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## **God Made Man: A Sonic Representation of God in the Organ Work “*Dieu parmi nous*” of Olivier Messiaen**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the sonic representation of God in the organ work “God among us”, the ninth and final movement of *La nativité du Seigneur* by French composer Olivier Messiaen. A convert to the Catholic belief, Messiaen holds a devote interior spirituality the spills into his compositions highlighting a dialogue and relationship with God. In the communal alienation and isolation of the twenty-first century, the awareness of musical constructs representing the incarnation of God offers an example and hope of self-giving that could be mirrored in civic sacrifice for others. Exploring the roots of human interiority through an auditory approach, in the organ music of Messiaen, one can discover, perhaps in a transformative experience, an understanding of God through music.

An analysis is offered of the first three measures of the ninth meditation, “*Dieu parmi nous*” that is inspired by the incarnation of the son of God in *La nativité du Seigneur*. An analysis of “*Dieu parmi nous*” will demonstrate the usage of Hindu classical music rhythmic structures, modes of limited transposition, and number play.

**Keywords:** Messiaen, Music, God, Sociology, Number Play, Hindu Rhythms

### **Introduction**

In this article an analysis of the first three measures of “*Dieu parmi nous*” is presented to understand the way the composer’s faith affects his composition. This process will help establish a relationship with both the piece of music that, conceivably with some contextual information, is more profound than that experienced by a casual listener. In the early twenty-first century, the more humans connect with each other through digital means the more we become alienated. Perhaps reflecting on the example of the love of God giving humanity the possibility to interact with God made man in Jesus the Christ, we too might give ourselves to humanity in order to better our communities.

### **Messiaen**

Olivier Messiaen was born in Avignon, 1908 to a well-read family—his mother a poet and father an English teacher. At an early age, Messiaen and his brother would construct stages and scenes for Shakespeare plays making translucent backdrops with discarded cellophane that projected colored light on their sets. By age 15 he was awarded prizes in harmony at the Paris Conservatory. His academic studies in music were admirable. As teacher and mentor, Paul Dukas lead Messiaen to Debussy, Ravel, and other composers that had an enormous influence on Messiaen and his compositional development.

In the autumn of 1927 Messiaen began organ studies with Marcel Dupré, shortly thereafter beginning his tenure at La Trinité as organist where he remained for 60 years. *La jeune France* (Young France), was a group formed by Messiaen, André Jolivet, Daniel-Lesur and Yves Baudrier in 1936. It was this band of musicians that rejected the current Parisian music scene expressing partiality toward, “living music, having the impetus of sincerity, generosity and artistic conscientiousness” (Griffiths, 1985, p. 72). Messiaen, a driving force in the group, set a musical upheaval reflecting, “a musical alliance calling for a generational revolution and new ‘nonconformism’ in French musical aesthetics” (Schloesser, 2014. p. 228).

Messiaen's work soon departed from this period, taking a clear direction of substantive themes based in the theological teachings of the Catholic Church. It was during this time that Messiaen methodized his compositional style using for his rhythmic systems, Hindu *decî-tâlas*, his modes of limited transposition for harmonic color, and birdsong for his melodic usage. A substantial portion of Messiaen's music involves the symmetries of time and pitch (Benitez, 2009. pp. 267-299). The use of non-retrogradable rhythms and harmonic sequences would display all possible permutations and then return to the original, representing this "charm of impossibilities" in a way, gives an informed listener a foretaste of eternity, therefore, God (Messiaen, 1956, p. 13).

During World War II Messiaen was captured at Verdun and held as a prisoner of war in Görlitz, Stalag VIII-A where he met three other musicians; violinist Jean Le Boulaire, cellist Etienne Pasquier, and clarinetist Henri Akoka (Rischin, 2003). While in captivity he wrote one of the most important works of the late 20th century, *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*. This piece was premiered in January of 1941 for the prisoners and prison guards. While at Stalag VIII-A, Messiaen was allowed to go outside late in the evening to reflect on his composition. One of these cold nights, he witnessed the aurora borealis. Yvonne Loriod, his wife, recounts Messiaen's experience, "...the extraordinary colors in the sky that no doubt intensified his fascination with color, a fascination that he would eventually express in his music (Rischin, 2003. p. 27). Ever since he was a child making translucent backdrops for theatrical scenes, Messiaen experienced the perceptual phenomenon synesthesia which is a stimulation of one sensory or cognitive pathway that leads to automatic, involuntary experiences in a second sensory or cognitive pathway (Cytowic, 2002). Chromesthesia, sound to color synesthesia, was experienced by Messiaen as other musicians. Messiaen attributed colors to his modes of limited transposition. When listening to his music, he "saw" a wash of colors—much like the aurora borealis or the blend of color on the floor that was caused by light passing through stained glass windows in a church.

And finally, possibly the most important stimuli on his compositional style was his belief in Catholic doctrine. A direct way to understand Messiaen's involvement in the teachings of the Catholic Church is to read his own words on the subject. A most unique source of Messiaen's words is compiled from the Conference in Notre Dame, 1977, discussions, conversations, Messiaen's address *Praemium Erasmianum*, and discussions and conversations from tapes and linguistic advice by Almut Rößler a student and valued performer of Messiaen's works. In Rößler's book, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen*, 1986, Messiaen states,

I'm a believer, and I talk about the mysteries of Christ to people who don't believe, who think that Christ wasn't God, ... There's one thing which is very difficult to explain to most people: the matter of time. ... In fact, space and time were the first of God's creations, ... God is infinite, He doesn't exist in space and knows neither beginning nor end. (Rößler, 1986. p. 123)

Messiaen's music is for believers in God and those who do not believe. Both, through study, analysis, and understanding one can have a greater appreciation of the auditory machinations that Messiaen engages. Messiaen asserts,

The person who's studied Harmony certainly understands a concert better than someone who hasn't studied it. The person who studied Instrumentation hears the timbres better, the one who studied Rhythm, the rhythms better than one who hasn't studied them. In the same way, a believer understands the truths of Faith better than an unbeliever. But music is to a certain extent a specialty, a technique, whereas faith, piety, is a need, especially, as a matter of fact, for those who do not believe. ... A music which brings them music and faith is a comfort for them, after all—perhaps even more so than for believers. (Rößler, 1986. p. 93)

Messiaen was not attentive in portraying facets of theology like wickedness, transgressions, or sin but instead he focused on the doctrine of elation, divine love, and redemption (Bruhn, 1996. pp. 277-309). He was also very interested in the distinction between time and eternity. "Time is not, as we have come to believe, a part of Eternity; Time neither includes nor extends Eternity. Time and eternity are two completely different measures of duration" (Baggech/Messiaen, 1998. p. 15). The organ is an instrument that has the potential of extending time indefinitely. As an organist Messiaen used the instrument to sustain a tone, that at times, would signify eternity. Often Messiaen will write a fermata over a long-held note giving the listener a sense of extreme duration or, symbolically, eternity.

Time is the measure of creation, eternity is God himself. Eternity is indivisible like God is indivisible. Time is not a finite length that enters into an infinite length (eternity): it is continuous in the face of the indivisible (God)” To speak of an immutable and indivisible present is to speak of Eternity, and to speak of Eternity is to affirm the existence of God (Baggech/Messiaen, 1998. p. 15-16).

### **La nativité du Seigneur: Dieu parmi nous/God among us**

La nativité du Seigneur, a nine-movement work for solo organ, was written during the summer of 1935, six years before the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*. In Messiaen’s words, “As this is my most substantial work—and represents for me the result of several years’ reflection” (Hill & Simeon, 2005, p.59). “God among us” is the final piece of *The Nativity of the Lord*. A full and detailed analysis is beyond the range of this article. Here a brief examination of the first three measures will suffice for the choices made to aurally represent the descent of the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ.

Time and number play have interested the composer for many years. The division of time, sonically, involves the rhythm of a piece of music. Messiaen uses the ancient Hindu *decî-tālas* as rhythmic structures that emulate the recurring flow in nature. *Vishishtadvaita*, a sector of Vedanta school of Hindu philosophy, used these *decî-tālas* as a musical measure of time in Indian classical music. Not out of a belief in Hinduism but out of the respect for the ancient form of delineating time, Messiaen was fascinated by these rhythmic constructions. Curious observation that Hinduism embraces a version of a deity taking on the form of an earthly object known as an avatar. “In Hinduism, incarnation refers to the rebirth doctrine and its theistic traditions to avatar meaning descent or to make one’s appearance or an embodiment of the essence of a superhuman being in another form.” (Kim, 2008. Pg. 169). Whereas the Catholic belief system proports God as a three-person form—the Trinity, where God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are three distinct persons, coeternal and, in the case of the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ/God the Son, is also consubstantial. An initial Christian tenet maintains that the divine nature of the Son of God was absolutely unified with human form and nature in one divine Person. “The theological term for this is the hypostatic union: The Second Person of the Holy Trinity, God the Son, became flesh when he was miraculously conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary” (Cohn-Sherbok et al,2019. Pg. 74). In Messiaen’s words, there’s something unique, that’s even more unusual than the totally other deity; namely, that God – as different, as distant, as terrible, as motionless, as eternal, and as infinite as He appears to us-come 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 god-head: the Mystery of the Incarnation, and that’s why I’m a Christian. (Röbler, 1986. p. 96)

The sonic representation of this belief, this display of the love of God toward humanity, is present in the first three measures of “*Dieu parmi nous*”.

For Messiaen certain numbers have a significant symbolic reasoning. One is a number chosen for its indivisibility; one regularly indicates the unified God. Messiaen utilizes one to add value to an additional element of measurement. Two is a number demonstrating worldly objects being the initial even number. Technically a prime number, it is basically dividable into reduced parts of  $1 + 1$ , distinct odd numbers that signify indivisible divinity. Two is the clearest or smallest even number and is consequently the plainest depiction of humankind. Three is a prime number suggesting the Holy Trinity. The number three cannot be divided, and it therefore suggests the indivisible God comprising three discrete beings. Messiaen constantly states that it is the perfect symbol for divinity.

Five is exceedingly representational in his music in that it is the sum of the first even number, 2, and the first odd number 3. The number 5 represents Christ who is both human and divine. Seven is another prime number that has immense representation in many beliefs and traditions. God formed the universe in six days and rested on the seventh. Messiaen respects this number because of the many biblical references leading him to use seven for all things sacred. Eight is the number that Messiaen utilizes to symbolize eternity. Nine is another odd number that is a perfect square as the product of  $3 \times 3$ . It often represents divinity or maternity, symbolizing the nine months of pregnancy. These numbers are used in the time values of both notes and rests—even in the structure of the nine movements and the form of individual movements of *The Nativity of the Lord* (Plamann, 2014).

In the first 3 measures of “*Dieu parmi nous*”, Messiaen uses the *decî-tālas* rhythm *laksmīśa* with a rhythmic structure of 1,  $1\frac{1}{2}$ , 2, 4.

Recalling Messiaen's usage of numbers, in the first three measures, that could represent the Trinity, he also utilizes the *rāgavardhana* form, a more melodic gesture within Classical Indian music. *Vardhana* is mythically one of the sons born to Śrī Kṛṣṇa of his wife *Mitravindā*: an intriguing thought. Messiaen's choice of the *rāgavardhana* could be a sonic representation of the fall or descent of the second person of the Trinity. The roots of the *rāgavardhana* lie in Hindustani music where there is also a "form taking" or birth of *Vardhana*.

*laksmīśa*: 2 3 4 8

Lent et puissant

*fff staccato*

*staccato*

*rāgavardhana*: 4 4 4 2 2 2

Example 1: "God among us" mm. 1—3

In this musical example we see the first three measures of "Dieu parmi nous". There are so many levels with which to examine. A brilliant exposition of the first theme of the piece; in the first measure, rhythmically carefully chosen, this measure could represent God the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, all three persons of the Trinity. The descent or fall of the second person of the Trinity happens within the first measure—one symbolizing the invisible God. The chord progression appears in two groups—two representing terrestrial matters or humanity. In the *Technique of My Musical Language*, Messiaen writes about the form of "Dieu parmi nous",

First theme, rhythmic: This first theme is divided into A and B; A is written in the fourth mode of limited transpositions; B is written in the second of these modes; B 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. (Messiaen, 1956. p.41)

He emphasizes the terrestrial nature even within the form of the work—the divine gifts humankind the second person of the Trinity.

It is important to state that the color relationship within modes are not for the individual notes in the scale but to the harmonies that constructed using that scale dependent on the transposition. The fourth mode, with its six transpositions, contains two minor 3rds that creates colors of gray, gold, and some blue in the first transposition. In the second transposition there are streaks of iron-gray, pink-mauve and coppery-yellow. Black and clear Prussian blue are also present.

In conversation with Claude Samuel, Messiaen explains,

Mode 2 is thrice transposable, so it has only three possibilities of coloration. For me, the first transposition of Mode 2 is defined like this: 'blue-violet rocks speckled with little gray cubes, cobalt blue, deep Prussian blue, mauve, black, and white. Blue-violet is dominant.' The same mode in its second transposition is totally different: 'gold and silver spirals and brown are dominant.' And here's the third transposition: 'light green and prairie-green foliage, with specks of blue, silver, and reddish orange. Dominant is green. (Samuel, 1994. p.64)

Mode 4 is frequently used by Messiaen where he constructs his most distinctive harmonies. Musically, it alternates between half and whole intervals. Not only does Messiaen construct representational rhythmic shapes but also is painting with sound an entire precise palette of color in his composition.

At the premiere of the *La nativité du Seigneur*, in an effort to communicate with the audience, a small slip of paper was distributed to those gathered, outlining Messiaen's musical and theological leanings. In Messiaen's words,

The emotion, the sincerity of the musical work: to be at the service of the dogmas of Catholic theology. To be expressed by melodic and harmonic means: the progressive growth of intervals, the chord on the dominant, pedal notes, embellishments and extended appoggiaturas. Still more by rhythmic means: rhythms immediately preceded or followed by their augmentation and sometimes increased by a short note-value (half the added value). And above all by modes of limited transposition: chromatic modes, used harmonically, the strange colour of which derives from the limited number of their possible transpositions (2, 3, 4, and 6 according to the mode). Theological subject matter? The best, since it contains all subjects. And this abundance of technical means allows the heart to overflow freely. (Hill & Simeone, 2005. p. 59)

A complex mix of rhythm, harmonies, color, and numeric symbolism are the devices that Messiaen uses to express the Catholic doctrine of incarnation in "*Dieu parmi nous*". The incarnation of God is the ultimate attempt at communication and connection—a benevolent God that seeks relationship and interaction.

### Conclusion

Messiaen utilizes musical means to share and demonstrate the Catholic belief that a merciful God makes a physical connection with humankind in an incarnation of the Son of God. The composer uses highly complex rhythms and the colorations of his modes of limited transposition. These are the mechanisms that Messiaen has developed into a method by which his belief system presents the splendor of the incarnation of a munificent God. What might individuals, in an era of alienation and segregation of self, advance from this demonstration? Perhaps, through the knowledge of the work of a composer, there might be a movement toward self-giving and a caring mindset that could be echoed between people to make connections and develop giving relationships in civic offering for others. Through this sonic representation of the incarnation of God, individuals might imitate an incarnation of good-will toward the community.

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