subjects was the incarnation of Christ, the ultimate merging of the human and the divine. Messiaen's *La Nativité du Seigneur* (*The nativity of the Lord*) marks a turning point in his career and a landmark composition in 20th-century musical literature. The cycle contains nine movements centering on the incarnation and birth of Christ, all of which Messiaen composed in 1935. *La Nativité* features some of the earliest manifestations of his idiomatic musical language, which he would continue to employ and refine throughout his career. Moreover, *La Nativité* is the first work in which Messiaen indicates specific theological mes-

sages through his titles, the preface, and the Biblical quotations that he chooses for each movement. He then utilizes various compositional techniques to symbolically portray the Christian truths at the heart of this work.

In order to discuss several compositional techniques and the theological significance contained therein, in this article I will analyze "Dieu parmi nous" (God with us), which is the longest and final movement of *La Nativité*. In this ninth movement, Messiaen uses modes of limited transposition, Hindu rhythms, birdsong, numerology, added values, and melodic contour to depict the great theological truth of God dwelling in the midst of humanity, both as the human Christ Child and the immortal, everlasting Deity.

Messiaen's Melodic Language and Formal Structure in "Dieu parmi nous"

Messiaen's *Technique of My Musical Language* appeared in 1944, almost a decade after he composed *La Nativité*. In *La Nativité*, however, Messiaen already implemented many compositional tools that he would continue to explore and codify in his later treatise. In fact, *La Nativité* includes Messiaen's first acknowledged use of birdsong and his first published account of the modes of limited transposition; it also contains his first recognizable use of Indian rhythmic patterns. Furthermore, Paul Griffiths notes that the preface to *La Nativité* marks "the first time [that] Messiaen speaks of the 'theological' aspect of

his music."³ In the lengthy preface, Messiaen begins, "Emotion and sincerity, first. But conveyed to the listener by sure and clear means." He then outlines these "sure and clear means" in five theological and five musical points:

From the musical point of view, there are five principal means of expression:

1. Modes of limited transposition.
2. Enlarged pedals, embellishments, and appoggiaturas.
3. The half-unit of added value.
4. The progressive increase of intervals.
5. The chord on the dominant.⁴

Messiaen unveils the modes of limited transposition in this preface, including the second and fourth modes, which he employs in "Dieu parmi nous." Mode 2 is the octatonic scale, a collection of alternating half and whole steps. It can be divided into four groups, each containing three notes, and Messiaen asserts that it can be transposed three times, like a diminished seventh chord. The fourth mode, divided into two groups of five notes, is shown in Example 1. Each group is transposable six times, as is the augmented fourth.

Messiaen uses these two modes extensively throughout "Dieu parmi nous," and both modes appear at the opening of the movement, as shown in Example 2. The first measure features Mode 4, showcasing the tritones that he mentions in the preface. Indeed, the left

Ex. 1: Mode 4 (from Messiaen, *Messiaen on Messiaen*, p. 7)



Ex. 2: "Dieu parmi nous," mm. 1–3

laksmīśa: 2 3 4 8

Lent et puissant

fff staccato

R

staccato

rāgavardhana: 4 4 4 2 2 2

hand plays only tritones throughout the initial two measures, creating a dramatically jarring opening. The pedal enters in the second measure with Mode 2, as the melodic line descends slowly and finally rests on C, the lowest note of the organ's pedalboard.

These opening two measures reveal the first of three themes in "Dieu parmi nous" which Messiaen identifies in his preface. He states that the first "and principal theme [is] a great descent of fortissimo reeds. It is the glorious and ineffable fall of the second person of the Holy Trinity into a human nature—it is the Incarnation."⁵ This theme is continuously varied throughout the movement and never reappears exactly in its original form. Messiaen refers to this theme in *The Technique of My Musical Language* and suggests,

Like Bach's chorale "Adam's Fall" for organ, like the descent of Ariane, the light, to the midst of the darkness where the wives of Blackbeard suffered (in the opera of Paul Dukas), this element assimilates rhythmic precipitation and the passage from treble to bass into the idea of fall; but it is a question of the glorious and ineffable fall of the second person of the Holy Trinity into a human form (if it is permissible to employ this term on the subject of the Incarnation of the Word!).⁶

This pedal descent is followed by Messiaen's second theme, which he labels "the theme of love: it is the Communion."⁷ This gentle theme starkly contrasts with the first, and it is followed by the third theme in what he calls "alleluiatic praise in bird style;" it is "a theme of rejoicing: it is the Magnificat."⁸ This theme utilizes the chromatic scale and contrasts the descending Incarnation theme with its jubilant ascending line. Messiaen composes the first half of "Dieu parmi nous" solely using these three themes, constantly varying them and never repeating the original forms. These themes will be presented and discussed in the following section.

Messiaen's Rhythmic and Numerological Language

Messiaen organizes these three main themes by means of his rhythmic language, which includes notes of added value and Hindu rhythmic patterns. The opening chords, shown in the first measure of Example 2, demonstrate his technique of adding note values. The first two chords are two 32nd notes long; but next, Messiaen adds another beat—a single 32nd note. In a series of added values, he creates a rhythmic sequence of 2 3 4 8, in which 1 equals a 32nd note. This rhythmic pattern is one of Messiaen's favorites, which he dis-

Ex. 3: mm. 23–24

covered in his studies of Indian rhythms. According to Mirjana Simundza, it forms the *laksmīśa*, one of the "120 deśītālas the 13th-century Indian theorist Śārngadeva presented in the discussion *Samgītaratnākara*."⁹

Simundza hails Messiaen as "the first Western composer to investigate Indian rhythmic patterns and to use them consciously in his work."¹⁰ Although he studied these patterns during his student years at the Paris Conservatory, according to his own recollections, *La Nativité* was the first composition in which he consciously implemented these rhythms. Messiaen attests,

The renewal of organ-writing came with *La Nativité du Seigneur*, a work that gained great success in France and abroad (without deserving it, for I've done much better). But *La Nativité* with its Hindu rhythms nevertheless constituted a great change in organ music at a time when Franck represented the summit of modernism.¹¹

These rhythms continued to structure Messiaen's compositions throughout his career. According to Simundza, Messiaen particularly favored three: the *rāgavardhana* (4 4 4 2 3 2), *candrakalā* (2 2 2 3 3 3 1), and *laksmīśa* (2 3 4 8), all of which appear in "Dieu parmi nous." The Incarnation theme consistently uses the *laksmīśa*, and the opening pedal descent, shown in the second measure of Example 2, uses what Messiaen describes as an altered version of the *rāgavardhana*: "It contains three quarter notes and three eighth notes (diminution of the three quarter notes), a rhythm which recalls to us the Hindu *rāgavardhana* and which will be the basis of the final toccata."¹² His version of the *rāgavardhana* often follows a rhythmic pattern of 4 4 4 2 2 2, while the actual Indian rhythm is 4 4 4 2 3 2. However, for Messiaen's purposes, the value of three can be considered an added value, therefore reducing the basic pattern to 4 4 4 2 2 2, in which 1 equals a 16th note.

Messiaen's third theme, which he calls a "Magnificat in bird style," also contains multiple instances of added values. The original theme (m. 8) begins with a repetition of three beats (16th plus 8th), which is then extended to a

group of six beats, followed by a group of eight beats, and finally expanded to 11 beats. The final variation of the Magnificat theme begins in m. 14 and culminates in an extended bicinium (mm. 16–30). As illustrated in Example 3, this section provides the first example of the *candrakalā* (2 2 2 3 3 3 1), followed by the fourth Greek *épitríte*, which is a series of long-long-long-short values [- - - u]. This pattern, in tandem with Messiaen's altered *rāgavardhana*, is the rhythmic basis of the closing toccata section.

Messiaen used the deśītālas for a number of years (until 1963) before discovering the cosmic and religious symbols wedded to each tāla in Indian culture. Nonetheless, he remarked, "I've used Hindu rhythms and rhythmic principles a great deal, but when I used them, I still didn't know the meaning of the Sanskrit words, and so I was unaware of the symbols. Yet I often approached the meanings unconsciously."¹³ His use of the *laksmīśa* and *candrakalā* seem especially serendipitous in "Dieu parmi nous," as the *laksmīśa* represents beauty and riches and the *candrakalā* refers to a phase of the moon.¹⁴ Certainly, the opening Incarnation theme represents a descent of beauty and riches in the earthly embodiment of Christ. Messiaen uses the *candrakalā* in Mary's Magnificat, a tāla that fittingly evokes the moon, the celestial body closely connected with the female reproductive cycle.

Messiaen's rhythmic language is intrinsically tied to his fascination with numerology. Throughout his oeuvre, he favors prime numbers, attesting, "For you know that divinity is not divisible!"¹⁵ Certain prime numbers are especially significant and are infused with religious or cultural meaning. The number five is of central importance in "Dieu parmi nous," and Simundza elucidates its meaning as follows:

It is the sum of the first even number (2) and the first uneven number (3). It represents the union of the heavenly (3) and terrestrial principles (2), that is the female (2) and the male (3) number in India. [Five] is the number of the center, order and balance, the symbol of man, the manifestation of the universe and the principle of life.¹⁶

Ex. 4: mm. 35–36

Ex. 5: mm. 100–104

Ex. 6: mm. 55–58

Christ's incarnation, the central subject of *La Nativité*, is an artistic combination of these factors; it is a commingling of the earthly and the divine, a proverbial marriage of God the Father and the Vir-

gin Mary. Therefore, it is not surprising that "Dieu parmi nous" is rife with twos and threes, and that Messiaen strategically combines these numbers to represent Christ's incarnation. Its most obvi-

ous manifestation is the development of the Communion theme beginning in m. 31, as the descending pedal line clearly appears in groupings of two and three. The pedal begins in strict groupings of three. However, when the pedal reenters in m. 36, shown in Example 4, Messiaen adds groups of two notes, creating a symbolic communion between two and three, an intermingling of the heavenly and earthly, the male and female.

The number seven possesses complex symbolism that is present in almost all cultures and religions. Messiaen has his own interpretation of certain symbolic numbers; for example, he says of seven and eight: "Seven is the perfect number, the divine Sabbath sanctifying the six days of creation; this rest of seven is prolonged in eternity and becomes the eight of the indefectible light, of the unalterable peace."¹⁷ Messiaen uses these numbers throughout "Dieu parmi nous" to signify divinity and the ultimate rest of eternity. For instance, the opening pedal descent in Example 2 consists of eight notes, finally arriving at a long resting point on the eighth, the lowest note of the pedalboard. Messiaen also interjects what seems like an abrupt trill in the middle of the Magnificat, which lasts exactly seven beats. These numbers make especially poignant appearances on the final page of "Dieu parmi nous," as the pedal repeats a clear rhythmic pattern of seven beats, which is later repeated in the manuals, as shown in Example 5. Finally, the closing pedal note enters on the eighth 8th note of the descending line, now resting on tonic with a fermata.

A Theological Reading of "Dieu parmi nous"

By studying Messiaen's musical language in "Dieu parmi nous," one is able to glean insight into the composer's faith and create a theological narrative that reflects the Scripture that Messiaen assigns to this piece:

Words of the communicant, of the Virgin, of the whole Church: "He who created me has dwelt in my tent, the Word is made flesh and dwelt within me. My soul glorifies the Lord, my spirit trembles in rejoicing in God my Savior." (Ecclesiasticus 24:8, Gospel according to St. John 1:14, Gospel according to St. Luke 1:46–47)¹⁸

Messiaen considered himself a theologian above all else and used his musical language and compositional tools to more adeptly express central components of the Christian faith. His "Dieu parmi nous" is a clear expression of his favorite theological theme; in it the heavenly meets the earthly, and the temporal glimpses eternity.

The preface to *La Nativité* marks Messiaen's first reference to the theological function of his compositions. In addition to highlighting the five musical aspects of the cycle, he outlines the following five theological aims:

From the theological point of view, there are five principal ideas:

1. Our predestination realized by the incarnation of the Word.
2. God living in the midst of us, God suffering.
3. The three births: the eternal birth of the Word, the temporal birth of Christ, and the spiritual birth of Christians.
4. A description of some of the personages who give a special poetry to the Feast of Christmas.
5. Nine pieces in all to honor the maternity of the Holy Virgin.¹⁹

It is interesting that Messiaen gives two lists of five in this preface, seemingly dividing his points into rather arbitrary lists. The number five is, of course, a prime number with much religious significance; it is the ultimate union of heaven and earth, of male and female, of the temporal and eternal. Furthermore, as Messiaen outlines the musical and theological ideas that govern *La Nativité*, he divides the ten into two tables of five, just as God provided the Ten Commandments to the Old Testament Israelites in two stone tablets.

The number ten also appears in "Dieu parmi nous" linked to the Incarnation theme. The opening figure in the manuals contains ten chords, finally resting on the tenth while the descending pedal line responds with eight notes (see Example 2). While Messiaen does not comment on his use of ten and eight in the opening theme, ten clearly recalls the Ten Commandments, and Messiaen uses eight as a symbol of eternal rest. His use of these numbers is significant and here may represent Christ's divine fulfillment of the law through his incarnation. It is, after all, through the incarnation theme that Messiaen finally allows his listeners to rest on the low C after a seemingly interminable descent to the eighth pedal note.

The numbers eight and ten resurface in what is arguably the most theologically intriguing passage of "Dieu parmi nous." Measures 55–58, shown in Example 6, parallel the opening Incarnation theme, but here Messiaen substantially varies the material. In m. 55, the first four chords alternate between ten and eight pitches. The next four chords contain seven pitches, followed by a chord containing five. These chords are rhythmically augmented from the original theme. What follows this descent, however, is entirely unexpected. Messiaen adds a measure (m. 56), which is



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followed by an ascending right-hand line derived from the original pedal descent.

The added m. 56 is particularly intriguing, as it contains ten beats, in which 1 equals a 16th note, and eight pitches. Messiaen emphasizes this measure by altering the dynamic level, suddenly decreasing the volume to mezzo forte. Additionally, the chords in m. 56 are notably less dense than those which precede and follow, and they are surrounded on either side by silence created by Messiaen's meticulously placed 8th-note rests. While the rests are quite short, they nonetheless bear great visual testimony to Messiaen's intent in this passage. He sets these chords apart for the performer, punctuating this measure by surrounding it with rests and indicating a change in dynamic level. He follows this inversion (mm. 57–58) with the brilliant E-major toccata section beginning in m. 59. It seems quite plausible that the added measure symbolizes

Christ's interment in the tomb, as the altered ascending line leads to the jubilant resurrection toccata in what Wilfrid Mellers calls the "traditionally 'heavenly' key of E major."²⁰ Interestingly, the added measure is ten 16th notes long, perhaps again suggesting Christ's fulfillment of the Old Testament law through his crucifixion. Furthermore, the descending chords in m. 55 are among the most dissonant sonorities of the piece, supporting the interpretation that Christ's imminent death lurks even amidst his incarnation.

"Dieu parmi nous" is the capstone of Messiaen's suite addressing the nativity of the Lord. In this movement, he affirms one of the most pivotal ideas of Christianity: Christ descends to dwell as God among us. Christ's incarnation fulfills the Old Testament law, and by so doing frees humankind from its inherent sin. All of creation rejoices with Mary in her bird-inspired Magnificat theme, but the story does not simply

end here. Messiaen subtly foreshadows Christ's suffering and death in this movement, asserting that the wood of the manger quickly becomes the wood of the Cross. For Messiaen, however, the Cross is implicitly linked to the empty tomb, which he celebrates in the joyful resurrection toccata that serves as a brilliant culmination to *La Nativité*. Throughout "Dieu parmi nous," Messiaen strategically incorporates theological symbolism through the modes of limited transposition, numerology, melodic contour, added values, bird-song, and Hindu rhythms. By understanding the theological truth at the heart of this movement, we are more fully able to grasp Messiaen's message in which God descends to dwell among us.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Claude Samuel, *Conversations with Olivier Messiaen*, trans. Felix Aprahamian (London: Stainer & Bell, 1976), p. 2.
2. Paul Griffiths, "Olivier Messiaen," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., ed. Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell (London: Macmillan, 2001).
3. Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985), p. 63.
4. Olivier Messiaen, *Messiaen on Messiaen: The Composer Writes about His Works*, trans. Irene Feddern (Bloomington, Ind.: Frangipani Press, 1986), p. 7.
5. Messiaen, *Messiaen on Messiaen*, p. 13.
6. Olivier Messiaen, *The Technique of My Musical Language: Text with Musical Examples*, trans. John Satterfield (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1966), p. 53.
7. Messiaen, *Messiaen on Messiaen*, p. 13.
8. Messiaen, *Technique*, p. 53.
9. Mirjana Simundza, "Messiaen's Rhythmical Organization and Classical Indian Theory of Rhythm," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 18, No. 1 (June 1987), p. 117.
10. Simundza, "Rhythmical Organization," p. 117.
11. Quoted in Samuel, *Conversations*, p. 78.
12. Messiaen, *Technique*, p. 53.
13. Quoted in Samuel, *Conversations*, p. 45.
14. Simundza, "Rhythmical Organization," p. 124.
15. Quoted in Samuel, *Conversations*, p. 47.
16. Simundza, "Rhythmical Organization," p. 130.
17. *Hommage à Olivier Messiaen* (Paris: n.p., 1978), p. 40, quoted in Simundza, "Rhythmical Organization," p. 134.
18. Messiaen, *Messiaen on Messiaen*, p. 13.
19. Messiaen, *Messiaen on Messiaen*, p. 8.
20. Wilfrid Mellers, "Mysticism and Theology," in *The Messiaen Companion*, ed. Peter Hill (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), p. 225.

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