

or programme of any kind attached, the others are all inspired by religious or natural symbolism, notably numbers 3 and 6, which are illustrations of surrealistic visions from the Old Testament prophets. He attached particular importance to the location of the composition of each piece, which had a strong influence on its character, and is carefully noted in the score – his study in Paris saw the birth of the most theoretical pieces, while the others were inspired by contrasting landscapes of mountains, glaciers and forests...

1 *Reprises par interventions*

Three Hindu rhythms are treated as *personnages rythmiques*, and then reprised three times in different permutations – as a closed fan, as an open fan, and in retrograde, thus forming a perfect palindrome. Messiaen draws special attention to the 'fan' sections, where the music takes on an extremely bizarre, fragmented character as it is dismembered before our ears.

2 *Pièce en trio (for Trinity Sunday)*

'Now we see in a glass darkly...' (St Paul)

Like the first, this short piece was written in Paris, and is also based on variations of Hindu rhythms. "It is written in trio form, for it speaks of a very great mystery that we can understand only very imperfectly – the Mystery of the Holy Trinity."

3 *Les mains de l'abîme (for seasons of Penitence)*

'The deep uttered his voice, and lifted up his hands on high.' (Habakkuk)

"This piece was composed in the mountains, in the high Alps... surrounded by vertiginous chasms and precipices, in the terror of the abyss. This abyss is a symbol of the misery of humanity crying out to God. At the beginning and end of the piece: great fortissimo of the whole organ – the cry of the abyss! In the middle: the highest and lowest registers of the organ are superimposed, with nothing in between, giving a vivid spatial sensation. In the bass, the supplication of the deep, coming from the entrails of the earth... In the treble, the divine response... ethereal sweetness, distant, hidden tenderness, an unreal sound. 'Deep calleth unto deep,' says Psalm 42... Desolation and consolation: the Abyss between the two voices."

4 *Chants d'oiseaux (for Easter)*

'Afternoon of the birds: blackbird, robin, song thrush and nightingale'

Messiaen's afternoon belongs not to a faun, but to his beloved birds, and this central movement provides a foretaste of the *Catalogue*



d'oiseaux and the other major works of the '50s. This is music of the forest: blackbird, robin and song thrush begin sing in the late afternoon, and then, as night falls, the nightingale begins a long solo, 'tender and mysterious...' "In my hours of gloom," Messiaen wrote in 1959, "when I am suddenly aware of my own futility, when every musical idiom appears to me as no more than admirable, painstaking experimentation, without any ultimate justification, what is left for me but to seek out the true, lost face of music, somewhere in the forest, in the fields, in the mountains or on the seashore, among the birds."

5 *Pièce en trio (for Trinity Sunday)*

'Of him, and through him, and to him, are all things.' (Romans) Messiaen considered this piece to be his finest achievement in the manipulation and organisation of rhythmic cells; two sets of *personnages rythmiques* are superimposed in the manual parts, while the pedals play the principal melody. The music was inspired by the majestic glaciers of the French Alps, which "explains its character, simultaneously harsh and nostalgic, the proud, melancholy profile of the melody, the rhythmic precision, reflecting the geometry of mountains and rocks, and the hard clarity of the registration, influenced by visions of sun and snow..."

6 *Les yeux dans les roues (for Whit Sunday)*

'And the rims of the four wheels were full of eyes round about them. For the spirit of the living creature was in the wheels.' (Ezekiel)

Ezekiel's surrealist vision of 'the eyes in the wheels' inspired one of Messiaen's shortest but most powerful inspirations; relentless, circling permutations of twelve-tone rows – a turbulent stream of semiquavers in the manuals above slower patterns in the pedals – vividly evoke the rotation of these terrifying wheels, in a blazing fortissimo.

7 *Soixante-quatre durées*

The final piece is another tour de force of rhythmic organisation, based on a series of sixty-four durations, ranging from one to sixty-four demi-semiquavers; two different versions are superimposed, one arranged in groups of four as a closed fan (61-62-63-64, 4-3-2-1, 57-58-59-60, 8-7-6-5 and so on), and the other, in retrograde, as an open fan (29-30-31-32, 36-35-34-33, 25-26-27-28, 40-39-38-37 and so on). But this too is music of the forest, and a whole flock of birds flies in and out of these rhythmic patterns, bringing the barren landscape to life with its irrepressible song. ■ **David Gammie**

LA NATIVITÉ DU SEIGNEUR (1935)

Following on from *L'Ascension* and a number of shorter pieces, *La Nativité* was the work in which all the elements of Messiaen's mature style – melodies, modes, colours and rhythms – came together for the first time. The 26-year-old composer prepared a brief manifesto explaining the theological background and some of the novel registrations and compositional procedures he had employed in the work, and this was published with the musical score: "Emotion, sincerity first of all, but transmitted to the listener by means both sure and clear..." Messiaen would later insist that he had "done much better since", but this set of nine Christmas 'meditations' remains the most popular of his large-scale organ works, its vivid pictorial imagery never failing to speak directly "from heart to heart".

1 *La Vierge et L'Enfant*

The first meditation begins in a mood of rapt contemplation, a moment frozen in time as the Virgin gazes down with infinite tenderness at her newborn child. Like the three panels of a stained-glass window, or a painted altar triptych, this movement is in ternary form (ABA), and the opening scene is bathed in "violet light". The scherzo-like central section represents the joy of the Blessed Virgin in a kind of hypnotic dance constructed from three independent elements – an ornate melody for the right hand, based on the plainsong Introit of Christmas, 'Puer natus est', an ostinato group of eleven chords for the left hand, and a high-pitched bell-like ostinato for the pedals. A brief reprise of the opening scene and an improvisatory cadenza for solo Flute bring the first movement to a close.

2 *Les bergers*

The introduction to the second meditation again describes the scene in the stable, intensifying the atmosphere of the preceding piece as the shepherds kneel in silent adoration. The superposition of two chordal lines in different modes and rhythms evokes "the holy light round the manger" in a complex of shifting colours – "violet blue, flecked with red, gold and silver". With a brief flourish on their pipes, the shepherds rise, and the music takes on a more human, less rarefied character as they depart, piping "a sort of carol with a curious rhythm – a naïve melody in the style of the popular noëls of the French provinces, played first on the Clarinet, then on the Oboe, with two simple verses and two decorated verses". The use of Greek rhythmic figures gives the carol an attractively wayward, unpredictable flavour.

3 *Desseins éternels*

The next three meditations move away from the actual events of the Christmas story to concentrate on more profound theological considerations. A single seamless phrase for soft Flutes and Strings, 'Desseins éternels' is one of those ecstatic, timeless slow movements that feature in all Messiaen's early works. It is a meditation on the mystery of God's eternal plan for the salvation of mankind through his Son; the performer is directed to play 'extremely slowly and tenderly'.

4 *Le verbe*

The fourth and fifth pieces are concerned with the Word of God, the Word made Flesh, and to match the grandeur of this theme Messiaen uses the fortissimo of the organ for the first time. "Le Verbe" is divided into two parts. The fundamental theme of the first part is a slow descent on the pedal reeds, reminiscent of the terrible fortissimo of the long trumpets in Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*, and also of certain trombone themes in the music of Wagner..." A short development, employing several characteristic harmonic and rhythmic devices, leads to the second part of the piece, which "symbolises the Word. It is a long solo for Comet (a tone-colour that is particularly colourful and rich in harmonics) combining elements of the plainsong sequence 'Victimae Paschali' in its melody and structure, the Hindu

SATURDAY 28 NOVEMBER

King's College Chapel 6.30pm

STEPHEN CLEOBURY

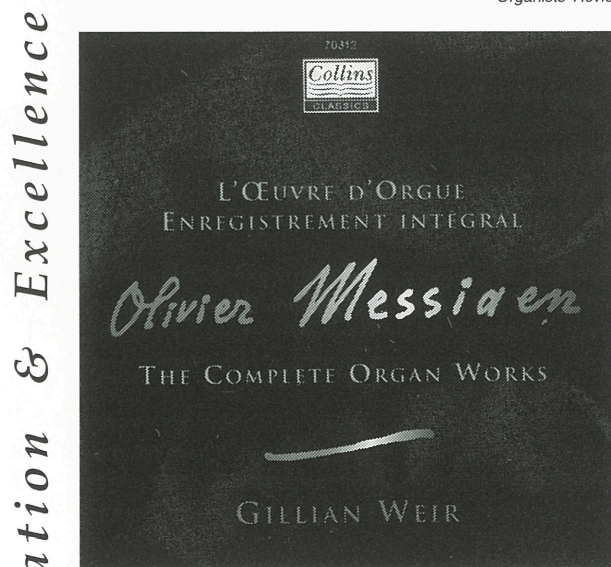


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