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Graduate Seminar in Music Since 1950

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## Tradition, the Avant Garde, and Individuality in the Music of Olivier Messiaen: Musical Influences in *Méditations sur la mystère de la Sainte-Trinité*

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### Origins and Inspirations as "Tradition" in the Late Twentieth Century

#### The Abundance of Musical Resources in the Twentieth Century

A glance at any twentieth-century music textbook will give one the impression that serialism, chance music, electronic music, and the post-modern trends of minimalism and neo-romanticism have seemed to dominate the music of the second half of the twentieth century. However, a more detailed look into the music presented in the texts suggests that the work of most individual composers during the period represents a more eclectic collection of influences that include one or more of these major trends among them, sometimes only during a short period of the composer's productive life. This observation shows that a more complete view of late twentieth-century music comes from looking at

the influences on individual composers and thus gives the perspective that this music abounds with tradition. Much of this rich sophistication in twentieth-century music was fueled by the explosion of resources that arose from musicological and ethnomusicological research. Only in the twentieth century have musicologists and other researchers successfully begun to construct a complete musical picture of such sources as the Medieval period, non-Western cultures, and the political and philosophical zeitgeists of all of the many times and cultures. Music in the twentieth century, then, does not draw on one central and contemporary tradition to the exclusion of foreign influence, but, rather, makes use of many much more individualistic origins and inspirations as its "tradition." One representative composer who embraces many quite eclectic resources, avant-garde trends, and also presents some very individualistic musical beliefs is Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992). In looking at Messiaen's music of the second half of the twentieth century, one can see that, although his music was deeply personal and highly individualistic, it was highly influenced by both tradition and the twentieth-century avant garde.

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### Messiaen's Philosophical and Musical Resources

It will be important when looking at Messiaen's works to have a basic understanding of all of his sources of inspiration. Philosophically his music derives from several personal convictions as well as a few specific musical traditions. Messiaen's self-attested musical identity is that he is first a Catholic, and his music illustrates religious texts and Catholic doctrines; he is next an ornithologist, and much of his music is full of birdsong; he is next a musical "colorist," with certain sounds and chords in his music having particular color associations; and he is lastly a rhythmicist, with highly irregular rhythms playing an important part of his music, often mimicking the rhythms of nature.<sup>1</sup> A more detailed look at Messiaen's musical influences must organize itself under these headings and must also look at the more technical compositional influences that serve these broad philosophically-based musical assertions which are at the core of his *œuvre*.

The musical traditions upon which Messiaen draws his inspiration are highly varied, including Eastern rhythms and modes, Greek rhythms, medieval principles of rhythmic organization, the French organ music tradition, synthetic modes and rhythms, and the organization principles of total serialism. Although Messiaen has declared his esteem for the main composers of the Western tradition, for example Mozart's rhythm and Chopin's piano writing, his music seems incapable of espousing the central precepts of the tradition, such as motion derived from developing themes, harmonic progression, and the interdependence of rhythm and pitch structure.<sup>2</sup> Scholars thus often characterize Messiaen's music as being "static." However, even with the absence of traditional development, Messiaen's works have a highly perceptible aural logic, and the content of the music itself professes important musical and philosophical meaning. One must see Messiaen's music through these intellectual, religious, and emotional sources to truly understand its unique worth.

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### The Influences and Techniques in Messiaen's Music

#### Catholicism

Although Messiaen rarely composed music intended for liturgical use, his Catholic faith was the fundamental foundation for and message of his music. "A believer musician, I speak of the faith to non-believers. How can you expect them to understand me?"<sup>3</sup> Indeed, religious content was perhaps the most provocative aspect of the scandalous work *Trois petites Liturgies de la Présence divine*, which quickly established Messiaen as a creative genius in 1945. "The non Christian was out of sympathy with the religious sentiments expressed, while the traditional Catholic was displeased by the apparently vulgar treatment of sacred ideas.... It sets out, in fact, to transfer something of the

substance of the Church's liturgy to the concert-hall, an operation which is discomfiting to the non-believer as well as to the conservative Catholic."<sup>4</sup> Most of Messiaen's music is similar to this example in that it centers around the Catholic mysticism itself, much more than it depicts simple religious subjects. Because this particular philosophical influence on Messiaen's work comes from his steadfast religious faith, it informs all of his work regardless of the sacred or secular nature its overt subject matter. Further, investigation into the remaining influences will show that in Messiaen's conception they are all manifestations of aspects of his religious faith.

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### Birdsong (and Nature in General)

Messiaen's interest in ornithology and birdsong began when he was about fifteen, when he visited a farm in the Aube district. It did not, however, become an overt part of his music until *Quator pour la Fin du Temps* (1941). The "birdsong" period of Messiaen's output truly began with *Reveil des Oiseaux* (1953) and continued well into the 1960s. Yet the use of transcribed birdcalls is not simply a source of musical material for Messiaen. His exploits of this device include associating the birdsong with its natural habitat (the colors associated with the region, the songs of other birds that inhabit the same area, the time of day when the birds are heard, etc.), associating the birdsong with the coloration of its plumage, and using birdsong in a much more flexible way, bringing together birds that would not naturally be heard in the same region. In addition, Messiaen's interest in the natural word extends much further than birdsong. The noises and rhythmic qualities of natural events, such as the tides, waterfalls, and wind, tend to appear in Messiaen's music, and especially in his bird pieces. Although Messiaen has used many traditional melodies in his music (folk songs in the *Quatre Études de Rythme*, Gregorian chant in his organ music, etc.), the melodies of birdsong seem to be a much more integral part of Messiaen's musical idiom. Philosophically birds take on a symbolic function for him as creators of true musical expression undefiled by human frailty and egoism. Messiaen has said in an interview with Claude Samuel, "Among the artistic hierarchy, the birds are probably the greatest musicians to inhabit our planet." Further, in the same vein as his interest in communicating something of Catholic mysticism to non-believers, Messiaen declares, "I speak of birds to people who live in cities, who have never gotten up at four in the morning to listen to the awakening of the birds in the country..."<sup>5</sup> From this statement one can perhaps surmise that Messiaen associates the highly complicated patterns of the birds' twittering with the complexity of the mysteries in Catholic theology. Scholars have long questioned Messiaen's transcription skills, noting inconsistencies and inaccuracies in the bird calls he uses. One can quickly dispense with these accusations once one understands Messiaen's reasons for using birdsong. In Messiaen's own discussion of his use of birdsong, he asserts that accuracy is often not a question with the use of particular birdsongs in his music: "It is ridiculous servilely to copy nature.... Melodies of the "bird" genre will be transcription, transformation, and interpretation of the volleys and trills of our little servants of immaterial joy."<sup>6</sup> With this in mind, it is possible to understand Messiaen's unique and bizarre use of birdcalls in terms of his musical conception.<sup>7</sup>

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### Rhythm

Rhythm is perhaps the most difficult aspect of Messiaen's music to perform, interpret, or comprehend. Messiaen's desire to write complicated rhythm can begin to be understood in terms of his own statement about rhythm: "Most people believe that rhythm means the regular values of a military march. Whereas, in fact, rhythm is an unequal element, following fluctuations, like the waves of the sea, like the noise of the wind, like the shape of tree branches."<sup>8</sup> Once again in this statement one can see an association with nature, and perhaps one can get a sense that the mystery of irregular rhythm is somehow tied in Messiaen's mind to the Holy Mysteries of his faith. He first

learned about Greek rhythms from Maurice Emmanuel and Marcel Dupré at the Paris Conservatoire during his time there (1919-30). During the same period he first encountered the rhythms of the Indian provinces, the 120 Indian 'deçî-tâlas' listed in Sharngadeva's treatise *Samgîta-ratnâkara* in its reproduction in Lavignac's *Encyclopédie de la Musique*.<sup>9</sup> Messiaen also has cited the influence of Japanese and Balinese rhythms on his own music.

Messiaen's interest in these rhythms probably stems from their relatively ametrical sound when compared to most Western rhythms. Indeed, ametric effects are an important part of Messiaen's music, which often seems simply to exist as a single ecstatic moment without motion to or from any goal. This absence of metric definition is reflected in Messiaen's use of highly structured rhythms that do not fall into periodic meters. This is accomplished largely by the use of rhythms that are traditionally associated with certain regular meters but have irregularly added or deleted notes, dots, ties, and hesitations (commonly called "additive rhythm"). Because of its definitive break with traditional time-signatures, *Quator pour le Fin du Temps* is a pivotal work in Messiaen's rhythmic conception, because the "End of Time" has a dual meaning for Messiaen: the apocalyptic conclusion of the universe, and a symbolic split from music based on temporal regularity—an ideological "End of Tempo."

In the first movement of the *Quator*, *Liturgie de cristal*, Messiaen makes use of an isorhythm in the piano part, a repeating pattern of twenty-nine chords presented in a rhythm seventeen notes long. Since it would take 493 chords for the patterns to realign themselves, there is no perceptible coincidence of melodic and rhythmic material. "Messiaen himself emphasizes the importance of the dissociation of rhythm from harmony and melody in this work 'in the manner of Guillaume de Machaut whose work I did not know at the time'."<sup>10</sup> Thus separation of rhythmic content from the other parameters of music is important to Messiaen, and is taken out to its final logical conclusion with the *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités*, where there is 'modal' usage of each parameter of the music in isolation from every other. ([See the preface to the \*Mode de valeurs et d'intensités\*](#))

Rhythmic compositional ideas that appear in Messiaen's later work include the idea of progressively increasing or decreasing rhythmic values (which derives from both additive rhythm techniques and the Japanese drumming tradition) and polyrhythm (which is seen in his more complex orchestral music). Rhythm, then, seems to take a primary role in the understanding of Messiaen's music, since melody is often dissociated from consistent rhythmic identity, and harmony is almost entirely coloristic. In this regard Messiaen was a pioneer, asserting rhythm's superiority over the elements of music which had reigned in Western music for centuries (melody, harmony, counterpoint, thematic development); and his appointment in 1947 as Professor of Analysis, Aesthetics, and Rhythm at the Conservatoire is thus telling.

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### Synthetic Materials

It is important to note that not all of Messiaen's material came only from external influences. His interest in structural creativity and the construction of musical materials that suit his individual musical ideals is therefore another important facet of his work as a composer. His 1942 treatise *Technique de mon langage musical* is the definitive reference for many of these synthetic musical materials and their use in his music. In this text, Messiaen discusses the theoretical underpinnings of all of the features of his own music (as of when he formulated the treatise) and briefly covers many of the important twentieth-century trends in compositional technique that never in fact became a part of his own idiom. Symmetry and internal self-similarity are the hallmark of most of Messiaen's synthetic materials as well as his motivic and thematic constructions. One can also consider the somewhat arbitrary assignment of certain notes, chords, motives, and themes to religious subjects and phenomena to be synthetic.

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### Symmetrical Rhythmic Structures (Non-Retrogradable Rhythms)

Messiaen's fascination with one symmetrical rhythm in the 120 Indian 'deçî-tâlas' led to his lifelong preoccupation with the creation of palindrome-rhythms. He called these rhythmic mirror-structures "non-retrogradable" because when one is read backward (in retrograde) it is exactly the same as when read forward. For Messiaen these rhythms are symbolic of eternity because they have no well-defined starting or ending point. Because one can always question the ability of the ear to perceive relationships between forward and backward forms of any material (the temporal nature of sound makes this difficult), this feature of Messiaen's compositional technique is indisputably synthetic.

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### The Modes of Limited Transposition

In the *Technique de mon langage musical* Messiaen explains a system of seven symmetrical modes that are self-similar such that a highly limited number of transpositions are possible before reproducing the original scale. The modes' symmetry means that the vertical pattern of intervals is the same ascending and descending. The simplest of these modes of limited transposition is the whole-tone scale, which not only has the smallest number of transpositions, but also has the greatest symmetry of all of these modes. The octatonic scale (diminished scale) is the second mode, with three possible transpositions and also several focal points of symmetry. Messiaen states that "The modes of limited transpositions realize in the vertical direction (transposition) what non-retrogradable rhythms realize in the horizontal direction (retrogradation)."<sup>11</sup> (See [Example 1, The Modes of Limited Transposition](#)) Although Messiaen announces that he has given all the possible symmetrical modes that divide the octave in half (except for subsets of the scales he has given), there are many other modes that are symmetrical but do not repeat their pattern at the octave transposition. Messiaen has made use of some of these in his music as well, mostly as symmetrical chords.

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### The Langage Communicable

Messiaen's own description of this modern "soggetto cavato" practice probably gives the best introduction to its significance in Messiaen's music. He first explains how he views music's expressive power:

Music does not express anything directly. It can intimate, cause a feeling, a state of the soul, touch the subconscious, or increase the dream faculties, and this is where it has immense capacities. It cannot absolutely "state," or inform with precision. I have tried, as a game, and to revitalize my thinking, to find a kind of communicable musical language.

I initially wanted to make a musical alphabet with which I will be able to transcribe words (French words, of course, because I am French). Immediately, I thought of the Germans, who do not express the notes of music by these syllables borrowed from the anthem of Saint John the Baptist [Ut Queant Laxis] that we [French] all know: Ut, re, mi, fa, sol, la, si □ but by letters. Letters immortalized by the theme BACH (signature of Johann Sebastian Bach), and by A S C H, S C H A, of Schumann's "Carnival." Here are the letters of the German musical alphabet: A=A, B=B-flat, C=C, D=D, E=E, F=F, G=G, and H=B-natural. People have sought a continuation of this succession, but as there was not one agreed upon by all, I preferred to disregard it, and I continued the musical alphabet in my own fashion, by grouping the letters by genres of acoustic



production. Moreover, I allotted to each letter: a single note, register, and duration. ([See Example 2, The Preface to \*Méditations\*, page 1](#))

To avoid accumulation of words, I deleted the articles, the pronouns, the adverbs, the prepositions, and kept only the nouns, the adjectives, and the verbs. This led me to use the system of "cases," as in the Latin [noun] declensions. And I indicated the particular "case" before each word, by means of a musical formula. ([See Example 3, The Preface to \*Méditations\*, page 2](#))

The two most significant concepts of all thought, which we rather imperfectly call the auxiliary verbs: "to be," "to have," are expressed by two exactly contrary melodic formulas. "To be" is in descending motion because all that is comes from God (The Being par excellence, He who Is). "To have" is in ascending motion because we can always have more by drawing nearer to God. ([See Example 3, The Preface to \*Méditations\*, page 2](#))

He also creates a musical "leitmotif" (making reference to Wagner) for God.

...and to express that God is immense as much as eternal, without beginning nor end in space and likewise in time, I gave two forms to my theme: one forwards (prime form, representing the vastness of the Creator), one backwards (retrograde form, representing the eternity of God), as two extremes which regard each other and which regress indefinitely... ([See Example 3, The Preface to \*Méditations\*, page 2](#))

This source of musical material has been highly criticized for being completely contrived. Although one can hardly argue the synthetic nature of the material (and many think that it sounds less natural than anything else in Messiaen's music), an understanding of Messiaen's view of its purpose and his inspiration to use it will help explain the significance of this technique in his musical conception. Messiaen was fascinated by the story of how the ancient hieroglyphics on a stone tablet found at Rosetta were deciphered. Messiaen's view is that, like the tablet, one approaches music "knowing that something is being communicated, but not knowing what. Messiaen supplies all the information for deciphering the message of the work in the score. Music, however is to be heard and not read like a book so that, even when one knows the key to the language of the work, the message remains hidden and difficult to perceive, just as the Mystery of the Holy Trinity itself is hidden and difficult to comprehend."<sup>12</sup>

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### Color-sound associations

Color is yet another aspect of Messiaen's language of which scholars have little grasp, simply because the color-sound associations in Messiaen's music are mystical and nonsystematic. "When I hear sounds, I see colors in my mind. I tell this to the critics, I have explained it to my students but nobody believes me..."<sup>13</sup> The colors nevertheless are extremely important to Messiaen personally, even if they seem arbitrary and specious to those who either see different colors or are not plagued by synesthesia. There is importance to the coloristic writing, however, for two major reasons. First, Messiaen's ear was finely tuned to the timbral and acoustical characteristics of chords and orchestrations, and aural coloration represents a defining characteristic of all of Messiaen's music. With or without visual associations, the colors of Messiaen's music are at least as important as the melodies and rhythms. In addition, the use of specific color associations with certain religious subjects, birdsongs, and/or regions of the world adds unity to this diverse expressive material that otherwise would seem to be simply superimposed upon the music.

### Literary and Theatrical Influence from his Parents

The literary references in Messiaen's music are largely restricted to scripture. However, his exposure to all types of literature as a child was nevertheless quite influential. Messiaen's father was an English professor and a Shakespeare specialist who introduced Messiaen to his own translations of many Shakespeare plays. *Hamlet* was a particularly intriguing play for the young Messiaen. The child Messiaen put on puppet plays of Shakespeare, Calderón, and Goethe for his parents. His mother also represented a strong influence on him, as she was the poet Cécile Sauvage. Messiaen claims that her book of poems *L'Âme en bourgeon* (The Flowering Soul), published while she was pregnant with him, had a profound effect on his character and his destiny as an artist. One poem in particular seems to be directed at the unborn child:

Child, pale embryo, you who sleep in the waters,  
Like a small god dead in a coffin of glass,  
You savor the floating existence  
Of the fish that drowns below the reeds.<sup>14</sup>

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### Total Serialism

Although there is some debate as to the origin of the ideas behind integral serialism in Europe, some scholars credit Messiaen with having championed the view that composers should give the individual parameters of musical sound separate attention. Messiaen's music of the post-World War II period certainly moves toward a dissociation between melody and rhythm; and during the mid-1940s, Messiaen was giving private composition lessons to Boulez and Stockhausen. Messiaen is also credited with the composition of the first European work to exhibit the principles behind integral serialism with the *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités* (1949). However, the influence that this had on other composers was far more important in the scheme of music history than the influence that total serialism had on Messiaen's music. After the *Livre d'orgue* (1951), which further exploits the principles of serialism, Messiaen makes very little use of serial technique in his music. However, the rare examples of serial writing that appear in Messiaen's later music are often quite musically effective.

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### Impressionism

Messiaen's interest in the music of the "French Impressionists" was quite important, and represents one of his earliest musical influences. "His harmony teacher introduced him to a score of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* when he was still only ten years old; this was to become yet another major influence on his development as a composer."<sup>15</sup> Messiaen himself calls this "the most decisive influence of my life."<sup>16</sup> Later influence from composers associated with the Impressionistic school came when Messiaen studied composition with Paul Dukas at the Paris Conservatoire. It is Dukas who reportedly told Messiaen to pay attention to birdsong for musical inspiration. Messiaen's early *Préludes* for piano (1929) are closely allied with the aesthetic behind Debussy's piano preludes, with titles such as "*Les sons impalpables*" and "*Un reflet dans le vent*." Although in the majority of his music Messiaen's depiction of extramusical content is arguably mystical rather than impressionistic, he uses the same kinds of coloristic musical language, veiling of literal depictions, and timbral attention to color, light, shimmering sounds, etc.

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### The French Organ Tradition

One of the most important, and perhaps most neglected influences on Messiaen's composition technique was the influence of the Classical and Romantic French organ schools. Messiaen's exposure to these traditions began very early in his life. When he was young, Messiaen was an avid apprentice of Charles Tournemire (Franck's successor) at the church of Sainte-Clotilde, practicing improvisation and school exercises.<sup>17</sup> At the Conservatoire, Messiaen studied organ with the great French organ composer Marcel Dupré. Messiaen was organist for fifty years at the church of La Trinité in Paris with its Cavaillé-Coll organ, where he improvised on Sundays at midday Mass.<sup>18</sup> Although his organ music was almost never for liturgical use, his large organ works nevertheless follow the tradition of the French classical organ mass, which had traditionally been played in alternation with sung verses of the chant. These "alternatum masses" used standardized registrations peculiar to French organs, and Messiaen makes use of these as the basis for the colorful registrations in his "organ masses." He also uses Gregorian chant in many movements of his large organ works. The Romantic French organ school also influenced Messiaen's organ writing, for he was writing for the very same Cavaillé-Coll instruments. The organ symphonies of Vierne and Widor were certainly influences on Messiaen's organ writing, with their orchestral treatment of the organ and innovative registrations that inspired Messiaen's own colorful registrations and forms.

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### Electronic sounds

Messiaen found further colorism in the sounds of electronic music. He did not become involved directly in the electronic music scene, especially after the tape manipulation techniques of *musique concrète* were replaced by more modern audio technology, however the sounds of electronic instruments became important as an "extra stop" on his organ that was the symphony orchestra. Several orchestral pieces, most notably the *Turangalila* Symphony, make use of the Ondes Martenot, an electronic keyboard instrument capable of smooth glissandi and a wide range of sound qualities. Messiaen's treatment of the organ also shows some influence from electronic music, with its fantastic timbres and seemingly superhuman gestures and rhythmic complexities.

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### Examples of these influences in *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte-Trinité*

The *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte-Trinité* is Messiaen's first major organ work since the *Livre d'Orgue* (1951), another large scale "organ mass." Messiaen scholars have cited this work as a confluence of all of his stylistic elements. One can find all of the techniques found in his nearby works (plainchant, birdsong, religious symbolism, and the *langage communicable*).<sup>19</sup> Messiaen also returns to older traits in his style (modality, Indian and Greek rhythms, triadic chords with added notes, diatonic writing, and conclusive major triads).<sup>20</sup> This work also "brings together all the elements of Messiaen's organ style □ the slowness, the converse character of hectic virtuosity, the unusual timbres (often occasioned by birdsong imitations) and the verse-refrain forms."<sup>21</sup> Paul Griffiths sees this return in Messiaen's later music to all of his earlier techniques as a retreat from the avant-garde, acknowledging the wane in progressive compositional techniques.

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### Catholic Faith

As Catholicism and Messiaen's beliefs were the central driving inspiration for all of his music, not much extra discussion is necessary in relation to this work. It follows in the tradition of the classic French "organ masses," prominently presenting familiar plainchants. Certainly the mysticism in this work is obvious upon glancing at the score. (See [Example 4, Score of the \*Offertoire\*](#)) Every phrase of



the music is labeled with a specific theological idea, quote from scripture, or uses a theological message in the *langage communicable*. For example, the fifth movement alternates phrases representing "God is immense," "God is eternal," "God is immutable," and "the Breath (wind) of the Spirit," before adding "The Father is all powerful" and "God is love." The musical content does reflect these elements, in a similar manner to the *langage communicable*: the listener must know beforehand the content in order to understand how it is communicated aurally.

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### Birdsong

Although this work does not center itself on birdsong, as do *Reveil des oiseaux*, *Oiseaux exotiques*, *Catalogue d'oiseaux*, and *Chronocromie*, Messiaen punctuates the work with the calls of the Garden Warbler, the Blackcap, and the Yellowhammer.<sup>22</sup> It is important that he saves the distinctive repeated-note call of the Yellowhammer for the conclusion of the second, fifth, eighth, and ninth movements, as a sort of unifying seal or signature.<sup>23</sup> Messiaen labels the birdcalls in the score.

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### Rhythm

Even if rhythmic serialization is minimized in this work, rhythmic complexity is still quite substantial. Rather than an arbitrary system of durations to use modally, Messiaen serializes rhythm by assigning specific rhythmic values to the letters of his *langage communicable*. Individual expositions of text in the work are often accompanied by Greek or Indian rhythms, which are also labeled in the score. Although Messiaen's rhythm is always complex, the rhythmic complexity in this work is perhaps even more daunting because the organ has always been a rhythmically ruthless instrument, exposing every inaccuracy of touch, attack, release, and tempo.

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### Synthetic Materials

Even though non-retrogradable rhythms and modes of limited transposition only play a minor role in this piece, the *langage communicable* is certainly synthetic material. When it is not being used, there are always symmetrical structures holding the piece together compositionally. Messiaen's peculiarities of melodic writing (interversion, motivic cells, etc.) are interweaved with Gregorian chant successfully in this work.

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### Literary Influence

The *Méditations* feature references to scripture, theological concepts, and the Catholic mass. The texts used for sections that use the *langage communicable* are from St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*. The verse-refrain forms derive from Catholic liturgy, as well as the recitative-like Gregorian chant melodies ([See opening of the Offertoire in Example 4](#)). Certainly literature has played an immense role in the creation of this "organ mass."

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### The French Organ Tradition

Considerable references are made to the tradition of the alternatum mass in this work. Messiaen uses

chants from the mass in alternation with freer "improvisations" on the subject. Along with several Alleluia movements, Messiaen features a *Graduel* and an *Offertoire*.

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## The Importance of Tradition in Music

### Messiaen's Acknowledgement of Influence

"The composer's source material can be summarized as follows: his Catholic faith, birdsong, and the traditional rhythms and modes found in medieval music and in the music of India, Japan, Bali, the Andes, and Greece. He was able to achieve a fusion of his various musical ideas by using modal harmony, a reference to the cultures of those countries, and by linking music and religion closely together."<sup>24</sup> Messiaen grasped that Music that is entirely synthetic is difficult for audiences to interpret, so he included many traditional elements in his works. His understanding of the importance of influence is evident in the acknowledgements he gives in his *Technique de mon langage musical*:

My masters: Jean and Noël Gallon, who stimulated in me the feeling for the "true" harmony, Marcel Dupré, who oriented me toward counterpoint and form, Paul Dukas, who taught me to develop, to orchestrate, to study the history of the musical language in a spirit of humility and impartiality; those who influenced me: my mother (the poetess Cécile Sauvage), my wife (Claire Delbos), Shakespeare, Claudel, Reverdy and Eluard, Hello and Dom Columbia Marmion (shall I dare to speak of the *Holy Books* which contain the only *Truth?*), birds, Russian music, Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Plainchant, Hindu rhythmic, the mountains of Dauphiné, and finally, all that evokes stained-glass window and rainbow; my most devoted interpreters: Roger Désormière (orchestra conductor), Marcelle Bunlet (singer), Étienne Pasquier (violinist), Yvonne Loriod (pianist); finally, all who induced me to write this work and particularly my friend André Jolivet.

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### Tradition as Honesty and the Importance of Influence

Influence is inevitable. One cannot write music in a vacuum. The music of the richest sophistication and influence is the most meaningful at all levels of study from first listening to in-depth theoretical analysis. However, simplicity of expression can be valuable as well. With sophistication often comes complication, and Messiaen's music is among the most complicated at times, and is sometimes also quite simple and elegant. The importance of tradition is also paramount, because without a background in musical experience, a composer's music cannot be the true expression of one's own musical ideas. Music without tradition loses its honesty as art.

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## Musical Examples

Example 1: [The Modes of Limited Transposition](#)

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Example 2: [The preface to \*Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte-Trinité\*, page 1](#)

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Example 3: [The preface to \*Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte-Trinité\*, page 2](#)

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Example 4: [VI. Offertoire de l'Épiphanie from \*Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte-Trinité\*](#)

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### End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Samuel, [Conversations](#), pp. 77-79. [Return to Text](#)
  - <sup>2</sup> Griffiths, [The New Grove Twentieth-Century French Masters](#), p. 229. [Return to Text](#)
  - <sup>3</sup> Samuel, [Conversations](#), p. 77. [Return to Text](#)
  - <sup>4</sup> Johnson, [Messiaen](#), pp. 12-13. [Return to Text](#)
  - <sup>5</sup> Samuel, [Conversations](#), p. 77. [Return to Text](#)
  - <sup>6</sup> Messiaen, [Technique de mon langage musical](#), Chapter IX. [Return to Text](#)
  - <sup>7</sup> Birdsong information taken from Johnson, [Messiaen](#), pp. 116-120. [Return to Text](#)
  - <sup>8</sup> Samuel, [Conversations](#), p. 78. [Return to Text](#)
  - <sup>9</sup> Johnson, [Messiaen](#), p. 10. [Return to Text](#)
  - <sup>10</sup> [Ibid.](#), pp. 61-62. [Return to Text](#)
  - <sup>11</sup> Messiaen, [Technique](#), Chapter XVI, article 6. [Return to Text](#)
  - <sup>12</sup> Johnson, [Messiaen](#), p. 175. [Return to Text](#)
  - <sup>13</sup> Samuel, [Conversations](#), pp. 77-78. [Return to Text](#)
  - <sup>14</sup> Nichols, [Messiaen](#), p. 7 (author's translation). [Return to Text](#)
  - <sup>15</sup> Johnson, [Messiaen](#), p. 9. [Return to Text](#)
  - <sup>16</sup> Nichols, [Messiaen](#), p. 7. [Return to Text](#)
  - <sup>17</sup> Pollet, [The Organ Works](#), pp. 10-11. [Return to Text](#)
  - <sup>18</sup> [Ibid.](#), p. 8-9, 11. [Return to Text](#)
  - <sup>19</sup> Johnson, [Messiaen](#), p. 173. [Return to Text](#)
  - <sup>20</sup> Pollet, [The Organ Works](#), p. 16. [Return to Text](#)
  - <sup>21</sup> Griffiths, [The New Grove Twentieth-Century French Masters](#), p. 228. [Return to Text](#)
  - <sup>22</sup> Pollet, [The Organ Works](#), p. 16. [Return to Text](#)
  - <sup>23</sup> Nichols, [Messiaen](#), p. 79. [Return to Text](#)
  - <sup>24</sup> Pollet, [The Organ Works](#), p. 10. [Return to Text](#)
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For a background on Messiaen's life and work, as well as a complete bibliography and links, see: Malcom Ball, [The Olivier Messiaen Page](#).

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