

**Olivier Messiaen's Liturgical Improvisations:
A Theological Practice and its Resonances**

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Abstract

Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992) was one of the most distinctive and influential composers of the twentieth century. His works exhibit not only his technical innovations and control of his musical material, but frequently also his avowed intention programmatically to express his Catholic faith. In addition to his work as a composer and as a conservatoire professor, he held the post of titular organist of the church of Ste Trinité in Paris for more than sixty years. In that role he was required to respond musically to liturgical texts and actions, these responses most frequently taking the form of improvisations. The inherently ephemeral nature of this activity, and the specific cultural locus of Roman Catholic liturgy, have meant that this part of Messiaen's activity has received less attention from researchers than his other functions.

This thesis considers the evidence for both the musical content and the theological significance of Messiaen's liturgical improvisations, and the ways in which that practice may have informed his composition. Significantly, the research includes the first substantial analysis of a set of recordings of Messiaen improvising, made during services at Ste Trinité during the 1980s. This approach, complementing the verbal accounts given by Messiaen himself and others, enables an assessment of his ecclesiastical function as a whole. The resulting interpretation of these improvisations is then further developed with reference to the theology of liturgy, demonstrating that this context enables the music to have its own proper theological force. This in turn enables a refined understanding of Messiaen's wish to have his composed works understood as a form of transposition of liturgy into the concert-hall. The influence of improvisation on a selection of his compositions is demonstrated, as is the relevance of liturgical theology to the interpretation of his claim that his music aimed to elucidate theological truths.

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In memoriam Rev. Martin Davis: *lux aeterna luceat eis.*

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Notes

An important source for this study is the 2-disc set of improvisations entitled *Olivier Messiaen, Live: Improvisations inédites*, (La Praye, DLP 0209, 2001). Having been withdrawn from sale the discs are not widely available, but, at the time of writing, the music they contain is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7MkPMrqSiHw>.

Sources consulted in French are generally quoted in English, unless otherwise stated translation is my own. Titles of works are retained in their original language. Messiaen's church, *l'Eglise de la Sainte Trinité, Paris*, is referred to throughout as Ste Trinité, Messiaen's posthumously published *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur, et d'Ornithologie* is referenced as '*Traité*' followed by an upper-case roman numeral to indicate the tome; in the case of tome V which is in two volumes, a lower-case roman numeral indicates the volume.

Plainchant is taken principally from the *Liber Usualis*, also consulted is the *Graduale Romanum*. When quoted in examples plainchant is rendered as stemless noteheads on a five-line stave.

Materials consulted in the *Fonds Messiaen* held by the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* are referenced as 'BnF, FM', followed by the library identifier; page numbers follow the digitised copy of the document where it has been made.

The Bible is quoted only indirectly in translation from Messiaen's own French which often paraphrases or elides the text. The English language Bible consulted during research is the New Revised Standard Version; for particular purposes I have also consulted *La Bible de Jérusalem*, and the *Traduction Œcumenique de la Bible* in French, the Latin Vulgate, the Nestle-Aland Greek text of the New Testament, and *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*.

The majority of the music created by Messiaen was ephemeral. The composer of enduring monuments depicting the celestial city spent the majority of his time building musical sand-castles, washed away by that day's tide.¹

1. Introduction

Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992) is known as one of the leading musicians of his time. Pierre Boulez, in his preface to Messiaen's posthumously-published *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur et d'Ornithologie*, suggests that the composer's central place in the musical life of the twentieth century centred around three activities: he was known as a composer, as an educator, and as an organist.² For Boulez, however, the last of these three was the least well-known; not necessarily in the sense that Messiaen having being an organist is an obscure fact, but in the sense that his musical activities in a particular parish church are less accessible to a wider public, or, given their transience, to researchers after the event. Messiaen's role as a church organist was a constant factor in his work for all his adult life, from his appointment as *titulaire* at Ste Trinité in 1931 until his death in 1992. The ephemeral nature of the organ improvisations that he created in that role, and also the specific cultural locus in Catholic liturgy, however, mean the impact that this role had on his wider musical practice is more often asserted than explored. The overarching question governing this thesis, therefore, is: how did Messiaen's role as improviser at the organ in the liturgical context affect his compositional practice?

Three ideas contained within this question define subsidiary areas of investigation: Messiaen's role as improviser; the liturgical context; and the relationships between improvisation, liturgy and composition. Each of these gives rise to a specific sub-question.

¹ Christopher Dingle, *The Life of Messiaen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) p.184.

² Pierre Boulez, *Préface* to Olivier Messiaen, *Traité de Rhythm, de Couleur, et d'Ornithologie – Tome I* (Paris: Leduc, 1994), p.v.

1. What was Messiaen's role and practice as improviser at the organ, in both formal and musical terms?
2. In so far as the role was, for Messiaen, not merely functional but also vocational, what can be discovered about his theological conception of the role, and how might the wider discourse of liturgical theology illuminate it?
3. What links can be established between Messiaen's improvisational and compositional practices, and is it possible to infer specific influence from improvisation to composition or *vice versa*?

These questions in turn provide the structure of the argument presented, are bound to the sources of evidence that are available, and guide the methods of interrogation of that evidence. In chapter two the first question is addressed on the basis of written and archival evidence, primarily the various accounts that Messiaen himself and others gave of his practice as an ecclesiastical musician, but also considering some of the sketch material and prompts for improvisations held in the Messiaen archive at the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*. Chapter three addresses the same question, but expands the evidence base and the methodology by engaging with some of the surviving recordings of Messiaen improvising at the organ. The largest part of that chapter consists of the first detailed study of a two-CD set of improvisations released in 2001 by La Praye, entitled *Olivier Messiaen: Live: Improvisations inédites*.³

Chapter four turns to the second of the governing questions and accounts for the theological significance of liturgical music, which in turn suggests that liturgy may furnish a way to make sense of Messiaen's broader claim that his musical output could express theological truths. That chapter engages with a set of ideas known as 'liturgical theology' to

³ Olivier Messiaen, *Live: Improvisations inédites*, (La Praye, DLP 0209, 2001) [2 CDs].

provide a theoretical framework for a novel understanding both of the theological relevance of music within the church, and for Messiaen's idea that music beyond the church could express theological ideas. Chapter five then engages with the third research question, taking the form of a series of case studies on Messiaen's compositions each suggesting a different connection between musical improvisation, liturgy, and theology. The precise 'resonances' of his practice of liturgical improvisation in each of the works considered for these case studies vary both in form and intention and in effect, suggesting that the influence of this aspect is pervasive, albeit not always obvious. In drawing out these connections, chapter five draws on the conclusions of the preceding chapters and shows their relevance to our understanding of Messiaen's music in the form we most often now come across it: as composed works for concert audiences.

Before making the substantive case for a characterisation of Messiaen's approach to liturgical improvisation and its relevance to his wider musicianship, the project must be contextualised, both in terms of Messiaen's life and times, and in terms of previous research on the composer and his music. Section 1.1 therefore begins with a short summary of his biography, turning to a specific outline of his appointment to the role of titular organist at Ste Trinité and a description of the instrument that he used in that role. Section 1.2 gives a similarly brief outline of the principal elements of Christian liturgy. Section 1.3 makes some preliminary observations concerning ethical considerations pertaining to the project before section 1.4 provides an initial literature review encompassing approaches to Messiaen and his music, approaches to musical improvisation more broadly, and approaches to the connections between music, liturgy and theology.

1.1 A brief introduction to Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992)

Olivier Messiaen was born on 10 December 1908 in Avignon in the South of France. His early childhood memories appear mostly to have been not of Avignon but of Grenoble where

he spent the years of the First World War with his mother and his younger brother, while his father and his uncle were mobilised. His mother was a poet and his father a teacher of English and translator of Shakespeare into French. After the war, the family moved first to Nantes, where Messiaen received both formative early music lessons and his first communion, and then to Paris where he was admitted to the Conservatoire as an auditor in 1919 and a registered student from the academic year 1920–21.⁴ From the Conservatoire he was awarded prizes in harmony, piano accompaniment, fugue, history of music, organ and composition; this despite mourning his mother, who died in 1927. In 1931 he was appointed to the church of Ste Trinité as organist, further details of which appointment follow in the next section, and in 1932 he married Louise-Justine (known as Claire) Delbos, a violinist and composer. Their son Pascal was born in 1937.

Messiaen was mobilised at the beginning of the Second World War, and spent time as a prisoner of war – famously completing his *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* in a prison camp. Returned to occupied Paris in 1941 he was made professor of harmony and analysis at the Conservatoire; he was later professor of composition, but not until 1966.

Claire died after a period of extended deterioration in 1959 and two years later Messiaen married pianist Yvonne Loriod, whom he had taught, and for whom many of his piano works were written. They lived in Paris, but also had a house South of Grenoble where they would often spend time in the summer, and where much of his composition work was done, away from the noise and other commitments of the city. He died in Paris in April 1992.

He composed prolifically and with a distinctive style which explores colour, modality and rhythm in particular. His works for organ are particularly noteworthy, especially as the focus of this thesis is on his role as organist, although it is not adequate to think of him as an

⁴ Stephen Schloesser, *Visions of Amen: the Early Life and Music of Oliver Messiaen* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), pp.42–3, 47, 51.

‘organist-composer’ given his extensive and ambitious contribution to orchestral and concertante repertoire. Indeed, two of his earliest publications for his own instrument, *Le Banquet céleste* (1928) and *L’Ascension* (1934), are in fact arrangements of music originally written for orchestra. Nevertheless, he wrote for organ throughout his career, introducing new ways of thinking about the possibilities for different combinations of textures and timbres afforded by the nature of organ registrations.⁵ The impact that his experimentation with the organ had on his wider compositional thinking was acknowledged by the composer in a number of ways, most notably that he talked of having developed his ‘modes of limited transposition’ in improvising at the organ,⁶ and that he spoke of organ registration having influenced his thinking on orchestration.⁷

In another sense his personal faith and his role as an organist and church musician overlapped, in that he claimed that:

A number of my works are ... destined to shed light on the theological truths of the Catholic faith. That is the first aspect of my work, the most noble, without a doubt the most useful, the most valuable, perhaps the only one which I will not regret in the hour of my death.⁸

This intention is clear from the titles of many of his works, although there are some, such as the highly influential *Quatre Études de rythme* for piano, which have more technical than programmatic purposes. Other inspirations which are not explicitly religious include a number of works based on birdsong which he found to be a rich mine of motivic and timbral ideas, and, arguably, works based on human love (though this last can also be considered as relating to divine love). His opera, in which ornithology and theology meet through the figure

⁵ Ferdinand Klinda, *Orgelregistrierung: Klanggestaltung der Orgelmusik* (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1987) pp. 248–254.

⁶ Jean-Christophe Marti, “‘It’s a secret of Love’: an interview with Olivier Messiaen”, trans. Stewart Spencer, in liner notes to Olivier Messiaen *Complete Edition*, various artists (Deutsche Grammophon, 480 1333, 2008) [32 CDs] p.232.

⁷ Claude Samuel, *Permanences d’Olivier Messiaen* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1999) pp.84–5.

⁸ Samuel, *Permanences*, p.24.

of St Francis of Assisi, formed in many ways the summation of his creativity, though despite expressing exhaustion at its completion it was not his final work.

Julian Anderson has described what he calls Messiaen's 'problem of communication', both positively in that his 'music exudes an obsessive need to communicate with the outside world in the most direct and concrete manner possible'⁹ and negatively in that 'the lack of any external images or symbolism in a composing project usually caused in Messiaen a serious failure of musical imagination'.¹⁰ Messiaen's tendency to surround his music with texts, in the form of superscriptions and commentaries, is one of the characteristics of much (though admittedly not all) his work. Given the inherent difficulty in defining musical means to communicate specific concepts and ideas, his perceived need to use music in this way was not easily met, and Messiaen continued to develop new means to encode symbolism and even text – in the form of a musical-alphabetical cipher he called a *langage communicable* – into his music.

Even were such communication to be a realistic prospect, Messiaen felt himself at odds with much of his audience in four specific respects: he spoke of matters concerning religious faith to an increasingly secular and atheist society; he celebrated birds and birdsong in front of city dwellers whose predominant experience of birds consisted only of urban pigeons and sparrows; he conceived of his music in terms of sound-colour complexes in a way which elicited little comprehension, let alone sympathy; and he delighted in rhythm defined in a sense at odds with the dominant perception that rhythmic is a synonym for regularity rather than subtlety.¹¹ These conflicts form a large part of what is distinctive about his musical approach, and in turn therefore what makes him an intriguing focus for research.

⁹ Julian Anderson, 'Messiaen and the Problem of Communication', in Christopher Dingle and Robert Fallon (eds), *Messiaen Perspectives 1: Sources and Influences* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), p.257.

¹⁰ Anderson, 'Problem of communication', p.268.

¹¹ Samuel, *Permanences*, p.411–2.

The words that he, as librettist of his own opera, puts into the mouth of St Francis, however, acknowledge that music and poetry are ‘in default of truth’.¹² This thought shows an indebtedness to St Thomas Aquinas, which is also characteristic of other elements in his theological expression.¹³

The received image of Messiaen is of a somewhat otherworldly figure, writing religious music which celebrates both natural creation and the mysteries of revealed faith in a remarkably individual way. Researchers have begun to deconstruct this image, as is discussed in section 1.4.1. both in terms of showing that he did not stand as aloof to worldly concerns as has been projected, and that his use of musical materials drawn from his various influences is pervasive to the extent that he can no longer be understood as standing so far apart from the traditions he received and the work of those around him. The argument of this thesis sits within such revision, but from the perspective that he was surrounded not only by the political and musical world, but quite specifically by the structures and thought of the Roman Catholic church, and in particular the concrete expression of that thought in the practice of Catholic liturgy. It is necessary therefore to outline at this point his appointment and duties as an organist, the role in which he most closely inhabited that context.

1.1.1 Messiaen’s appointment at *l’Église de la Sainte Trinité*

That Messiaen was organist of Ste Trinité for more than sixty years, and approached that role with significant religious as well as musical commitment is one of the better-known facts about his life. Precisely how he carried out his duties, however, is less well established. One of his biographers, Nigel Simeone, has written in some detail about the process by which Messiaen was appointed as the youngest titular organist in Paris in 1931, uncovering various

¹² Olivier Messiaen, *Saint François d’Assise (Scènes franciscaines): Opéra en 3 actes et 8 tableaux : Poème et musique d’Olivier Messiaen*, libretto (Paris: Leduc, 1983) p.53.

¹³ Siglind Bruhn, ‘The Theology and Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas in the Compositions of Olivier Messiaen’ in Robert Sholl (ed.), *Messiaen in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp.125–6.

items of correspondence both supporting and raising concerns about the appointment of such a young and innovative musician.¹⁴

Inevitably in a tenure of such length certain details of the responsibilities of the post changed with time, and much of chapter two is devoted to clarifying the formal elements of the role as well as the musical nature of Messiaen's contributions, which are further analysed in chapter three. At this stage, however, it is worth giving the outline of duties as it was typically described by the organist himself: for most of the time he would play for three Masses each Sunday, and for Sunday Vespers, as well as for weddings, funerals, first communions and other such additional services as required. He was able to arrange for deputies as needed, although it seems to have been rare that he would do so except when he was away from Paris, until ill health required it in his final years. It is worth also being aware of the slight peculiarity of many Parisian churches in often maintaining two organs and retaining both a titular organist for the *grande-orgue* and also a choir organist. Essentially this division meant that Messiaen's duties focussed on those parts of the service which were organ only, where another person would do more accompanying. Messiaen's diaries confirm that the absence of the choir organist would mean additional duties for him, and also mention by name Léon Souberbielle who held the post in the 1970s and 80s.¹⁵

As a matter of compromise, the three different Masses every Sunday were each characterised by a different musical style, one to plainchant only, one to repertoire works of a classical or romantic character, and the third in which modern music was permitted. This third Mass drew a congregation of enthusiasts – possibly for the music more than the

¹⁴ Nigel Simeone, “‘Chez Messiaen, tout est prière’: Messiaen's Appointment at the Trinité”, *The Musical Times*, Vol 145, No. 1889 (Winter 2004), 36–53.

¹⁵ Yvonne Loriod, *Transcription des agendas d'Olivier Messiaen, 1939–1992*, par Yvonne Loriod, BnF, FM, RES VMB MS-122, p.268. A full list of the choir organists and *maîtres de chapelle* at Ste Trinité is given in Carolyn Shuster Fournier, *Un siècle de vie musicale à l'église de la Trinité à Paris, de Théodore Salomé à Olivier Messiaen* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014), p.127.

Sacrament – and attracted the affectionate nickname of the ‘fools’ Mass’ (*Messe des fous*).

That the last of these was the Mass in which Messiaen’s musical contribution is likely to have been most remarkable is not in question, but it should not entirely overshadow the fact that his duties in the other two Masses each week would also have entailed improvisations from the organ, drawing on and commenting on the plainchant themes in the first, more probably in the form of pastiche in the second, but the exigencies of timing mean that it is unlikely that only composed repertoire and nothing else would have been heard in those services.

For the majority of parishioners and visitors to the church, the music at the service would be only one part of the impression given: it is a large space, with stained glass affecting the lighting; the scent of incense would dominate the olfactory sense; seating is wooden chairs (rather than pews). For most people present, the liturgy is the primary reason to attend, rather than the music. The distinction between the choir organ and the gallery organ would be noticed, although the organist of the *grand orgue* is not readily visible from the nave. Perhaps especially in the earlier years of Messiaen’s tenure, when electronic music was still rare and novel, some of the unfamiliar sounds Messiaen would have made might have had quite a mystifying effect. Not all of the music would have met that description, however; much of the time it would have been broadly similar to the sounds heard in other large Parisian churches at the time.

The following chapters explicitly address the form and nature of the role and Messiaen’s approach to fulfilling his duties, so this section need only serve as a contextualising introduction. Before moving on, there remains the important necessity to describe the instrument, as no two organs are quite alike, and the character of Messiaen’s liturgical music is closely tied to the nature of the organ he was playing.

1.1.2 The organ at Ste Trinité

The church of Ste Trinité was constructed in the 1860s, and was furnished with both a choir organ and a gallery organ built by the prolific and entrepreneurial Aristide Cavaillé-Coll, whose approach did so much to establish the distinctive timbres of French organs. Cavaillé-Coll organs are characterised by a wide range of reed and string stops as well as mutations to add colour to the timbres, and he had been an early adopter of the Barker Lever to increase the power and size of his instruments.¹⁶ When Messiaen was appointed he was only the fourth titular of the great organ, following Charles-Alexis Chauvet (1837–1871, appointed 1869) who served only two years before succumbing to tuberculosis, and two thirty-year stints by Alexandre Guilmant (1837–1911, titular 1871–1901) and Charles Quef (1873–1931, appointed 1901). The great organ had been rebuilt in 1871 (having been damaged during the 1870 Paris Commune) and 1901. Further work was done shortly after Messiaen was appointed, with seven stops added in 1934, and a major rebuild was undertaken in the early 1960s, adding eight further stops, replacing the console and electrifying the action, enabling the addition of playing aids in the form of pre-set combinations.

In his brief pamphlet describing the organ, dated 1980 and constituting a significant source of information about the instrument, Messiaen admits that there are larger organs, but insists that ‘the organ of the *Trinité* equals them in power, in magnificence, and perhaps surpasses them in mystery and poetry’.¹⁷ It is not necessary to repeat here the full specification of the organ, which can be found, among other places, in the score of the *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte-Trinité*, along with Messiaen’s settings for the

¹⁶ The Barker Lever, developed by and named after English engineer Charles Spackman Barker, is a pneumatic device which uses the wind pressure of the organ itself to ease the opening of pallets. In the absence of such assistance, the weight of the keys increases with each rank added to the registration, rendering more powerful combinations of stops impractical to play.

¹⁷ Olivier Messiaen, *Les Grandes Orgues de l’église de la Sainte-Trinité à Paris*, (Paris: Église de la Trinité, 1980) reproduced in Olivier Glandaz, *Messiaen à l’orgue* (Péronnas: Klincksieck, 2014), p.93.

combinations.¹⁸ The characteristics to which Messiaen's pamphlet draws particular attention are that the expression box on the *Récit* closes tightly, thus enabling every gradation of the full dynamic range¹⁹ – approximately half of the stops on the *Positif* are also under expression²⁰ – and the particular timbres of specific stops: the strings he finds ravishing in *pianissimo*, he notes that the *hautbois* is playable in chords rather than exclusively as a melodic voice, he compares the *Positif* bassoon to Wagner's Fafner as well as to the beast of Revelation, and suggests that particular higher-register stops are well suited to the recreation of birdsongs.²¹ He also comments that the acoustic of the church is neither too dry nor too diffuse, enabling poetic resonance to coexist with precision of attack.

1.2 A brief introduction to Christian liturgy

Taking an initial definition of liturgy as formal acts of public worship according to the established patterns of the church, it is necessary to establish relevant details of the range of activities involved. The theological significance of liturgy is discussed in detail in chapter four, so for this introductory section a more descriptive outline is appropriate. The various different services in church may be divided initially into two categories: the office, or the pattern of daily prayers, sometimes called the liturgy of the hours, and the sacraments. The office consists principally of regular recitation of the psalter, together with readings, responsories, canticles and additional prayers. Although there are a number of offices, the one Messiaen mentions having played the organ at most frequently is the evening office of Vespers. In such a service, the organist would respond to psalms with a short verset, and often alternate with a choir for the office hymn and the Magnificat.²² In *alternatim* playing of

¹⁸ Olivier Messiaen, *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte-Trinité*, (Paris: Leduc, 1973), pp.90–95.

¹⁹ Messiaen, *Les Orgues de la Trinité*, p.93.

²⁰ Messiaen, *Les Orgues de la Trinité*, p.94.

²¹ Messiaen, *Les Orgues de la Trinité*, p.94.

²² Orpha Ochse, *Organists and Organ Playing in Nineteenth-Century France and Belgium* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p.129.

this kind, the organ could be considered as a singing voice, carrying the text of its verses, rather than as mere accompaniment or as an interruption of the text by purely instrumental music.

The church recognises seven sacraments, of which the one forming the bulk of the duties of a parish organist is the Eucharist or Mass. Appendix 1 summarises the main element of the Mass service. The centre of this service is the consecration of bread and wine to become the body and blood of Jesus, according to the doctrine of transubstantiation. The service begins with an introit, leading into the ministry of the word, in which readings are heard and a sermon is preached. Musically, the organist may respond to each reading, and a gradual would traditionally be sung before the Gospel reading. The next musical inflection is the offertory, in which the eucharistic elements are brought to the altar. After that an elevation marks a point of adoration once the elements have been consecrated, a communion is played while the bread and the wine are distributed. Finally, a *sortie* would be played while the ministers withdraw and to close the service.

The Second Vatican Council, which met from 1962 to 1965 was concerned, among other things, to ensure that the congregation were full and active participants in the service, rather than merely onlookers. As a result of this, a number of changes were made in the way services were conducted, including use of vernacular languages – which consequently diminished the use of some of the traditional chants which set Latin texts – and instructions that the prayers said by the priest be audible, which meant specifically that the elevation ceased to be a point at which music was appropriate. More detail on Messiaen's specific practice is given in chapters two and three.

It is also possible to identify some points of music making which may not count as liturgical on a narrow definition, but which are nevertheless implicated in liturgical concepts.

Even within the service it may be possible to distinguish between settings of liturgical texts and music which is more incidental; music before and after a service might similarly be thought of as extraneous to the liturgy properly so called. In so far, however, as they constitute an integral part of the activity of the community gathered in worship, it seems reasonable to include such music within the term. At one further remove might be found devotional gatherings with religious intent but which do not follow one of the formal services of the church. This category may be illustrated by a relevant example: the event in November 1967 to mark the centenary of the church and the inauguration of the re-built organ, in which preaching alternated with organ improvisations and from which developed Messiaen's *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte-Trinité*.²³ Such a gathering would have many of the characteristics of liturgy and might be thought of as liturgical, but would not constitute liturgy in its narrower sense. Furthermore, anything that happens in a Catholic church inevitably relates not only to the architectural surroundings, but specifically to the presence of the reserved sacrament. That is to say, that consecrated eucharistic elements are kept in a tabernacle, beside which a lighted candle testifies to the real presence of Christ. For Messiaen, therefore, even practising the organ in an otherwise empty church, was something done in the presence of God, and therefore an act of prayer, and an activity undertaken in relation to the sacramental action of the Mass. Given that Messiaen also spoke of some of his concert works having been in some sense liturgical, the spectrum from a narrower to a more inclusive definition of what constitutes liturgy continues further. Chapters four and five considers in more detail how that might be understood, but awareness of the range of activities that might be within the ambit of liturgical music is worth bearing in mind throughout chapters two and three.

²³ See section 5.1.2, below.

1.3 Preliminary ethical considerations

There are some ethical considerations which it is important to acknowledge regarding the approach taken, and it is valuable to acknowledge them early in the argument. First, Messiaen's liturgical music was part of his religious activity and it is necessary to ensure that the faith that meant so much to him is addressed respectfully. It is not necessary to share the composer's conviction, but nor is it fair to interpret his religious thoughts in ways incompatible or even offensive to his co-religionists.²⁴ Relevant to this point is the fact that the CDs which contain the evidence on which chapter three is based were withdrawn from sale very quickly after their initial release. It is understood that the reason for this withdrawal relates to the fact that the improvisations were part of the composer's religious service and not intended for interpretation outside that setting; and specifically that the lack of context given to the improvisations makes it difficult to locate the music relative to its proper function.²⁵ It is hoped that by at least identifying the plainchant material on which the improvisations are based, and from that identification making informed judgements about the original situation of the music, the interpretation given in this thesis avoids the worst of these problems.

Another reflection on the ethical background to the research is the criticism that musicology has been subject to that it frames music too much as the achievements of individual 'great' composers, too many of whom are European and male, at the expense of a more holistic view of the range of activities that constitute music-making and the variety of participants who engage in it. Relative to improvisation specifically, Vijay Iyer's attempt to get 'Beneath Improvisation' has critiqued attitudes that treat it as 'other' with respect to

²⁴ The researcher is an Anglican, comfortable with the shared inheritance of Western Christianity, but nevertheless external to Roman Catholicism as such; it is acknowledged that in the process of undertaking this research there has been more than one occasion on which the assumption that high-church Anglicanism is similar to Roman Catholicism has led to erroneous thoughts that have needed careful correction.

²⁵ Christopher Dingle, personal correspondence.

Western Art Music: his argument that few people go further than a token acknowledgment that ‘Bach/Mozart/Beethoven/Schumann/Bartók/Messiaen was a great improviser’ is well taken.²⁶ Part of the argument for there being a connection between improvisation and composition is that the two activities are not entirely distinct, meaning that the case made does in fact encompass that wider range of musical activities and conversely, by specifying Catholic liturgical improvisation, the argument also goes beyond the simplistic equivocation of different forms of non-written music.

It is, though, a single-composer study of a dead European male. This should not be taken as indicating that other exemplars are unavailable: Messiaen’s music sounds distinctive and compelling, and his own framing of his compositional activity relative to Catholic theology affords a useful point of entry to considering the functions of religious music. That said, many other composers have also been church musicians, and have aimed to make music which reflects their faith; Messiaen is not unique in that respect, and significant elements of the theological case made below would be applicable to others. Similarly, the fact that Messiaen is the focus of this argument should not be taken to imply that composers of backgrounds other than white European and/or male are less important; one can be happy to see a musical canon expanded without excluding from it those exemplars who were not previously disadvantaged within it.

Arguably more concerning than his own situation in Europe is the attitude towards non-European cultures sometimes in evidence in Messiaen’s treatment of material which draws on them.²⁷ It is arguable that in drawing on elements of Indian, Japanese and South

²⁶ Vijay Iyer, ‘Beneath Improvisation’, in Alexander Rehding and Steven Rings (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Concepts in Music Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p.775. n.6.

²⁷ Desmond Oliver, *Cultural appropriation in Messiaen’s rhythmic language*, DPhil Thesis, University of Oxford (2016). c.f. Wai Ling Cheong, ‘Buddhist Temple, Shinto Shrine and the Invisible God of *Sept Haïkai*’, in Andrew Shenton (ed.), *Messiaen the Theologian* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp.241–261; Peter Asimov, ‘Messiaen and Classical India and Greece; in Robert Sholl (ed.), *Messiaen in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge

American musical traditions, for example, he may have been implicated in forms both of ‘othering’ or exoticizing those cultures and conversely of universalising his own by appropriating ideas and incorporating them within his Catholic framework regardless of the contexts from which they originated. There is a sense in which his universalism constituted an openness to learn what he could from all sources, and may also have a parallel in his treatment of material ‘borrowed’ from within the Western musical tradition alongside such external elements.²⁸ Seen in this light his relation to such material may be better understood as a keenness to learn from all sources rather than with the subordinationist implications which more recent discourses discern.

1.4 Literature review

The remainder of this introductory chapter situates the presented research relative to existing scholarship under three headings: work that is done on Messiaen, his music and thought; wider approaches to improvisation that may be relevant to the consideration of Messiaen’s liturgical improvisations; and approaches to the theological implications of religious, and specifically liturgical, music, both as such ideas relate to Messiaen and also with reference to other musics and to more theoretical considerations. Each of these elements gives necessary background to the case made in the main body of the thesis, and relevant material is therefore adumbrated here. That said, each chapter engages in more detail with particular relevant items as the argument develops, so the detail at this introductory stage is not exhaustive.

University Press, 2023), p.40; Peter Burt, ‘Messiaen and the Idea of Japan’ in Robert Sholl (ed.), *Messiaen in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023) pp.54–67; Wai-Ling Cheong, ‘Messiaen and China’ in Robert Sholl (ed.), *Messiaen in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp.68–75.

²⁸ Yves Balmer, Thomas Lacôte, and Christopher Brent Murray, *Le Modèle et l’Invention: Messiaen et la technique de l’emprunt* (Lyon: Symétrie, 2017).

1.4.1 Approaches to Messiaen's life and works

Messiaen's own voice, in his early treatise *Technique de mon langage musical*,²⁹ and his posthumously published *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d'ornithologie*,³⁰ as well as prefaces and programme notes for his compositions,³¹ published speeches,³² occasional journalism,³³ and numerous interviews,³⁴ has tended to dominate our understanding of his music and its context. There are a number of major studies, biographies, and collections of essays engaging with aspects of Messiaen and his music.³⁵ Within these many of the major sources for Messiaen's biography and thought are reproduced, making them an essential starting point for further work. The majority of scholarship focusses on Messiaen's compositions, in keeping with his own view of himself as primarily a composer; his role as a teacher has been thoroughly investigated by Jean Boivin,³⁶ and a number of his students have recounted their recollections of his approach. Approaches to Messiaen's role as a church musician are generally thinner: as discussed above, Simeone has compiled the most relevant documents surrounding his appointment,³⁷ Andrew Shenton has recently contributed a short chapter on

²⁹ Olivier Messiaen, *Technique de mon langage musical* (Paris: Leduc, 1966).

³⁰ Olivier Messiaen, *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur, et d'Ornithologie – Tome I* (Paris: Leduc, 1994); *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur, et d'Ornithologie – Tome II* (Paris: Leduc, 1995); *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur, et d'Ornithologie – Tome III* (Paris: Leduc, 1996); *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur, et d'Ornithologie – Tome IV* (Paris: Leduc, 1997); *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur, et d'Ornithologie – Tome V, 1^{re} volume* (Paris: Leduc, 1999); *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur, et d'Ornithologie – Tome V, 2^{ème} volume* (Paris: Leduc, 2000); *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur, et d'Ornithologie – Tome VI* (Paris: Leduc, 2001); *Traité de Rythme, de Couleur, et d'Ornithologie – Tome VII* (Paris: Leduc, 2002).

³¹ See Yves Balmer, 'Entre Analyse et Propagande : Olivier Messiaen et son usage des notes de programme', in Michel Duchesneau, Valérie Dufour and Marie-Hélène Benoit-Otis (eds), *Écrits de Compositeurs : une autorité en questions* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. VRIN, 2013), pp.27–47.

³² Olivier Messiaen, *Conférence de Bruxelles* (Paris: Leduc, 1960); Olivier Messiaen, *Conférence de Notre-Dame* (Paris: Leduc, 1978); Olivier Messiaen, *Lecture at Kyoto – Konferenz von Kyoto*, Trans Timothy Tikker (English) and Almut Rößler (German), (Paris: Leduc, 2011).

³³ Stephen Broad, *Olivier Messiaen: Journalism 1935–1939* (London & New York: Routledge, 2016).

³⁴ *Inter alia*, Samuel, *Permanences*; Antoine Goléa, *Rencontres avec Olivier Messiaen* (Paris: Julliard, 1960); Brigitte Massin, *Messiaen: une Poétique du Merveilleux* (Aix-en-Provence: Editions Alinéa, 1989).

³⁵ *Inter alia* Harry Halbreich, *Olivier Messiaen, Musiciens d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Fayard/Sacem, 1980); Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen* (2nd ed., London: J M Dent & Sons Ltd, 1989); Peter Hill, (ed.), *The Messiaen Companion* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008); Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Messiaen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Dingle, *Life*; Andrew Shenton (ed.), *Messiaen the Theologian* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010); Christopher Dingle and Robert Fallon (eds), *Messiaen Perspectives*, 2 vols., (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); Robert Sholl (ed.), *Messiaen in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

³⁶ Jean Boivin, *La Classe de Messiaen* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1995).

³⁷ Simeone, "Chez Messiaen, tout est prière", pp.36–53.

Messiaen as organist, though it is not particularly detailed,³⁸ Carlyon Shuster Fournier has a more extensive book on music at Ste Trinité,³⁹ and many commentators on his compositions for organ reference his activities at Ste Trinité.

Among the most noticeable aspects of Messiaen's music is his insistence on surrounding most of his musical works with written texts, and indeed, on reinforcing the importance of these. Messiaen himself took trouble to curate the interpretation of his works while he was alive, as witnessed not only in his published writings and interviews and the texts he felt it important to have printed on the scores, but also the control he tried to exercise on programme notes at the performances of his works. Though such a wish to explain and frame works is common to many composers, Yves Balmer has argued that in Messiaen's case the level of control and resistance to editorial interference went beyond common norms.⁴⁰ It seems that this aspect of his activities is closely tied to his wish to protect especially the theological interpretations of his works, though in so doing it is arguable that he reveals an insecurity with regard to their capacity to communicate directly on their own terms.

Among recent research on Messiaen's compositional technique, the most striking and provocative is the revelation of ways that Messiaen had made use of materials borrowed from music that he admired. Julian Anderson noted in 2009 how, for example, Messiaen's Chord of Contracted Resonance was derived from Jolivet;⁴¹ in 2013 Christopher Dingle revealed ways in which Messiaen's admiration for Mozart may have had direct musical influence, though acknowledging that the parallels might be 'dismissed as wishful thinking if made by anyone other than the composer' and that it may 'not be possible, or remotely advisable' to

³⁸ Andrew Shenton, 'Messiaen as Organist of L'Église de la Sainte-Trinité', in Robert Sholl (ed.), *Messiaen in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp.181–189.

³⁹ Shuster Fournier, *Siècle de vie musicale à la Trinité*.

⁴⁰ Balmer, 'Entre Analyse et Propagande'.

⁴¹ Julian Anderson, 'Messiaen and the Notion of Influence', *Tempo*, vol. 63, issue 247 (Jan 2009), 2–18.

speculate too far.⁴² Such caution notwithstanding, these sorts of observations have been expanded to an astonishing degree by a team consisting of Yves Balmer, Thomas Lacôte, and Christopher Brent Murray. Using detailed analyses of Messiaen's writings and compositions they have identified numerous instances of musical material taken, transformed and reused by Messiaen.⁴³ Their work positions Messiaen's technique relative to Debussy, Ravel, Massenet, Jolivet, Honegger, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Falla, and the Second Viennese School, as well as historical and global music traditions. Though individual instances taken on their own may seem somewhat speculative, the cumulative argument is persuasive. The image they present, however, is of Messiaen's compositional process as a very cerebral and calculated activity; in that context, a more nuanced exploration of his improvisational practice may help to address certain unanswered questions, such as those concerning the role of memory in both extemporaneous and planned composition. A second observation on this research is that they are reticent to assign particular significance to the use or treatment of the material they identify as borrowed, even in cases where textual associations are strong: on plainchant, they pose as questions possible textual associations between borrowed chants and the programmes of works in which they are used, but say that a definitive response is beyond scope of their book.⁴⁴ Such caution is reasonable, but it is proposed below that a more thorough interrogation of liturgical theology can help to clarify the referents of liturgical material such as plainchant.

⁴² Christopher Dingle, 'Messiaen and Mozart: A Love without Influence?', in Christopher Dingle and Robert Fallon (eds), *Messiaen Perspectives I: Sources and Influences* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), p.233.

⁴³ Balmer *et al.*, *Le Modèle*. See also Yves Balmer, Thomas Lacôte, and Christopher Brent Murray, 'Messiaen the borrower: Recomposing Debussy through the deforming prism', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol 69, Issue 3 (Fall 2016); Yves Balmer, Thomas Lacôte, and Christopher Brent Murray, 'Un cri de passion ne s'analyse pas: Olivier Messiaen's Harmonic Borrowings from Jules Massenet', *Twentieth-Century Music*, vol. 13, issue 2 (Sept 2016), and Yves Balmer, Thomas Lacôte, and Christopher Brent Murray, 'Messiaen and borrowing', in Robert Sholl (ed.), *Messiaen in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp.164–172.

⁴⁴ Balmer *et al.*, *Modèle et Invention*, p.326.

On the subject of plainchant, a recent essay by Jonas Lundblad which characterises itself as ‘a lengthy gloss on Messiaen’s characteristic statement that, “the marvellous thing about plainsong is its neumes”’ argues that Gregorian theory forms a sometimes unstated but nevertheless coherent unifying factor in his musical thought.⁴⁵ This seems to be the case both in terms of neumes as melodic patterns, and of the malleability of chant with regard to rhythm. This is important in that it shows that Messiaen’s indebtedness to plainchant operates at several levels concurrently, and gives *prima facie* support to one of this thesis’s underlying suppositions: that liturgical music, especially as Messiaen engaged with it from the organ console at Ste Trinité, did have a significant impact on his wider musical activities.

Another aspect to the historiography of Messiaen studies in the last twenty years, of which the work on ‘borrowing’ is a part, is the increased scepticism with regard to the claims the composer himself made, and the importance of independent verification of his own statements. This approach is associated in particular with the thorough research published in 2003 by Rebecca Rischin which undermines many of the received ‘myths’ surrounding the *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*.⁴⁶ Given that Messiaen’s own telling of the story was the source of most such mythical claims, and that the truth is quite compelling enough without embellishment, this in turn means that his statements on other subjects must be treated with some suspicion. Of course, such caution in accepting any source at face value is appropriate in any case, but Rischin’s work on the *Quatuor*, together with the extent to which Messiaen can be demonstrated to have used misdirection with regard to the incorporation of borrowed musical material, entail a turn away from interpreting his statements, both verbal and musical, as being determinative.

⁴⁵ Jonas Lundblad, ‘Universal Neumes: Chant Theory in Messiaen’s Aesthetics’, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 147/2 (March 2023), p.490.

⁴⁶ Rebecca Rischin, *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2003).

Stephen Broad's work on Messiaen's earlier writings has also demonstrated that the composer was more activist and more politically engaged than the accepted image of him as standing apart from controversy allows.⁴⁷ The latter view, again, is one that Messiaen himself seems to have encouraged. That said, it is not especially surprising in anyone that different priorities and positions might be taken at different points over a lifetime, the import of Broad's reminder is largely a realisation that the older Messiaen – and, arguably, a number of 'reputational entrepreneurs' on his behalf⁴⁸ – had been especially successful in projecting the one particular image, rather than that his earlier advocacy of particular positions is particularly surprising.

1.4.2 Approaches to improvisation

Previous scholarly approaches to Messiaen's improvisations specifically are few, but they are considered here first, before a wider consideration of improvisation itself as a theme in music research more broadly. Vincent Benitez has written a rather speculative paper about gestures which may have been improvisational in Messiaen's organ works, notably *Joie et clarté des Corps glorieux*, supporting the argument with a brief analysis of one of the improvisations on *Puer Natus* that Messiaen released in 1985.⁴⁹ More recently, and more thoroughly, Adrian Foster's doctoral project at McGill University involved analysing the improvisations accompanying readings from *L'Âme en bourgeon*, a cycle of poems by Messiaen's mother, Cecile Sauvage, released in 1977.⁵⁰ Where Benitez was speculative, Foster is very detailed as far as musical analysis goes, but rather light on the social, psychological and cultural

⁴⁷ Stephen Broad, *Recontextualising Messiaen's Early Career*, DPhil Thesis, University of Oxford (2005).

⁴⁸ The term was coined by Gary Alan Fine, 'Reputational Entrepreneurs and the Memory of Incompetence: Melting Supporters, Partisan Warriors, and Images of President Harding' *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 101, issue 5 (March 1996), 1159–1193. The idea is prominently used in Marianne Wheeldon, *Debussy's Legacy and the construction of Reputation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁴⁹ Vincent Perez Benitez, 'Messiaen as Improviser', *Dutch Journal of Music Theory*, Vol 13, No. 2. (2008), 129–144.

⁵⁰ Adrian Foster, *From Recorded Sound to Musical Notation: Reconstructing Olivier Messiaen's Improvisations on L'Âme en bourgeon*, D.Mus Dissertation, McGill University (2017).

resonances which the poems and the setting must have had for Messiaen. His focus on this particular set of improvisations, while respectful of the fact that Messiaen authorised publication of very few improvisations, also means that the Catholicism which was so important to Messiaen is largely out of scope. This thesis looks specifically at the evidence we have for his liturgical improvisations, which precludes any possibility of consideration separate from context; it is also argued that there are relevant ways in which his improvisations were dissimilar to his compositions, and arguably more similar to other organists in the French tradition. The conclusions of chapter three, therefore, do not merely extend the observations made by Benitez and Foster, but qualify them.

Among relevant wider literature on improvisation as it relates to Messiaen's role is that which reveals his training in the discipline. In this respect we are fortunate that Marcel Dupré, who was Messiaen's organ teacher at the Paris Conservatoire, wrote a textbook on organ improvisation.⁵¹ This work gives significantly more weight to the various strict forms for improvisation, the section on free improvisation being very brief and coming at the end of the more formal instruction, despite the fact that, in practice, liturgical improvisation tends for reasons of practicality to be in the freer styles. Another reference for advice from within the world of Catholic organists during Messiaen's formative years is Charles Tournemire's *Précis*. Tournemire takes a rather more rarefied view, stating that 'improvisation truly deserving the name' cannot be fixed in rules.⁵² His more frequently quoted dictum, that no matter how agile in feet and hands an organist who cannot improvise can only be considered 'half an organist', is of interest to us not only for its vehemence, but also for the less-

⁵¹ Marcel Dupré, *Cours complet d'improvisation à l'orgue*, 2 vols. (Paris: Leduc, 1925 & 1927).

⁵² Charles Tournemire, *Précis d'exécution, de registration, et d'improvisation à l'Orgue* (Paris: Éditions Max Eschig, 1936) p.102.

frequently quoted justification given on the following line: ‘He is incapable of commenting on the office’.⁵³

From a wider perspective, improvisation and extemporisation are terms which can be used to label a variety of different activities ranging from ornamentation through strict classical development of thematic material (improvising a fugue, for example) to free improvisation of an entire piece at the musician’s whim. Conversely, different terms used are for similar practices in specific contexts.⁵⁴ It is often acknowledged that improvisation on the organ is not necessarily the same as improvisation in other contexts, and also that the French, specifically Parisian, tradition of improvisation is distinctive. Some of the wider literature on improvisation treats the church organ either dismissively or naively. In his introductory article on improvisation in *Grove Music Online*, for example, Paul Griffiths brackets it with certain forms of dance music and writes it off as merely ‘functional’.⁵⁵ Similarly, Sabine Feisst includes in the introductory section of an essay on modernism and improvisation:

Improvisation in Western classical music lost significance in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, lingering only in domains such as church organ playing and preluding and as a part of silent-film accompaniment.⁵⁶

A useful, if somewhat dated, resource which tries to cover the idea of improvisation from a variety of different perspectives is Derek Bailey’s *Improvisation: its Nature and Practice in Music*.⁵⁷ Although revealing the differences between different forms of improvisation, however, he does not really interrogate the question that arises of how far it is useful to

⁵³ Tournemire, *Précis*, p.104.

⁵⁴ A time- and genre-circumscribed but revealing survey of different terms is given by Lawrence Gushee, ‘Improvisation and Related Terms in Middle-Period Jazz’ in Gabriel Sollis and Bruno Nettl (eds.), *Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, and Society* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), pp.263–280.

⁵⁵ Paul Griffiths, ‘Improvisation, II. Western art music, 6. The 20th Century’, *Oxford Music Online* <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/> (accessed 30 November 2023).

⁵⁶ Sabine Feisst, ‘Negotiating Freedom and Control in Composition: Improvisation and Its Offshoots, 1950 to 1980) in George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piecut (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, Volume 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p.207.

⁵⁷ Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: its nature and practice in music* (Rev. ed., Indiana: Da Capo Press, 1992).

consider all these styles under a single label. It is also methodologically rather crude in presenting short interviews often with only one proponent of each category – organ improvisation is represented by the French organist and composer Jean Langlais, who was a friend of Messiaen's. Arguably by the time of this interview Langlais could no longer be considered entirely representative even of French Catholic circles, given the vehemence of his negative reaction to the changes made after the Second Vatican Council.

More rigorous is a collection of essays from 2009 under the title *Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, and Society*, which not only encompasses a variety of musics under the heading of improvisation, but also a selection of approaches.⁵⁸ This book, however, is largely dominated by approaches belonging to Ethnomusicology, although the final section does have contributions from Historical Musicology they are, of the nature of such collections, focussed on specific examples which do not necessarily map directly onto the sorts of improvisation that are of particular import here. Similarly, the *Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies* intentionally takes a definition of improvisation which is much broader than the merely musical, and many of the contributions distance the more theoretical approaches they champion from the concrete instantiations, musical or otherwise, which give rise to them.⁵⁹

An important recent contribution which similarly aims to be universal in its application of the term improvisation, despite its clear tendency towards the genre of free jazz, is Sam McAuliffe's *Improvisation in Music and Philosophical Hermeneutics*. This is relevant not only in that it gives an expansive [re-]definition of improvisation, but also that it relates to the theological elements in this thesis in its attempt to suggest that improvisation

⁵⁸ Gabriel Sollis and Bruno Nettl (eds.), *Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, and Society* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

⁵⁹ George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, 2 Volumes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

relates to both the creation and communication of meaning.⁶⁰ McAuliffe's definition of improvisation is as wide as 'to attend and respond to the situation in which one finds oneself'.⁶¹ His ongoing argument, though, drawing on Gadamer's extension of Heidegger's philosophical hermeneutics, not only suggests the possibility of an hermeneutical engagement with improvised music, but also an improvisational and inherently musical approach to any kind of meaning-formation:

Hermeneutical thinking *with* music guided us across a terrain that not only illuminated a certain understanding of music but also led us back through music as a means to understand the hermeneutical. Thus, we uncovered the hermeneutical character of music and the musical character of hermeneutics. Moreover, we uncovered the essentially improvisational character of both music and hermeneutics and thus, the improvisational character of our being-in-the-world.⁶²

In a sense, the argument presented in this thesis supports the more universal idea encapsulated here by exploring the response of a particular musician, Messiaen, to a specific context, Catholic liturgy. McAuliffe's assumptions, however, tend towards improvisation in ensemble: the engagement between musician and context is seen as working both ways – indeed in triangular form with a shared matter at hand – which means that although we are particularly interested in Messiaen's music in his context, the 'improvisation' of engagement with the liturgy is a work of the whole congregation gathered as much as it is of the individual musician at the organ console.

Returning more specifically to organ improvisation, an important contribution is Ronnie Krippner's 2018 thesis, in which the Anglican cathedral tradition is specifically explored, and contextualised relative to both the French and German traditions of organ improvisation.⁶³ He uses a technique he calls 'Real Time Analysis' to engage with recorded

⁶⁰ Sam McAuliffe, *Improvisation in Music and Philosophical Hermeneutics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023).

⁶¹ McAuliffe, *Improvisation*, p.1.

⁶² McAuliffe, *Improvisation*, p.180.

⁶³ Ronny J. H. Krippner, *Organ Improvisation in the Anglican Cathedral Tradition: A Portfolio of Professional Practice with Contextual and Critical Commentary*, PhD Thesis, Birmingham City University (2018).

improvisations, arguing that the aural impressions on a technically informed listener are sufficient to report the ‘macro-structural aspects of the improvisation, and broad aspects of style and syntactical control’ notwithstanding that certain details are thereby overlooked.⁶⁴ His focus is on what he terms ‘stylistic’ improvisation, that is, improvised music which follows particular rules and forms, as distinct from free improvisation, and indeed he advocates for more use of inherited forms, such as fugue. Despite being a discussion of music specifically in the cathedral tradition, however, Krippner assesses it in purely musical terms, rather than as it relates to the non-musical activities which surround and contextualise it. Messiaen’s approach in the liturgical context appears less focussed on such academic niceties as purely musical form, and this thesis argues explicitly that it constituted a more direct response to the specificities of the liturgical action which, by providing context, gives meaning to the music.

1.4.3 Religious music, liturgical music and theology

Views on the role of organist in the liturgy range, even within Catholic circles, from those who see it as merely functional background to those for whom it is a high calling having significant theological import. Dominating Catholic thinking on church music for the first half of the twentieth century was Pope Pius X’s Motu Proprio, *Tra le Sollecitudini*,⁶⁵ which, while in practice limiting some of the customs of some organists – specifically it was concerned to exclude operatic and theatrical elements which draw attention to the performer and away from the sacramental action – took a relatively high view of the role of music in worship: ‘its principal office is to clothe with suitable melody the liturgical text proposed for the understanding of the faithful, its proper aim is to add greater efficacy to the text’. Further instructions include the encyclical *Sacrae Musicae Disciplinae* (1955),⁶⁶ and its detailed

⁶⁴ Krippner, *Organ Improvisation*, p.143.

⁶⁵ Pius X (Pope), Motu Proprio, *Tra le Sollecitudini* (1903).

⁶⁶ Pius XII (Pope), Encyclical on Sacred Music, *Musicae Sacrae Disciplina* (1955).

follow-up *De musica sacra et sacra liturgia* (1958).⁶⁷ These, while positioned as extensions of earlier instructions aiming to protect the liturgy from external influences, such as theatre music, were interpreted at the time as also excluding certain forms of modernism, however much inspiration the latter might have taken from the liturgy.⁶⁸

Sacrosanctum Concilium (1963), or the constitution on the sacred liturgy of the Second Vatican Council, introduced profound changes. The text of the constitution reaffirmed the primacy of the Latin language, plainchant, and organ music:

Particular law remaining in force, the use of the Latin language is to be preserved in the Latin rites.⁶⁹

The Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as specially suited to the Roman liturgy: therefore, other things being equal, it should be given pride of place in liturgical services.⁷⁰

In the Latin Church the pipe organ is to be held in high esteem, for it is the traditional musical instrument which adds a wonderful splendour to the Church's ceremonies and powerfully lifts up man's mind to God and to higher things.⁷¹

Nevertheless, the council was concerned that 'all the faithful should be led to... fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations'.⁷² In pursuance of this, it permitted both use of vernacular languages and some level of inculturation in music. This meant that, in the implementation of the constitution, Catholic liturgy changed radically. Many ecclesiastical musicians found their practice altering very rapidly, usually to their appreciable chagrin. Implementation of musical change at Ste Trinité appears not to have been as significant as in many other churches: in 1985 Messiaen could still refer to the main Sunday 9 am Mass as dedicated to plainchant. Jacques Hollande, the *Curé* at the time,

⁶⁷ Roman Catholic Church, *De Musica Sacra et Sacra Liturgia* (Rome: Congregation for Rites, 1958).

⁶⁸ On how these may have affected Messiaen, see Stephen Broad, 'Messiaen and *Art Sacré*', in Christopher Dingle and Robert Fallon (eds), *Messiaen Perspectives 1: Sources and Influences* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), p.276–8.

⁶⁹ Roman Catholic Church, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Rome: Second Vatican Council, 1963) §.36.1.

⁷⁰ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §.116.

⁷¹ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §.120.

⁷² *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §.14.

implemented changes in ‘a spirit of obedience’ and with some concern to avoid ‘agitation’.⁷³ Messiaen himself, by this stage, had international fame, as well as the respect of the parish clergy, and arguably, therefore, could influence details in the application of instructions to the parish more than some other musicians might. The role of the choir organist also enabled Messiaen to delegate music with which he was not happy to another.

The extent, noted above, to which Messiaen’s own words have continued to determine our approaches to his music is even more marked when considering his religious views. Given that we cannot know his personal faith beyond his words perhaps this is the most respectful way to approach it. He did, however, demonstrably smooth over certain historical details, and hide any sense that his ideas developed over time. The speech he gave at *Notre Dame* in December 1977 distinguishes between liturgical and religious music, and then adds his own category of dazzlingly-coloured music.⁷⁴ On liturgical music he gives exclusive preference to plainchant:

There is only one [liturgical music]: plainchant. Plainchant alone possesses at once the purity, the joy, the lightness necessary to launch the soul towards the truth.⁷⁵

Such a claim may be overstated and polemical: in light of the implementation of changes after the Second Vatican Council such an insistence that plainchant stands alone cannot be a neutral claim. That said, one of the striking features of Messiaen as a liturgical musician is that he published very little music specifically intended for liturgical use, and this feature is as remarkable before the council as after it. Messiaen’s speech omits, moreover, to develop any commentary on the relationship between sung chant and the improvisations that he regularly based on plainchant material within the liturgical context; I argue that these

⁷³ Karin Heller, ‘Olivier Messiaen and Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger: Two Views of the Liturgical Reform according to the Second Vatican Council’, in Andrew Shenton (ed.), *Messiaen the Theologian* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), p.73.

⁷⁴ Messiaen, *Conférence de Notre-Dame*.

⁷⁵ Messiaen, *Conférence de Notre-Dame*, p.3.

improvisations remain native to the liturgy, though Messiaen's text omits any mention of treatments of plainchant beyond its being sung.

Messiaen's third category, dazzling music, has been discussed at length by Sander van Maas, whose writing is very dense and can be rather circular,⁷⁶ but who nevertheless succeeds in bringing out the importance to Messiaen's thinking of von Balthasar's *Herrlichkeit*.⁷⁷ Van Maas is not the only commentator who has tended to treat Messiaen as though he was a professional theologian; he was certainly well-read in theological texts and engaged with theological ideas, but we should not forget that he was primarily a musician, and it was through his music that his theology was primarily expressed. Douglas Shadle's exploration of Messiaen's relationship to Jacques Maritain's neo-Thomist circle, for example, reads as though praising him for having stayed aloof to the tension between neo-Thomist and *Ressourcement* ideas in twentieth century theology; simply by not being an academic theologian Messiaen would have been under no pressure to take sides of this kind.⁷⁸

Existing commentary on Messiaen's music and liturgy tends to follow Cardinal Lustiger in asserting that 'Messiaen was not a writer for the liturgy', but was nevertheless deeply liturgical.⁷⁹ Père Kars sets out a few senses in which a liturgical dimension is inherent in Messiaen's work.⁸⁰ There is evidence to confirm that Messiaen's thinking as liturgical organist was theologically informed: he told Brigitte Massin that upon his appointment to Ste Trinité his confessor had advised him in addition to understanding the organ he should also

⁷⁶ An accessible reading of van Maas's book is given by Jennifer Newsome Martin, 'The Composition of Glory: Olivier Messiaen and Hans Urs von Balthasar' in Robert Sholl (ed.), *Messiaen in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), p.139.

⁷⁷ Sander van Maas, *The Reinvention of Religious Music: Olivier Messiaen's Breakthrough Towards the Beyond* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009).

⁷⁸ Douglas Shadle, 'Messiaen's Relationship to Jacques Maritain's Musical Circle and Neo Thomism', in Andrew Shenton (ed.), *Messiaen the Theologian* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp.83–99.

⁷⁹ Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, *Intervention dans l'Ouverture du Festival Messiaen, Ste Trinité*, 1995 reproduced in Père Jean-Rudolphe Kars, 'The works of Olivier Messiaen and the Catholic Liturgy', in Christopher Dingle and Nigel Simeone (eds), *Olivier Messiaen: Music, Art and Literature* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007), p.332.

⁸⁰ Kars, 'Messiaen and Liturgy', pp.323–333.

understand the liturgy.⁸¹ The book recommended to him in the first instance was Dom Columba Marmion's *Le Christ dans ses mystères*, a work which relates the cycle of the liturgical year to events in the life of Christ.⁸² Thinking in this way draws out some useful parallels with the major achievement of one of Messiaen's influences, Charles Tournemire, who had made significant use of Dom Prosper Guéranger's *L'Année liturgique* in preparing his *L'Orgue Mystique*.⁸³ Messiaen's avowed enthusiasm for von Balthasar, whose theology prioritises the experience of beauty (albeit not explicitly liturgical), can be read as relevant to his conception of music in the service of the church. In so far as Balthasar can be read as a response to Kant, an argument can be made that Messiaen's discomfort with Enlightenment and Post-Enlightenment thinking reacts not only to its anti-Catholicism but also to its reliance on forms of logic and truth claim that leave no room for this experiential foundation.

Worthy of particular note at this point are attempts to provide theological interpretations of specific works of Messiaen, of which Dorothee Bauer's exegesis of the *Livre du Saint Sacrement* is exemplary.⁸⁴ This is detailed work, and Bauer succeeds in drawing out the ways in which Messiaen's music encodes relatively complex eucharistic doctrines such as concomitance, in addition to transubstantiation which is specifically named in the title of a movement. Her conclusions, arranged around doxological, cosmological, and eschatological themes in the music approach the understanding of liturgy expounded in chapter four below.⁸⁵ She asserts, however, that:

The *Livre*'s overall character of personal prayer remains in need of explanation because it scarcely emphasizes the communal character of the

⁸¹ Massin, *Messiaen*, p.68.

⁸² Dom Columba Marmion, *Le Christ dans ses mystères* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1945).

⁸³ Robert Sutherland Lord, 'Liturgy and Gregorian Chant in *L'Orgue Mystique* of Charles Tournemire', in Jennifer Donelson and Stephen Schloesser (eds.), *Mystic Modern: The Music, Thought, and Legacy of Charles Tournemire* (Richmond: CMAA, 2014), p.47; cf. Charles Tournemire, *L'Orgue Mystique* (Paris: Heugel, 1928–1930).

⁸⁴ Dorothee Bauer, *Olivier Messiaen's 'Livre du Saint Sacrement'*, trans. D. Vogels (Paderborn: Brill, 2023).

⁸⁵ Bauer, *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, p.311.

liturgy, which came to the fore especially after the Second Vatican Council.⁸⁶

It is not entirely clear that this perception is founded on more than the assumptions Bauer brings to the work. The Mass as a public liturgy is of its nature a corporate activity of the church gathered, and a listening practice which starts from that assumption can hear as much exhortation and leadership in the music as the personal devotion noted. Furthermore, Bauer herself later notes the communal element brought in by the eschatological dimension of liturgy:

In thanksgiving for the Eucharist, individual believers know themselves to be connected with the heavenly Church, as Romano Guardini also emphasizes in his comprehensive explication of ecclesiastical Communion. Whether Messiaen implicitly presupposes the horizontal communion cannot be discerned from the underlying quotations. On the other hand, Messiaen's reference to the *eschatological* dimension of participation in the Body of Christ points to a philosophy that is seldom considered today.⁸⁷

Given that Messiaen is known to have read works by Guardini, it seems more probable to assume that he did indeed consider that aspect of communion. The theological argument of this thesis is precisely that this element is constitutive of Messiaen's approach.

Liturgical theology has a long history – its foundational aphorism ‘that the rule of prayer might establish the rule of belief’ being attributed to Prosper of Aquitaine in the 5th century⁸⁸ – though it is an area sometimes overlooked. It can be characterised as the argument that Christianity constitutes, and is constituted by, not only beliefs but also practices; it follows that the activity of the church in the liturgy may itself be taken as a significant source for theology. Though few theologians would necessarily demur, since the time of the Reformation, western churches, including the reformed Catholic church as well as the Protestant churches, have tended to insist that liturgy be changed to match dogmatic ideas,

⁸⁶ Bauer, *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, p.41.

⁸⁷ Bauer, *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, p.300.

⁸⁸ Jacques-Paul Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus Series Latina* (Paris: Excudebat Migne, 1846) vol. 50, col. 535.

rather than that the ‘rule of prayer’ be formative for the ‘rule of belief’. There are only a handful of rigorous modern treatments of this idea, of which Alexander Schmemmann’s Eastern Orthodox treatment has been particularly influential.⁸⁹ It is worth noting in this regard that, in one of the clearest previous gestures in the direction of linking liturgical theology to Messiaen’s music, the final paragraph of an essay about rhythmic technique and symbolism, Robert Sherlaw Johnson refers explicitly to Orthodox rather than Catholic conceptions:

In spite of the emphasis on bringing God among men, the ultimate aim [of liturgy], as Bishop Callistos says, is to bring mankind into contact with the experience of heaven, to the contemplation of God, and so it is with Messiaen.⁹⁰

Nevertheless, in respect of Messiaen it may be thought prudent to focus on a Roman Catholic text. Aidan Kavanagh’s *On Liturgical Theology*,⁹¹ though maintaining a degree of tentativeness, perhaps out of awareness that ecclesiastical authorities might disapprove, does argue that liturgy is the primary form of theology, and that dogmatic and propositional theologies are secondary (though not inferior). There is no evidence that Messiaen engaged with, or would have agreed with, some of the more polemical statements on the primacy of liturgy over dogmatics, but the insights from liturgical theology concerning at least a dialectic between the two may help reveal some sympathetic reasoning. Furthermore, Rößler’s recollection of a Mass in April 1974 confirms the supposition that in his role as liturgical organist Messiaen’s conception was thoroughly theological, and his music was not only derived from the liturgy but recognisable as a commentary upon it.⁹² The argument of chapter

⁸⁹ Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1966).

⁹⁰ Robert Sherlaw Johnson, ‘Rhythmic Technique and Symbolism in the Music of Olivier Messiaen’, in Siglind Bruhn (ed.) *Messiaen’s Language of Mystical Love* (New York & London: Routledge, 1998), p.138.

⁹¹ Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1984).

⁹² Almut Rößler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen: with original texts by the composer*, trans. B. Dagg and N. Poland (Duisburg: Gilles & Francke, 1986), p.137. The full quotation is given below, p.61–2.

four is that this conception of liturgical theology is applicable to Messiaen's theological consideration as a liturgical musician. It seems unlikely that this engagement had no effect on his thinking while composing, and therefore the argument of chapter five applies both the theological conclusions of chapter four and the musical conclusions of chapters two and three, which consider Messiaen's liturgical practice, to a selection of his published works.

2. Messiaen as Improviser

The first research question to be addressed in this thesis is ‘what was Messiaen’s role and practice as improviser at the organ?’ This requires that Messiaen’s practice as a liturgical musician be established, and more specifically that his approach to improvisation at the organ be determined. This is taken in two parts, largely driven by the different types of evidence to be considered; this current chapter looks primarily at documentary evidence and accounts of those who heard Messiaen improvise and play repertoire pieces in church, while the following chapter engages with some of the various recordings that exist of him doing so. Preliminary to both of these parts must be a consideration of what it means to provide a description of a ‘practice’ and a definition of the term improvisation.

Regarding the first of these preliminaries, if ‘practice’ is taken to be a summative noun encompassing everything that Messiaen did as an ecclesiastical musician, then a full description of it would have to include an account of every occasion on which he acted in that capacity, and (at least in theory) every relevant thought that passed through his mind. The latter is strictly inaccessible to observers, and the former impractical in scope. An analytical account is necessarily an abstraction and generalisation from such information as is available to create a coherent sense of the range and principal features of the activity in question. In framing information in this way, it is important to consider openly the purposes and intentions of the account, since to curate information is inevitably to seek to persuade and influence interpretation; selecting relevant evidence and framing it in a particular way cannot be neutral, even as it hopes to be responsible.

It will be observed, therefore, that this account is already oriented to some extent towards the case that is made in chapter four giving a theological account of liturgical music which enables a liturgical grounding for the possibility of theological music. Specifically, Messiaen – particularly as a younger man – was happy to defend his music’s deviation from

many people's pre-conceived ideas about what 'religious' music should sound like, on the grounds that his conception of religion included significant elements of the awesome and the dramatic as well as the contemplative and the saccharine:

Well, let me take the offensive. These people who reproach me for not knowing dogmas don't know them themselves. They know even less the texts of Holy Scripture and the Fathers of the Church. They expect from me a sweet music, vaguely mystical and above all soporific. As organist, it is my duty to comment on the texts belonging to the office of the day. These texts hold up very different truths, express very different sentiments and arouse equally very different graces, following the particular colour of the time.¹

This account of his practice is, therefore, comfortable with including, and even defending, within a description of Messiaen's practice aspects of his music which may be found by some to be disruptive in a religious setting.

Similarly, it is important to be alert to the emphases and agenda of those preserving and recounting instances of Messiaen's activity. Many of the descriptions of Messiaen improvising which are engaged in this chapter are not in themselves new to musicology, but are probed in a slightly different way. The question of the power dynamics between clergy, congregation and organist develops into something of a running theme as such accounts are presented later in the chapter, but to give an initial example, even today Messiaen's name dominates the music section of the website of Ste Trinité:

Having never wished to separate his Christian faith from his music, Olivier Messiaen held to his mission as liturgical organist for more than 60 years. And when he was present at the Trinité it was primarily as a Christian. From high in the organ loft, accompanied by his wife, Yvonne Loriod, he participated attentively in the Mass, in prayer and contemplation...

What astonished in this universally-renowned composer was the extreme simplicity with which he carried out his service. One of his greatest joys was to improvise on Plainchant. He always sought to respect well the tone of the feast celebrated, the colour of the readings of the day.

¹ Goléa, *Rencontres avec Messiaen*, p.37–8.

Drawing on the richness of the liturgical cycle, it was at the organ of the *Trinité* that Messiaen experimented with his varied timbres and found inspiration for his main works.²

In this, the parish seems to be treading a line between wanting to associate itself with Messiaen's achievements as a composer, and in some ways to take credit for his extension of the registral possibilities of the organ and explorations of timbre more generally, while at the same time insisting that his music was subservient to liturgical concerns and offered in a spirit of extreme simplicity. Given that his composed works, including those for organ, tend towards maximal in terms of scope, sonority, and technique, the claim that such works were inspired and developed in and by an act of restrained service is not obviously unproblematic. That is not to say that either part of the claim is necessarily untrue, but it must at least give cause to consider the complexity of the relations between liturgical musicians and ecclesiastical authorities. These power dynamics themselves are not static: the youngest titular organist in Paris appointed straight out of the conservatoire inevitably carries far less clout than a professor at the same conservatoire, who is also a world-renowned composer and Grand Cross of the *Légion d'honneur*. This theme is developed below: for now it may suffice to note that although these chapters seek to describe Messiaen's practice as a liturgical musician, this practice may not be best conceived as a singular phenomenon: it can be seen to have varied over time as he developed throughout his career, and between occasions as different styles will have been required.

2.1 Towards a definition of liturgical improvisation

Before continuing to develop these ideas, it is necessary to refine the working definition of a key term: improvisation, and more specifically the import of the qualified term 'liturgical improvisation'. In non-musical contexts, to improvise often carries negative connotations of

² L'Église de la Sainte Trinité, 'Arts-Culture', Parish Website, www.latriniteparis.com (Accessed 24 August 2022).

being unplanned, rushed, under-resourced and/or sub-standard; there is a tendency when considering musical improvisation to go too far the other way and describe a pseudo-magical *creatio ex nihilo* in which a genius musician has almost supernatural control over her or his material. Such narratives are further complicated by the application of the same term to various non-western musics which have never had a tradition of written musical composition, in which it risks carrying connotations of uncivilised otherness.³ It may not be entirely useful, therefore, to begin from a maximal definition which encompasses all kinds of musical creation in the moment of performance, but to seek a more focussed understanding of the nature of improvisation in the more specific context of a church organist. That said, Messiaen is also known to have improvised at the piano,⁴ and, in his impecunious younger days, on organs in the rather different contexts of music hall and cinema,⁵ and it is reasonable to imagine that he thought about those other improvisations in musically similar (though not necessarily identical) ways to his ecclesiastical function. Still less distinct may be improvisations that were not strictly liturgical, in the sense of forming part of a particular office, but were nevertheless in the service of the church. This category would include extended improvisations prior to major services, such as Midnight Mass, which arguably went beyond the function of prelude, but also special events such as the one on 23 November 1967 of alternating verbal and musical reflections, which led to the *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte-Trinité*.⁶

As noted in section 1.4.2., above, the improvisations of church organists, while widely recognised as a significant part of the function, are often treated relatively uncritically in

³ Iyer, 'Beneath Improvisation', pp.760–780.

⁴ Christopher Dingle, 'Messiaen as Pianist: A Romantic in a Modernist World', in Scott McCarrey and Lesley A Wright (eds.), *Perspectives on the Performance of French Piano Music* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014) p.31.

⁵ Broad, *Recontextualising Messiaen's Career*, p.139.

⁶ Anne Mary Keeley, 'In the Beginning was the Word? An Exploration of the Origins of *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte-Trinité*', in Christopher Dingle and Robert Fallon (eds), *Messiaen Perspectives 1: Sources and Influences* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), pp.175–193. See also section 5.1.2 below.

wider discussions of the term. Concerning Messiaen specifically, Christopher Dingle considers the apparent contradiction between meticulous preparation, even sketches, and the notion that something was improvised:

That Messiaen's improvisations were sometimes so meticulously primed might appear to be contradictory to the entire notion of music created in the moment.⁷

Dingle resolves the issue by acknowledging that a range of different occasions might entail more or less preparation. The context for that observation is the event which gave rise to the *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte-Trinité*, and it is worth noting that as this was a major event, it is likely that more preparation was put into this than would have been for a more low-key Sunday Mass in ordinary time. This raises again the observation that even within the notion that one can describe something as a musician's 'practice' there is variety more than uniformity. Dingle is also surely correct to note that 'the majority of the music created by Messiaen was ephemeral',⁸ but that serves only to underline the daunting nature of the task of describing such an extensive 'practice'.

There is a further distinction to be made between complementary but different senses in which the idea of 'Messiaen's practice of liturgical improvisation' may be understood. This distinction may be thought of as a difference between technical and cultural definitions. If in the technical sense improvisation is taken to mean music-making that involves extemporaneous composition, whether of ornamentation, extension or substance, then we can take musical outputs and analyse them in an equally technical sense, considering musical material and its development. This approach is dominant in the next chapter of this thesis as it engages with recordings of Messiaen's improvising. To balance this, however, we may also consider this practice to consist of a culturally specific and meaningful activity arising from

⁷ Dingle, *Life*, p.183.

⁸ Dingle, *Life*, p.184.

particular circumstances; it is for that reason that my title refers not to improvisation alone but to ‘liturgical improvisation’. In this understanding, the details of the sounds produced are of less import than the implied statements made by the symbolism adduced and the choices made for reasons relating specifically to that context. Chapter four takes up the theological implications of considering Messiaen’s liturgical improvisation as a cultural contribution to Catholic Christianity. The two aspects complement one another, and it is not the intention to suggest a preference for one over the other, but acknowledging this dual aspect to the practice creates space to encompass and relate them to each other.

To give an account of Messiaen’s practice of liturgical improvisation, therefore, is both to describe in musical terms the technical aspects of that practice – what were his sources of musical material and how did he develop them – and also to consider what his intentions may have been in terms of adding to the cultural construction of the religious ritual of which it formed a part. Of course, it is only external actions that are truly accessible to the researcher, so the latter part relies on inference from the musical activity together with what Messiaen said about the practice, what others said about it, and what his training and acknowledged influences will have added to the framing of the activity. The same framing also provides most of the material on which inferences might be made connecting the two aspects to each other, though there are limitations. To identify some of the musical material in an improvisation as a particular line of plainchant, for example, can suggest an occasion by association with a particular Sunday or festival, and it is possible to discuss in music-theoretical terms the way such a quotation might be extended or developed. It is not possible, however, to determine whether, for example, a particular number of repetitions might have arisen from a conscious choice concerning symbolism, or simply from the exigencies of the improvisation accompanying a ritual action that constrained the amount of time available. We may be justified in interpreting the music simply in terms of what is presented, but we cannot

necessarily conclude that every possibly-symbolic element is intentional. That note of caution being acknowledged, however, it is evident from Messiaen's compositions that he made significant use of musical symbolism, and it is therefore not inappropriate to suggest similar intentions in his improvised music.

The remainder of this chapter considers first Messiaen's training and influences as an improviser and as an organist and then goes on to engage with the various accounts that he and others gave of his practice in that role. The dual aspects of specifically musical and cultural understandings remain in evidence, as do the variety and change that are inevitably encompassed in an activity that took place regularly over the course of more than sixty years. It is nevertheless hoped that a coherent narrative may emerge from this variety, not to subsume it but to reveal ways in which there is continuity within change. This may in turn allow the whole to be labelled a 'practice' in a way which enables a description of this specific activity to inform our understanding of Messiaen's approach to his musical and religious inspirations more generally.

2.2 Messiaen's training in improvisation

Messiaen's contemporary, friend, and fellow organist Jean Langlais, speaking to Derek Bailey and having identified Messiaen as being, in his eyes, the most gifted musician for the organ, recalled their student days at the Paris Conservatoire:

The day he [Messiaen] won the first prize in the competition he improvised a splendid fugue. But he practiced two years for that. And he was Messiaen. And we have only one Messiaen. We have a technique for practicing improvising like we have a technique for practicing scales and arpeggios.⁹

Marcel Dupré, Messiaen's only organ teacher, ran the organ class at the Conservatoire from 1926 until he was appointed director of the Conservatoire in 1954; Messiaen joined the class

⁹ Bailey, *Improvisation*, pp.37–8.

in 1927 and won his *premier prix* in 1929.¹⁰ Messiaen claimed that it was, in fact, because he had shown an aptitude for improvisation that he was recommended to Dupré, and not because his religious conviction might have indicated an ecclesiastical function as appropriate to him.¹¹ It is also often observed that at the time of this introduction he was an absolute beginner. As Dupré later recalled:

When he came out to Meudon for the first time (he was nineteen), he sat stupefied in front of my organ keyboards. He had never seen an organ console before. After an hour of explanations and demonstrations, I gave him the Bach C minor Fantasia to learn. He came back a week later and played it to me by heart, perfectly; an astonishing feat!¹²

This telling plays into the trope whereby a person of undenied talent is made to seem even more impressive for having such skill by nature more than training. Stephen Schloesser is sceptical of the idea that Messiaen had no contact with the organ prior to that point, suggesting both that Jehan de Gibon seems likely to have given him some organ instruction before the family moved to Paris, and that Messiaen's friendship with Daniel-Lesur makes it very likely that he had also met Tournemire at Ste Clotilde before the autumn of 1927.¹³ The first of these points, while plausible, seems entirely speculative; the latter more likely, but it only indicates that the notion Messiaen had not seen an organ console is an exaggeration; it would not necessarily follow that he had played the organ previously nor had the principles of registration explained to him.

That said, Schloesser's suggestion that Tournemire's influence may have been downplayed on account of rivalry between Tournemire and Dupré – Tournemire had also been a candidate for the conservatoire's organ class when Dupré was appointed – gives a rationale for believing that Tournemire was even more influential than Messiaen always

¹⁰ Hill & Simeone, *Messiaen*, pp.22–3.

¹¹ Samuel, *Permanences*, pp.26–7.

¹² Hill & Simeone, *Messiaen*, p.22

¹³ Schloesser, *Visions*, pp.134–5.

acknowledged. It is known that Messiaen was enthusiastic about Tournemire's improvisations and about his *l'Orgue mystique*, so his influence, alongside Dupré's, must be accounted for even if it did not constitute instruction.¹⁴ The approaches taken by these two influences on Messiaen's development as a liturgical organist and improviser can be compared because each published a textbook on the subject: Tournemire's *Précis d'exécution, de registration et d'improvisation à l'orgue*,¹⁵ and Dupré's *Cours Complet d'Improvisation à l'orgue*.¹⁶

It is important, of course, to be aware that textbooks differ from instruction in relevant ways: the latter enables more focus on the particular strengths of the students concerned where the published word must be couched in general terms; demonstration functions in a different way to written musical examples; and certain things that a teacher could say the same person might refrain from entrusting to posterity in print. Nevertheless, the two books can be usefully compared. As might be expected from the title, Tournemire's work concentrates on technical aspects of organ playing and registration; his comments on improvisation are relatively brief and comprise only the final section of the book.¹⁷ Dupré also asserts that good technique is prerequisite, but covers playing technique only briefly in his first chapter,¹⁸ before embarking on harmonic preparation and the analysis of thematic material leading to the formal considerations of different sorts of improvisations, which constitute the bulk of his book. Both, as is to be expected within the French organ tradition, include specific observations about the liturgical context of improvisation in Catholic services. Dupré's course progresses towards the fugue as the height of style for organ music,

¹⁴ Nigel Simeone, «*Bien Cher Félix...*» *Letters from Olivier Messiaen and Yvonne Loriod to Felix Aprahamian* (Cambridge: Mirage Press, 1998) p.51; Broad, *Messiaen: Journalism*, p.41–2.

¹⁵ Tournemire, *Précis*.

¹⁶ Dupré, *Cours d'improvisation*.

¹⁷ Tournemire, *Précis*, pp.102–117.

¹⁸ Dupré, *Cours d'Improvisation*, pp.1–6.

and indeed as the most technically difficult aspect of the organ competition in which his students aimed to compete. Tournemire covers the fugue relatively briefly by simply listing the expected elements, reserving more attention for symphonic and freer forms, possibly on the grounds that the liturgical function is less likely to focus on the academic rigour of fugue than on short musical responses to liturgical texts. Dupré's approach is systematic and builds up towards more complex improvisations, suggesting the teacher's assumption that a skill can be taught; Tournemire takes a more rarefied view of improvisation as a gift of almost mystical illumination born of 'real emotion'.

The examples of Messiaen's improvisations that are discussed in more detail in chapter three demonstrate elements from both these texts; arguably more of Tournemire's free and emotional style are evinced, as the set of recordings we have does not include an example of an improvised fugue, or similar set form. That said, the forms of development of thematic material that are used can often be traced to Dupré's advice. Furthermore, Messiaen acknowledged that it was Dupré who first encouraged him to explore modes in improvisation, though this is not a significant feature of his improvisation textbook.

Both texts also conclude with imagery that clearly resonates with Messiaen's concerns, and with his later claims regarding his own music; it is not necessary to suppose that they directly planted seeds of ideas that Messiaen, given his general preoccupations, would otherwise not have developed, but it is noticeable how directly these earlier texts reflect ideas that he later drew on. Tournemire concludes his text, after adumbrating some of the Carnatic ('Hindu') and Gregorian modes, by describing the colours of the celestial city:

Thus armed, improvisers will be able think, in the vast domain of thought adorned with rich colours, of the foundation stones of the Holy City that is spoken of by the Apocalypse.¹⁹

¹⁹ Tournemire, *Précis*, p.117; Rev. 21:19–20.

He continues to list the precious stones in question. Dupré's final image is of coloured glass:

The organ plays a decorative part, and in each piece it must be like the great stained-glass windows in a cathedral, of which one appears red, the other blue, another violet, even though they are, in reality, multicoloured.²⁰

While both these texts provide important background to understanding Messiaen's training in improvisation, there are elements not covered in them.

Odile Jutten's thesis concerns the teaching of improvisation in the conservatoire class following a methodology which is diachronic, in so far as it covers changes in the teaching over time, and analytical in that her main concern is to consider the themes given on which the improvisation were to be made.²¹ It also divides stylistically, as she found it more useful to separate out the different improvisation tasks – chant harmonisation, free forms, and fugue – rather than assume that each could be directly compared. This is itself yet another indication that improvisation is not a single phenomenon; even within one school and one instrument different tasks are not necessarily alike. Jutten does provide a description of the chorale improvisations in the competition in the year Messiaen won his prize, complementing Langlais's description given above of his fugue:

Six candidates presented themselves: Henri Cabié and Henriette Roger improvised a contrapuntal chorale with a counter-subject, Jean Langlais chose a chorale in canon of three voices, Gaston Litaize a canon in 5 voices and Olivier Messiaen, who won his prize, dared the first *grand mélange* in the history of the class, which he realised in the following manner: syncopations in the soprano, crotchets in the alto, the given chant in the tenor and minims in the bass.²²

²⁰ Dupré, *Cours d'Improvisation*, p.148; cf. Messiaen, *Conférence de Notre-Dame*, p.12; Messiaen, *Traité VII*, p.198.

²¹ Odile Jutten, *L'Enseignement de l'Improvisation à la Classe d'Orgue du Conservatoire de Paris, 1819–1986 d'après la thématique de concours et d'examens*, (Lille: l'Atelier National de Reproduction des Thèses, 1999).

²² Jutten, *Enseignement*. p.199. *Mélange* is the term used in French treatises (including Dupré's) for combined counterpoint in which each voice follows the rules of a different species; *grand mélange* is specifically the form of four-voice counterpoint in which the cantus firmus is joined by voices using second, third and fourth species respectively; see Marcel Dupré, *Cours de Contrepoint* (Paris: Leduc, 1938) p.32 .

The history of the organ class at the Paris conservatoire tends to show a tension between the different demands of execution and improvisation, successive teachers tending to emphasise either one or the other; certainly when Widor took over from Franck in 1890 his view had been that technique and performance had been neglected in favour of improvisation.²³ Guilmant, who succeeded Widor in 1896 – and was at the time organist of Ste Trinité – was considered to have a less creative approach to improvisation, though his own *L'Organiste liturgiste* gives a sense of how he expected organists to treat plainchant-derived material.²⁴ Dupré brought the class back towards a particular focus on improvisation, and imposed strict expectations in terms of the formal aspects of each type of improvisation.

Messiaen, therefore, left the organ class with his *premier prix* having been rigorously, if relatively briefly, trained in contrapuntal improvisation as well as organ technique. One further observation worth noting is that he recalled Dupré recommending experimentation with modes; this is not recorded as a formal part of his training at the conservatoire, but it was through experimenting in this way in organ improvisation that Messiaen expounded his discovery of the modes of limited transposition, arguably one of the earliest elements of his distinctive musical language.²⁵

2.3 Clarifying Messiaen's duties at Ste Trinité

Many descriptions of Messiaen's duties at Ste Trinité begin and end with the description he gave to Claude Samuel of the pattern of services:

My offices were, by arrangement with the different *curés* who succeeded one another at the Trinité, rather wisely disposed in the following manner: at the High Mass on Sunday I only did plainchant; at the 11 o'clock Mass on Sunday, classical and romantic music; at the midday Mass I was permitted to play my works, finally at vespers I was obliged to improvise because the

²³ John R. Near, *Widor: A Life beyond the Toccata*, (NY: University of Rochester Press, 2011) pp.195–203.

²⁴ Alexandre Guilmant, *L'Organiste liturgiste* (Mainz: Schott, 1891).

²⁵ Marti, “‘It’s a secret of Love’”, p.232.

brevity of the versets do not allow the playing of pieces between the Psalms and during the Magnificat.²⁶

While this is a useful summary, within this overall pattern of Sunday services details such as specific service times changed more than once. A typewritten document in the Messiaen archive at the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* which is labelled as a transcription of Messiaen's diaries by Yvonne Loriod but reads in places as less a transcription and more a sort of biography by his widow, having commented on certain changes to Messiaen's teaching arrangements, notes that:

If the director wanted to totally change the conservatoire class... the *Trinité* would also change several givens concerning the times of Masses and their styles, but with a lot of respect for the organist (and a delicious courtesy).²⁷

Such changes appear to have occurred at several points, which is not surprising in a period of sixty years but adds a certain texture to the simple assumption that the pattern of duties adumbrated to Claude Samuel was unchanging throughout his tenure.

A first observation in this respect concerns the fact that in the first years of his appointment the permission to play modernist music was not given. The midday Mass was not instituted until 1945, as Messiaen explains in his *Traité*:

Having become organist of the *grand orgue* of the church of the *Trinité* (Paris), in 1930 [*sic.*] (I was, therefore, 22 years old), my service obliged me to play short improvisations on the texts of plainchant, especially as versets on the antiphons of Vespers. In the course of other offices, I always played written pieces (Nicolas de Grigny, J. S. Bach, modern music, etc.). In 1945, the creation of a midday Mass and the permission to do there exclusively modern music, offered me the possibility of long organ recitals, where I played the works of my contemporaries, or my own works, or finally I improvised, in order better to become one with the large divisions of the Holy Sacrifice: Offertory – Consecration – Communion, and better to emphasise the mysteries of the liturgical year.²⁸

²⁶ Samuel, *Permanences*, p.30.

²⁷ Loriod, *Transcription des agendas*, BnF, FM, RES VMB MS-122, p.101.

²⁸ Messiaen, *Traité IV*, p.83.

The typical pattern of services described, therefore, dates from fourteen years after his initial appointment, and one can imagine how a combination of Messiaen's growing stature as a composer and his appointment as Professor at the Conservatoire (albeit teaching classes in harmony and analysis rather than composition) might have led the Parish authorities at this stage in his career to indulge his personal musical style rather more than they had at his initial appointment. At the other end of the relevant period, Messiaen referred to the midday Mass having been dropped some twenty years previously both in the interviews with Claude Samuel as expanded in 1986 (from the original publication in 1967),²⁹ and in his conversations with Brigitte Massin published in 1989.³⁰ That puts the termination of this pattern of services in the mid-to-late 60s, meaning that it lasted in that form for only about a third of Messiaen's time at Ste Trinité. During the 1960s, two relevant considerations may be thought to have influenced the change: first, the organ at Ste Trinité was rebuilt between 1962 and 1966,³¹ and therefore out of use for a time. This enforced break from a conventional pattern may have been sufficient to prompt a change in any case, but during the same period the Second Vatican Council published *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, its Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, which event had a significant impact Catholic liturgy, and the role of Catholic liturgical musicians in general.

The finer details of the termination of the three Masses plus Vespers pattern of Sunday services may not be precisely determined, but in certain respects, at least, the re-opening of the refurbished organ and the change in duties do not, in fact, seem quite to have coincided. Yvonne Loriod's transcription of Messiaen's diaries notes that he played for the three Masses on 17 April 1966,³² apparently for the first time since the organ had been

²⁹ Samuel, *Permanences*, p.27.

³⁰ Massin, Brigitte, *Messiaen: une Poétique du Merveilleux* (Aix-en-Provence: Editions Alinéa, 1989) p.66.

³¹ Dingle, *Life*, p.183.

³² Loriod, *Transcription des agendas*, BnF, FM, VMB MS-122, p.251.

silenced; although some changes were noted on 24 April 1966 (the Gospel to be read aloud, and silence required at the Epistle and the elevation)³³ it was not until the run-up to Christmas 1967 that:

A little annoyance was waiting for Messiaen at the *Trinité*: the Canon of the Mass had to be read aloud and in French [...] which would forbid the organist to play during the greater part of the Mass. There remained only the Introit, the Offertory, the Communion and the Sortie. Finished the *Messe de la Pentecôte* [...] he had now to do short improvisations or play little pieces of two minutes. According to his habit, Messiaen accepted this privation without saying [...] a word.³⁴

This comment confirms that prior to such reforms it had been his expectation that he would continue to play during the Canon, or eucharistic prayer, which would therefore have been spoken by the priest more in the manner of a private prayer not necessarily intended to be heard by the congregation. The changes outlined clearly relate to the reforms implemented after the Second Vatican Council, which required the full and active participation of the people, and therefore that the principal prayers of the Mass be audible. Although these changes altered his duties during each service they do not in themselves affect the pattern of services. With less scope for the sort of music he was used to offering, however, the rationale for a midday service to which his personal musical style might have been the main draw diminished both for the church and for the musician.

It seems, however, that even if the third service no longer had the character of modernism to which it had previously been dedicated, Messiaen did continue to play for three Masses well into the 1970s. The installation of a new *curé* in September 1972 led to a reorganisation of services and duties described as:

1. Mass at 9:55: classical music – play without stopping from the end of the High Mass to the beginning of the 11am Mass.

³³ Liorod, *Transcription des agendas*, BnF, FM, VMB MS-122, p.251

³⁴ Liorod, *Transcription des agendas*, BnF, FM, VMB MS-122, p.277.

2. Mass at 11: classical music – improvisations on the Great Organ then singing by the *chorale* – play without stopping from the end of the Mass to the beginning of the Midday Mass.

3. Midday Mass: verset after the first epistle – *Kyrie* sung to plainchant – *Gloria* in French. *Offertoire*: great organ and *Sortie*: great organ. Therefore priority to short versets, and therefore to improvisation.³⁵

A letter from the *curé* to Messiaen dated 30 November 1975 suggests that the practical details of the third Mass remained a point of some debate:

Dear Maître,

Here is what I have imagined for the Sunday Masses of 12.10, trying to take account of everyone's views:

- A general schedule [*déroulement*] (salmon-coloured page)
- 4 possible schemas to select, following the Sundays, and above all in defining the texts, as you suggest.

This choice would be made from one Sunday to another and be communicated to me either by telephone or by leaving a note of your intentions in an envelope in the sacristy.

Some details doubtless remain to be planned. They will gradually fall into place.

We will begin, if you are agreeable, next Sunday 7 December, as I am absent today 30 November.

I would suggest to you for next Sunday the first schema.

Very cordially yours,³⁶

The enclosures referred to in this letter are unfortunately not retained with it, so what they indicate can only be inferred. In the same file, however, are a set of notes in which Messiaen indicated the textual inspiration on which he would improvise, covering a period of about six months following on from this letter. Appendix 2 summarises these notes.

³⁵ Loriod, *Transcription des agendas*, BnF, FM, VMB MS-122, p. 369.

³⁶ Olivier Messiaen, *Notes textuelles pour improvisation à l'orgue de la Trinité, entre le 7 décembre 1975 et le 20 juin 1976*, BnF, FM, RES VMC MS-178, NP.

Beyond the two that directly reference plainchant, these texts do not reveal anything of the musical content of the improvisations, so the rapport between text and music remains unclear. That said, the fact that he identified textual inspiration validates an approach to the recorded improvisations available that attempts to associate them with theological and narrative ideas inspired by readings from scripture. The biblical texts are all drawn from the lectionary of the day, though it is notable that they constitute the Old Testament and Epistle readings, never the Gospel. This implies that even if his improvisation may have covered the function of a gradual, played between the Epistle and the Gospel, it was conceived as a response to the former rather than an introduction to the latter. The texts often seem to be paraphrases, if not misquotations, of the biblical text.

That the readings follow the lectionary constrains over-interpretation of the choices, but there are a handful of texts in the list which notably relate to the libretto of Messiaen's opera *Saint François d'Assise*, which he was working on at the time.³⁷ The reference on 15 February to the leper shouting 'impure' according to Leviticus 13, for example, may have simply been the most striking image from the reading, but also seems relevant to St Francis's relationship to the leper in the opera. On the 18 January he had improvised on the words of the young prophet Samuel 'Speak Lord, your servant is listening', and the same quotation is put into the mouth of St Francis himself after he receives the stigmata in the opera.³⁸ The quotation from 1 John 3.20 on 16 May is particularly striking: 'Our heart accuses us, but God is greater than our hearts'. Both in these notes and in the opera, where it forms the basis for the words of the angel to the leper, Messiaen uses the conjunction 'but' (*mais*) where most biblical texts have 'for' (*car*).³⁹ The latter only really makes sense in the context of the

³⁷ Hill & Simeone, *Messiaen*, p. 311, confirm that the finishing touches to the libretto were made in early June 1976.

³⁸ Messiaen, *Saint François*, p.47.

³⁹ Messiaen, *Saint François*, p.18.

preceding verse, so the alteration may simply function to make the phrase a self-contained whole, but one wonders whether the opera libretto may have been in his mind as he jotted down a prompt from memory.

At Masses other than the midday *Messe des fous* Messiaen was generally obliged to perform his functions in a more restrained style, and to play repertoire. Although the focus of this thesis is on improvisation, any account of Messiaen's practice as a liturgical organist must also, therefore, consider what repertoire he played, and how he approached that. Of this, direct records do not seem to have been kept in a systematic way, but there is a document listing repertoire to be played at Masses during the 1930s, which might be taken as indicative of his range during that early period; a list of works included in that document is provided at Appendix 3. This document confirms that he did play his own works of the time, especially *La Nativité du Seigneur*, though this was relatively rare. The works list is dominated by Bach, though the French tradition is also well represented: Boëlmann, Daquin,⁴⁰ Dupré, Franck, de Grigny, Tournemire, and Widor are all represented, as is Messiaen's wife Claire Delbos, and his friend and contemporary Jean Langlais.⁴¹ Madame Messiaen also appears on the list as soloist playing violin repertoire during a number of services.⁴²

Although Messiaen will have had to play repertoire in a technically correct way to obtain his conservatoire prize from the organ class, it is possible that on at least some occasions he took more liberties in interpretation of repertoire during services. The recollection of American organist Ann Labounsky, in her biography of Langlais, reveals:

⁴⁰ Messiaen consistently uses the variant spelling d'Aquin; it is unclear whether this is simply a faithful reproduction of the edition he used or a consciously affected tribute to St Thomas.

⁴¹ Olivier Messiaen, *Notes pour la compositions des offices à la Trinité*, BnF, FM, RES VMB MS-128. Another list of works known to have been played by Messiaen during services is given by Shuster Fournier, *Siècle de vie musicale à la Trinité*, pp.171–195.

⁴² Full details of Claire Delbos's compositions performed by Messiaen, and her violin playing at Mass are tabulated by Nicholas Capozzoli, *Messiaen's Forgotten Mie: Rediscovering the Organ Music of Claire Delbos*, DMus Dissertation, McGill University (2020) pp.114–16.

On at least one occasion, hearing Messiaen at La Trinité was initially puzzling. The door to the organ loft was locked, and the music suggested a novice substitute. The sacristan confirmed that Messiaen was indeed playing. The music during the communion sounded vaguely familiar and was extremely slow and soft, as if time were suspended. Eventually the piece became recognizable: it was Bach's *Schmücke dich*, but the distortion in tempo made it difficult to identify... Messiaen held to his mystical ideals by playing Bach in the same tempo as his *Banquet céleste*.⁴³

Messiaen seems to have made similarly individual interpretations of more recent repertoire, as witnessed by an anecdote in which Langlais observed that he had heard his own work, 'Rameaux' (from *Poèmes Evangéliques*):

My work is marked allegro, legato, with full organ, and a deep bass. But Messiaen played in an extremely slow tempo, with the manual part entirely staccato: on the other hand, he had registered very few stops in the pedal, one practically could not hear the Gregorian theme.⁴⁴

It does not follow that these individual experiences can be generalised into a pattern, but they do at least suggest the possibility that Messiaen's performance of pieces from the repertoire was led by his sensibility as much as by the conventions of received practice and expectations.

This section has concerned the range of activities which fell within his duties, and the fact that these also changed a number of times. Such changes occurred at several points, as might have been expected in such an extended period of continuous service, but provide a corrective to the simple assumption that the summary Messiaen gave at one particular point in time is all that need be cited on the subject. The next section goes through various accounts of Messiaen's liturgical improvisations and demonstrates some of the ways in which it changed over time and was subject to various pressures from other parties.

⁴³ Ann Labounsky, *Jean Langlais: The Man and his Music* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 2000) p.175.

⁴⁴ Marie-Louise Jaquet-Langlais, *Ombre et Lumière: Jean Langlais 1907–1991* (Paris: Editions Combre, 1995) p.102.

2.4 Accounts of Messiaen improvising

Evidence of the earliest practice Messiaen adopted in a liturgical setting may be found in the criticism relayed by the *Curé* of Ste Trinité when Messiaen was still a candidate for the post:

Finally, the deputising you have done at the Trinité during M. Quef's illness has not won over the general congregation. You are one of the leading representatives of a young school which likes dissonances and which some consider to be too noisy. Note that in saying this I am not passing judgement on one style or another, but giving you the spontaneous reaction of those who like music and who, without knowing who is playing the instrument, have been in a state of revolt.⁴⁵

Recalling the observation above that aspects of the power dynamics inherent to the relationships involved in this exchange are of interest, it is worth noting here that *Curé* Hemmer distances himself from the criticism, ascribing it to certain unnamed others. It is tempting to speculate, at least, that among them might have been Nadia Boulanger, known to have been a parishioner of Ste Trinité, to have had strong opinions on music, and to have had an uneasy relationship with Messiaen.⁴⁶ There is, however, no firm evidence of the identity of any particular objector, nor reason to suppose that any one individual voice dominated at all. Messiaen himself responded to this criticism by renouncing the ways of his younger self and claiming the maturity of a couple of additional years to guide his approach:

When I was deputising at the Trinité, I know that I sometimes exhibited tendencies which were a little too modern, and I regret that now. I was only twenty years old when I deputised for the first time; I am now twenty-two-and-a-half, and at this time of life one evolves very quickly. My current view is that music should always search for the new, but in works for chamber ensembles or orchestra, where the imagination can run free. For the organ, especially the organ in church, what matters above all is the liturgy. The environment and the instrument are not well suited to modern music and it is important not to disturb the piety of the faithful by using chords which are too anarchic. ... But I can also be well-behaved and classical in style. I will adopt this and thus both you and the parishioners will be satisfied. Besides, ... I completely share your opinion about the calmness and moderation which is required in a church service (musically speaking).⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Simeone, "Chez Messiaen, tout est prière", p.41.

⁴⁶ Nigel Simeone, 'Offrandes oubliées 2' *The Musical Times*, Vol 142, No. 1874 (Spring 2001) p.17.

⁴⁷ Simeone, "Chez Messiaen, tout est prière", p.42.

Messiaen's biographer Christopher Dingle suggests Messiaen may not have been being entirely honest in this answer:

Whether or not he felt obliged to visit the confessional after sending his letter to the curate, it is hard to think of a phrase more apposite than 'wildly anarchic chords' to describe the extraordinary sounds emanating from the Trinité organ twenty years later.⁴⁸

The anarchic chords of twenty years later are witnessed by the compositions for organ that Messiaen published in the early fifties: the *Messe de la Pentecôte* and the *Livre d'Orgue*, the former of which is discussed in more detail in chapter five, and by certain contemporary accounts, including a note in Aaron Copland's diary in 1949:

Visited Messiaen in the organ loft at the Trinité. Heard him improvise at noon. Everything from the Devil in the bass, to Radio City Music Hall harmonies in the treble. Why the church allows it during service is a mystery.⁴⁹

Similarly, the diary of Julien Green for the same year suggests an improvisation that was startling and disturbing:

Heard an improvisation by Messiaen. Music which one could say was composed after the end of the worlds. It is of monstrous beauty, opening up immense caverns where rivers flow... Never have the vaults of this hideous edifice heard more disturbing sounds. Occasionally I had the impression that hell was opening, suddenly gaping wide.⁵⁰

Green's comment reveals more theological acuity in relating the music to Christian eschatology (which, as discussed in chapter four, plays a significant part in the theological understanding of liturgy), than is seen in Copland's assumption that the church ought to require a particular style based on nothing more than conservatism. Some caution is in order, however; as noted above the post-war period was when the midday mass was instituted, and

⁴⁸ Dingle, *Life*, p.42.

⁴⁹ Diary of Aaron Copland reproduced in Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise* (London: Fourth Estate, 2008), p.446.

⁵⁰ Hill & Simeone, *Messiaen*, p.185.

it is to be assumed that in the other two masses each Sunday Messiaen continued to offer music of a more restrained style.

Shortly after mobilisation, in early 1940, he described playing certain organs in northern France in a way which reveals something of the frustration he still felt about the restriction his parish role placed on his expression:

Finally I was allowed – and even asked – to play the organ... on some Sundays. Here, I have found abandoned instruments, riddled with ciphers. However among all of them, two at least were very good. One, a Cavaillé-Coll, is equipped with lovely 8-foot foundation stops and powerful reeds. I played a few pieces by heart... The other organ was modern, with lots of gentle mixtures. I treated myself to numerous improvisations, in an avant-garde style, with one solo for the 16-foot Bourdon and the Tierce on a harmonic scheme which would have frightened Schoenberg himself! Here's a curious thing: unlike the pious Parisian ladies, the soldiers were not shocked by these surprising sonorities!⁵¹

Early in his appointment Messiaen had written a letter in which he complained that 'the wine of my dissonances has become very bitter (for those who are not used to it), and I am obliged to add much water; you will find me well behaved and classical, alas!'⁵² Notwithstanding the later introduction of the *Messe des fous*, Langlais, the recipient of that letter, continued to observe that 'if you are familiar with Messiaen's work and then go to the *Trinité* and listen to his improvisations you will not recognise him as the same musician'.⁵³

This again highlights the inescapable fact that the practice described in these texts is not homogeneous; it is not necessary to conclude that either type of description – one that emphasises Messiaen's distinctiveness or one that highlights restraint – is incorrect. It is more likely that some occasions were more accommodating to one style and others to another. It seems likely that this varied not only between different services on any given Sunday in which the expectations agreed with the parish differed, but across the different Sundays of the

⁵¹ Hill & Simeone, *Messiaen*, p.91.

⁵² Labounsky, *Langlais*, p.175.

⁵³ Bailey, *Improvisation*, pp.37.

liturgical year, and also that his practice developed over time. That being the case, it is possible that Langlais's later description of Messiaen's improvisations as not being recognisable as the same musician as the composer is not entirely reliable: himself organist of Ste Clotilde from 1945, Langlais's own duties will have prevented him frequently being present to hear Messiaen executing this role, and he may have presumed that the approach of the earliest period of Messiaen's appointment continued in a way less complicated than the likely truth.

Langlais also, having initially sought to contribute to the development of music suitable for the revised liturgy after the Second Vatican Council, felt strongly that his musical expertise was dismissed and undermined by the ecclesiastical authorities and therefore, by the time he was speaking to Bailey in the 1970s might have had an ulterior motive to portray clergy as limiting the natural expression of a musician who he felt should have greater honour. Messiaen himself typically spoke only in positive terms about his relationship with the clergy: 'I have had five successive *curés* here, and they have all been kind to me'.⁵⁴ This raises again consideration of the dimension of such relationships that concern different power-bases within a church community. It was noted above that the parish of Ste Trinité has an interest in curating the understanding of Messiaen's liturgical service as humble and simple. A similar line is taken by *Père Kars*, who presents the faithful Messiaen as having been firmly rooted in this service:

Messiaen was the organist at the church of the *Trinité* for sixty-one years, in the organ loft which he had made, in a way, his 'residence'; a place where he was rooted spiritually and musically, a place of inspiration and searching, of work and of contemplation, where he felt, in his own words, like a '*paroissien lié à l'office*' (a parishioner bound to the service) and where he felt he was at one with the liturgy.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Olivier Glandaz, *Messiaen à l'Orgue* (Péronnas: Klincksieck, 2014), p.13.

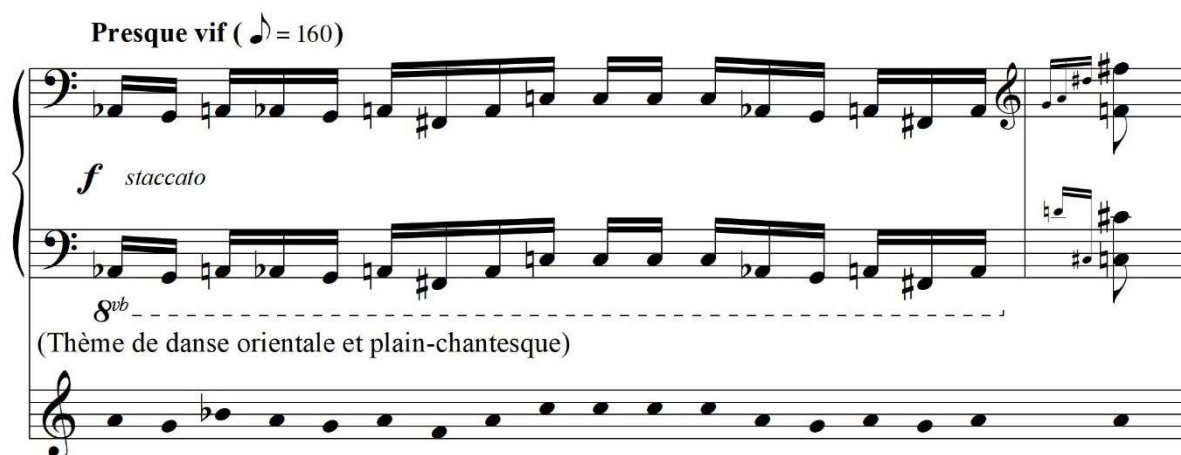
⁵⁵ Kars, 'Messiaen and Liturgy', p.325.

Père Kars is among those who wished to curate Messiaen's reputation as a faithful son of the church, despite the sense among certain others that his musical innovations were somewhat in tension with his faithfulness. Another such person was his widow, Yvonne Loriod, who wrote shortly after his death in response to questions from a pianist about a liturgical use of Messiaen's *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jésus* that:

He was very scrupulous when he improvised at his organ in the *Trinité* and would never have played the plainchant for Easter on Christmas Day! He was always inspired by the texts of the feast of the day.⁵⁶

This validates the assumption when approaching his recorded improvisations that a quotation from plainchant can serve to indicate the occasion on which it was made; that said, referencing across occasions can also be a way to add meaning to a commentary and cannot be excluded. There is, indeed, a certain irony in that this claim is made in relation to the *Vingt Regards*, a work linked to the Christmas story in which the most identifiable use of plainchant is the adaptation of the Easter gradual *Haec dies* as an 'oriental and plainchant-esque dance theme' in the tenth movement (example 2.1).

⁵⁶ Private letter Yvonne Loriod to Dr Edward Forman, 21 September 1992. This letter is now in the present writer's possession; another excerpt from the same letter is published by the original recipient in Edward Forman, 'L'Harmonie de l'Univers': Maurice Toesca and the genesis of *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*, in Christopher Dingle and Nigel Simeone (eds), *Olivier Messiaen: Music, Art and Literature* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007), p.21.



Example 2.1. Olivier Messiaen, *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*, 'X. Regard de l'Esprit de joie', bb.1–2, (upper two staves) compared with Gradual *Haec Dies* (lower staff).

Messiaen himself also claimed that:

I always play according to the liturgy. I adapt my music according to the different stages of the liturgical year... The whole period before the resurrection... I don't use the full organ nor light colours, I reserve them to acclaim the Resurrection.⁵⁷

Although apparently similar, his focus on colour and seasonality suggests a subtly different claim to the relatively simple focus on using the plainchant of the day: there are more dimensions in his conception of liturgical propriety than only the use of given musical materials. In similar fashion, he was happy to talk about theatrical and surprising elements as native to his conception of liturgical music:

I also manage to create [theatrical] scenes when I improvise. Some of my registrations are intended to be supernatural... When I express my faith with my organ, I create sounds that bring out symbols and allegories.⁵⁸

He also spoke in terms of enjoyment about complexes of sounds and surprising timbres:

⁵⁷ Glandaz, *Messiaen à l'Orgue*, p.36.

⁵⁸ Glandaz, *Messiaen à l'Orgue*, p.25.

When I develop my improvisation, I like to play with complexes of sounds, thus with the association of timbres that I invent in the very moment, and also with the acoustic.⁵⁹

If the former of these two quotations is a religious claim about allegorical meaning imposed on his improvisations, the second reads more as the thoughts of the musician appreciating his sound material. The two are not in any sense in opposition to each other, of course: there is no contradiction between finding pleasure in something and using it to convey religious themes. Nevertheless, this provides another example of the way in which different accounts can emphasise alternative aspects of the same activity in ways which alter the impression given of the whole.

The religious aspect also creates an opportunity for expressions of piety which, while one would never wish to make any accusation of insincerity, might be read as saying more about a person's posture towards the church rather than a real statement about the music. Messiaen's sacramental piety is not to be denied, but it is not clear what is added to musical descriptions by a claim that his improvisations were better in liturgical than concert settings. In one such case there is perhaps an ulterior motive – the context is a letter in which he declines a request for such a concert improvisation:

I went occasionally to hear the improvisations of Charles Tournemire... When Tournemire improvised in a concert, it was good. But the improvisations were much more beautiful during Masses at Sainte Clotilde, when he had the Blessed Sacrament in front of him. I think I resemble him somewhat in this respect. I improvise much better during a service, on my organ at the Trinité. In a concert my gifts desert me.⁶⁰

He made a similar observation of a set of improvisations which were broadcast on television, comparing that occasion unfavourably with his liturgical offerings:

It's not just because Mass is in the morning, and I'm more rested and have a clearer mind than in evening concerts. It is first and above all because during the service, I participate in the mystery that is taking place, that of

⁵⁹ Glandaz, *Messiaen à l'Orgue*, p.28.

⁶⁰ Simeone, «*Bien Cher Félix...*», p.51.

transubstantiation. There is the Blessed Sacrament present there while I improvise, and I know that under these conditions what I am doing is better.⁶¹

These observations do not reveal much of the musical content of the improvisations, but certainly inform the way we understand Messiaen's thinking about the cultural and theological contribution of musical responses to Catholic liturgy. The undeniably eucharistic focus of these quotations raises the question of whether the same sorts of considerations apply to non-sacramental offices. Of these the one he mentioned most frequently, and which is contained within the regular pattern of services he described, is Sunday Vespers. His comments to Almut Rößler in 1983 reveal both his affection for this service, and that it was among the services for which he no longer regularly played at that time:

Then there was still that wonderful institution, which has since been done away with, the Vespers at 5 p.m. That was glorious; before the psalm in the Vespers, there was a Gregorian antiphon, which was to be repeated after the psalm. Then the custom was established that, instead of this repetition, the organist would improvise. So I improvised on the melody and the Latin text, trying to reproduce the colour of the psalm which had just been sung. For example, the organ played in a very dark colour by a "*de profundis*", but in a very bright one by a *Halleluja*). ... These Vespers... had afforded me one of my greatest joys – improvising on Gregorian themes.⁶²

This seems to suggest a continuity of approach between eucharistic and non-eucharistic liturgy, at least in terms of Messiaen's musical response to the texts surrounding his improvisation. Although there is a theological difference between sacramental liturgy and the daily office, there are further hints that Messiaen did not find this distinction useful in his approach to liturgical music; first, the occasions when Loriod's transcriptions of his diaries mention Vespers in later years (most often at Christmas, confirming again that it was no longer part of the weekly pattern) it is frequently paired with Benediction – the devotion in which the consecrated Host is displayed outside the eucharistic service as a focus for prayer –

⁶¹ Massin, *Messiaen*, p.66.

⁶² Rößler, *Contributions*, p.138.

and therefore the Sacrament impinges into the office. Additionally, describing the origin of his *Messe de la Pentecôte* (which is discussed in more detail in section 5.1.1) he used terms which suggest that musical inspiration from Vespers as well as from Mass informed that project:

Becoming organist... my service required of me short improvisations on texts from plainchant, especially versets on the Vespers antiphons... In 1945 the creation of a midday Mass and permission to have exclusively modern music heard, gave me the opportunity of long organ recitals, in which I played the works of my contemporaries, my own works, or finally I improvised, to make a better fit with the great divisions of the Holy Sacrifice...⁶³

Even within the eucharistic service, Messiaen's comments tend to relate more to the ministry of the Word than to the Sacrament, possibly because he aimed to comment musically on what was particular to the occasion (referred to by liturgists as 'proper') rather than on what is the same each week (the 'ordinary'). This is not, of course, to suggest a rigorous distinction between the two – the ministry of the Word is an integral part of the eucharistic service – but it further contextualises the emphasis he projected elsewhere on the Sacrament as the central inspiration. His own description of what he learned from preachers may be light-hearted, but is nevertheless revealing:

I even have to say that I learned to play well by listening to the preachers. When a preacher made an incomprehensible brouhaha I said to myself: that's not how I should play. But when he made large pauses, and when I could hear very well, I told myself I should benefit from it, I'm also going to give large pauses.⁶⁴

Rößler's description of a Mass she attended on 28 April 1974 suggests that by that stage in his career preachers were conversely willing to learn from Messiaen:

The text of the sermon related to the readings and, above all, the preacher referred to Messiaen's improvisations, saying that this or that interpretation of the text had already been aptly given by Messiaen in his organ commentary. After the service as we met under the organ gallery, in place of

⁶³ Messiaen, *Traité IV*, p.83.

⁶⁴ Glandaz, *Messiaen à l'Orgue*, p.18.

a greeting, Messiaen immediately asked: *Did you hear what the priest said in his sermon? That's one of the greatest joys in my life: my music is no longer classified as bewildering, even as demoniac; instead I'm recognised as a co-messenger of the Word...*⁶⁵

It is not clear which of the Sunday Masses is described here, but it does seem likely that at this point the power dynamic between clergy and organist has swung quite a way towards the latter. Arguably, by this time the chance to hear Messiaen play was at least as much a draw to visiting worshippers as was the Holy Sacrifice, and the clergy would therefore be playing to the gallery by explicitly recognising and valuing the contribution made by their famous organist. Even in a low Mass preceded by an improvisation, Monsignor Wadsworth was struck by a level of courtesy not often accorded to less powerful personalities:

I presented myself in the church at the appointed hour and the Mass was preceded... by a magisterial improvisation on a plainsong motif (*Veni Creator*). The hour for the Mass arrived, the bell sounded, the celebrant emerged from the sacristy and processed to the altar... The Improvisation was still in progress, it had not reached its conclusion... The celebrant patiently waited at the altar, for some minutes, until the improvisation calmly and perfectly reached its conclusion.⁶⁶

As seen above, the identification of a plainchant motif is the only real hint as to the musical content of the improvisation concerned, and therefore the anecdote reveals more of the cultural and interpersonal aspects of the practice. Messiaen confirms that his intention in treating a plainchant motif was both to develop the melody and to comment on the text, though his remarks elsewhere on colour and timbre probably reveal more about the actual sound produced:

Sometimes I play even more modern composers and also play my own music, but it's rare, I mostly improvise ... at high Mass, we never sing the gradual anymore and it's me who replaces it: I take the theme of the gradual

⁶⁵ Rößler, *Contributions*, p.137.

⁶⁶ Monsignor Andrew R Wadsworth, 'The Organ as Liturgical Commentator – Some Thoughts, Magisterial and Otherwise', in Jennifer Donelson and Stephen Schloesser (eds.), *Mystic Modern: The Music, Thought, and Legacy of Charles Tournemire* (Richmond: CMAA, 2014), p.5.

of the day, I improvise on it, drawing inspiration not only from the melodic line of the neumes, but also from the Latin text, and what the text means.⁶⁷

Speaking to Claude Samuel about his earlier improvisations he hinted at both pastiche classicism when constrained to it, and also his own harmonic and rhythmic style when inspiration and circumstance allowed it:

It was sometimes very classical in character when circumstances constrained me; thus I played pastiche voluntaries, pseudo-Bach, pseudo-Mozart, pseudo-Schumann, pseudo-Debussy, to continue in the same key and the same style as the piece previously sung, but I nevertheless did improvise in my own style, dwelling in my old harmonic and rhythmic 'grease'; sometimes I was lucky, I had strokes of inspiration...⁶⁸

In this section the relationship between organist and clergy is mentioned a number of times, often expressed in terms of a tension between the two. Another power-base within the Parish deserves further attention, and that is the congregation. The vast majority of the accounts of Messiaen improvising that have been published are from people for whom the music was the main focus; this is unsurprising as that is what led the accounts to be committed to writing, but it leaves space for a largely 'silent' majority of people who heard this practice on a regular basis without making special note of the fact. The *curé's* concerns about Messiaen's appointment referred to members of the congregation as having not been won over by his style, but aside from that most of their voices are not accessible. The anecdote given by the president of the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* in his preface to the book accompanying an exhibition on the composer suggests that Messiaen, as well as the clergy, had a concern for their satisfaction, though it could be read as perhaps a bit paternalistic:

I will never forget that Christmas Mass when, after having summoned up a forest of birds to speak of the joy of the Nativity in a dazzling series of improvised variations, he returned quite simply to the Noël of Daquin. 'This is what the faithful are waiting for, they must be given their joy', he said

⁶⁷ Glandaz, *Messiaen à l'Orgue*, p.14.

⁶⁸ Samuel, *Permanences*, p.31.

with a warm smile, mostly surprised that so many should have listened to the Noël of Messiaen.⁶⁹

Arguably, Christmas is a time when nostalgia is prevalent, at which particular favourites are hoped for by congregants more than at other seasons. Elsewhere, however, Messiaen, could appear equally condescending: having been asked whether the clergy weren't afraid by his audacious music, he explained that the clergy understood his intentions, but that 'the parishioners were [afraid], because they still don't know the texts...'⁷⁰ It seems likely that this was a generalisation, and that there was a variety of views within the congregation, but such a response suggests at least some residual frustration with some of the opinions voiced.⁷¹

From these various accounts and recollections of Messiaen's practice as liturgical improviser, we can generalise a tantalising impression of the effect his improvisations might have had on his listeners, albeit that alternative sources are necessary to add specificity with regard to how they actually sounded: to that end the following section considers the evidence available from sketches and notes Messiaen made for his improvisations, and the next chapter analyses recordings of his improvisations.

2.5 Messiaen's notes and prompts for improvisations

The general limitation of the evidence considered so far in this chapter is that words about music cannot give satisfying specificity to the musical sounds themselves. The next chapter turns to the recordings in which some of those sounds are directly preserved. Before turning to that there is a further category of documentary evidence that must be considered, and that reveals some additional musical details. That category is the notes and sketches that Messiaen

⁶⁹ Jean Favier, 'Préface' to *Portraits d'Olivier Messiaen* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 1996), p.5.

⁷⁰ Samuel, *Permanences*, p.31.

⁷¹ Further evidence of some tension between organist and congregation may be added by an anecdote recounted by Yvonne Loriod, in which the loud and dissonant chords which end the *Livre du Saint Sacrement* were prefigured by a gesture recalling the congregation to attention when conversation risked overwhelming a *sortie*. Retold by Bauer, *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, p.275.

made for his improvisations; another of his own general descriptions of his practice reveals the existence of such notes, as well as confirming that his approach to improvisation was free from formal constraints:

Improvisation is something very difficult and I take my work very seriously. I come here with a few notes of birdsongs, some annotations of rhythms in order to construct better. I don't have the slightest idea what I'm going to play three seconds before. My notes allow me to visualise some benchmarks. But I can also improvise without my notes. Improvising is extremely tiring. It is not an art to be practised lightly. I have the weakness to believe that I am a good improviser. I avoid improvising according to strict scholastic or academic rules, I have my own language.⁷²

Many of these notes might not have been retained after use, and of those that remain extant not all are accessible: much in the *Fonds Messiaen* is still to be catalogued and access remains restricted for conservation reasons. The notes that are accessible are mostly those associated with the *Messe de la Pentecôte*, and therefore relate to a relatively specific time-period. The file in which most of the sketches considered here are found is marked as having been constituted of documents of different provenances, so they might not all directly relate to the *Messe*, but are believed to be dated around 1949–50.

In fact, some of the examples seem to relate to earlier works and although they do often pertain to organ improvisations it is not necessarily the case that they relate directly to Messiaen's liturgical improvisation. There are at least two examples where a theme is given and associated with a different organist; they are in Messiaen's hand, so it might be surmised that he provided themes for these others to improvise on. The first is labelled as an improvisation theme for Marchal.⁷³ The theme, undated, is a transposed and harmonised

⁷² Glandaz, *Messiaen à l'Orgue*, p.26.

⁷³ Olivier Messiaen, *Notes et esquisses pour la Messe de la Pentecôte et improvisations à l'orgue de la Trinité [ca 1949–1950] formats divers*, BnF, FM, RES VMA MS-1493 p.11. André Marchal (1894–1980) was organist of St-Germain-des-Prés until 1945 and thereafter of Saint-Eustache, and taught organ at the *Institut national des Jeunes Aveugles* where he taught a number of Messiaen's friends, including Jean Langlais and Gaston Litaize.

version of the third of the themes of ‘Dieu Parmi Nous’ the final movement of *La Nativité du Seigneur*.⁷⁴ (Compare examples 2.2 and 2.3)



Example 2.2. Olivier Messiaen, Improvisation Theme for Marchal.



Example 2.3. Olivier Messiaen, *La Nativité du Seigneur*, ‘IX. Dieu Parmi Nous’, bar 8.

Without a date we cannot be certain whether this was an earlier improvisation used by Messiaen in the composition, or a conscious reference to his work in an improvisation theme set later. The second example in which the stated improviser is not Messiaen himself are two themes for an improvised symphony by Marcel Dupré,⁷⁵ the second of which has a contour recognisably similar to some of the thematic material used in the ‘Offertoire’ of the *Messe de la Pentecôte*.⁷⁶ (c.f. examples 2.4 and 2.5) A similar idea occurs in several other works by

⁷⁴ Olivier Messiaen, *La Nativité de Seigneur* (Paris: Leduc, 1936) vol 4, p.1.

⁷⁵ Messiaen, *Notes et esquisses*, BnF, FM, RES VMA MS-1493 p.13.

⁷⁶ Olivier Messiaen, *Messe de la Pentecôte* (Paris: Leduc, 1951) p. 4.

Messiaen, including roughly contemporary *Cantéyodjayâ* (1949) – in which it is subject to an additional rhythmic treatment of progressive augmentation (example 2.6) – and in the organ improvisations which he based on his mother’s poetry cycle *L’Âme en bourgeon* (see section 3.1, below).

Lent, expressif (harmonies obligées au départ)
hautbois

f

bourdon 8

p

Bien modéré (ne pas harmonise au départ)

mf

quintaton 16, cor de nuit, tierce

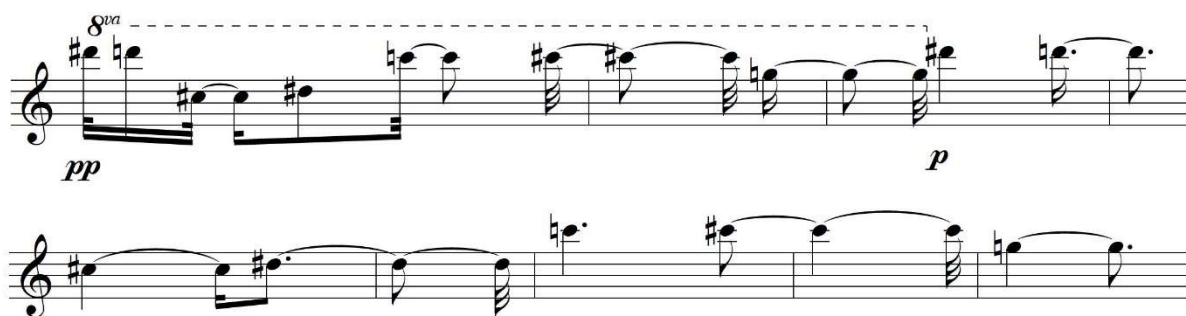
Example 2.4. Olivier Messiaen, Themes for an improvised Symphony for Marcel Dupré.

Modéré

Pos.

mf legato

Example 2.5. Olivier Messiaen, *Messe de la Pentecôte*, ‘Offertoire (Les choses visibles et invisibles)’, bb.11–14.



Example 2.6. Olivier Messiaen, *Cantéyodjayâ*, right hand, bb. 140–48.

Elsewhere in the same file are notes for improvisations and versets which contain only brief comments about registrations, supporting Thomas Lacôte's suggestion that timbre was the unifying element in the improvisations which gave rise to the *Messe*.⁷⁷ It is also notable that even brief thematic material set down in note form is consistently associated with specific registrations, suggesting that timbre is inherent to the conception of the idea, and not a secondary consideration to melodic or harmonic material. It has been suggested that this sort of timbral conception, at least since Berlioz, is one of the characteristics of a distinctively French aesthetic.⁷⁸ Other musical elements are diverse; those that most directly relate to the *Messe* are discussed in chapter five, in which the use of improvised material in Messiaen's worked out compositions is the focus. In the current chapter, the range of ideas and extent of planning that Messiaen put into the improvisations themselves are to be established.

One element that might be expected but is not much evidenced in the sketches considered is birdsong. Messiaen's interest in birds was already evident by this stage in his career, though it was not until later in the decade that he began rigorously to treat specific birdsongs. In the file under consideration only one short idea, in a collection of ideas for

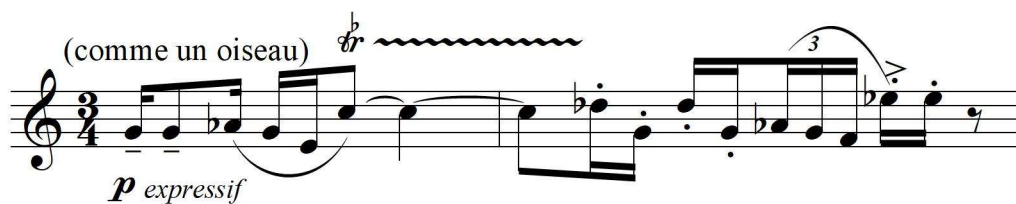
⁷⁷ Thomas Lacôte, 'La forge de la Trinité : matériaux et timbres dans l'œuvre d'orgue d'Olivier Messiaen', Communication au Colloque « Olivier Messiaen, La force d'un message », Académie Royale de Bruxelles, mai 2012.

⁷⁸ Caroline Potter, 'French Musical Style and the Post-War Generation' in Richard Langham Smith and Caroline Potter (eds.), *French Music since Berlioz* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2006), p.353.

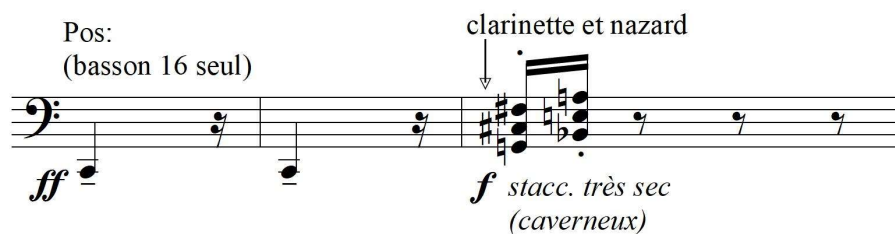
versets, is clearly related to birdsong (example 2.7).⁷⁹ The short solo line recalls the clarinet part at the opening of the *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* (example 2.8), which is usually understood to represent a blackbird. In the middle of the fast and disjunct monody to be played on a bourdon, a two-chord interjection on the *positif* registered with clarinette and nazard – a combination that occurs several times in the file – provides the element that is reused in the *Messe* (example 2.9).



Example 2.7. Olivier Messiaen, *Verset* sketch featuring birdsong.



Example 2.8. Olivier Messiaen, *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*, 'Liturgie de cristal', clarinet, bb.1–2.



Example 2.9. Olivier Messiaen, *Messe de la Pentecôte*, 'Offertoire (Les choses visibles et invisibles)', bb.99–101.

⁷⁹ Messiaen, *Notes et esquisses*, BnF, FM, RES VMA MS-1493, p.5.

The relative paucity of birdsong in these notes need not be taken as an indication that Messiaen did not use birdsong-derived material in his improvisations at the time: the *Messe de la Pentecôte* itself suggests that he did. It may be that he had a lot of the relevant motifs in his memory, or perhaps that might have brought in with him the *cahiers* in which he notated birdsongs, retained in the archive as a separate item from the notes for improvisations.

If example 2.7 is almost entirely melodic, another example in the same file appears to be exclusively harmonic (Example 2.10).⁸⁰ That said, some caution is necessary as it appears on a different sheet in the file, this time not explicitly headed versets, and therefore may constitute notes or a sketch for another purpose. It shares the page with two relatively brief melodies which, unusually for the material in this folder are written to time signatures, but not registrations (Example 2.11). The absence of the registration indications which seem to be so important in other brief sketches is a further reason to suppose that this page might not be so directly related to organ improvisation.



Example 2.10. Olivier Messiaen, Harmonic sketch material.

⁸⁰ Messiaen, *Notes et esquisses*, BnF, FM, RES VMA MS-1493 p.9.



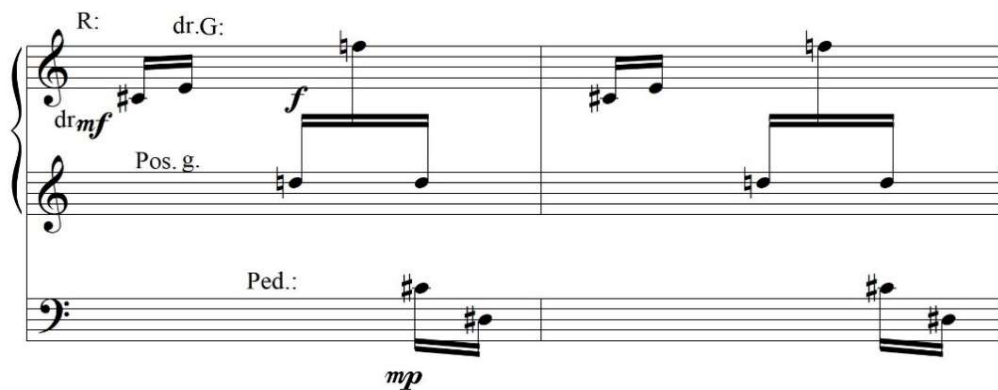
Example 2.11. Olivier Messiaen, Melodic sketch material.

Returning to the verset sketches, there are features which fit with what might be expected in terms of Messiaen's reimagining of organ timbres, as witnessed in his compositions. The pedal is often used in high registers, and contrasting textures across manuals give timbral variety in sparse textures. The first two examples in the file illustrate these observations:⁸¹ the first (example 2.12) presents a melodic fragment on the *recit* trumpet, accompanied by the great bourdon in the lowest part of the manual, while the pedal, registered by coupling to the *positif* flute, piccolo and tierce, without any native pedal stops, provides the response element to the trumpet's call. The second (example 2.13) uses all three manuals and the pedal independently, the right hand switching between great and *recit* in bursts of only one or two individual notes. Again, the registrations contrast, with the lowest sounding being the *positif* 16-foot Quintaton joined by a tierce; the great has a 4-foot flute and a quint, the *recit* sounds at pitch with a string timbre (gambe and voix celeste) and the pedal, using 4-foot flute, sounds an octave above its written pitch.

⁸¹ Messiaen, *Notes et esquisses*, BnF, FM, RES VMA MS-1493 p.3.



Example 2.12. Olivier Messiaen, Verset sketch.



Example 2.13. Olivier Messiaen, Verset sketch.

A further difficulty for using these sketches in an attempt to describe Messiaen's practice of liturgical improvisation is that they naturally represent ideas and prompts rather than instantiations. In other words, it is not necessarily demonstrable that he played what he had written, and even assuming that he did, development and extension of the initial idea are necessary elements of improvisation not revealed directly in the prompts themselves. Even a slightly more extended example leaves some of that development open. Example 2.14 is on a page headed 'improvisation at the *Trinité*' and extends beyond the short ideas for versets.⁸² It is possible, therefore, that this represents an example of Messiaen writing up after the event,

⁸² Messiaen, *Notes et esquisses*, BnF, FM, RES VMA MS-1493 p.16.

although planning in advance is not to be excluded. Two separate themes, labelled A and B are given, and B is followed by a note to reprise A ‘varied’.

R: bourdon 8 tremolo < pos: fl 4

The musical score is written for piano and flute. It consists of five systems. The first system shows the piano part with a tremolo (R) and the flute part with a pos (Pos) and a note (fl 4). The second system continues the piano part with a tremolo (R) and the flute part with a pos (Pos) and a note (fl 4). The third system shows the piano part with a tremolo (R) and the flute part with a pos (Pos) and a note (fl 4). The fourth system shows the piano part with a tremolo (R) and the flute part with a pos (Pos) and a note (fl 4). The fifth system shows the piano part with a tremolo (R) and the flute part with a pos (Pos) and a note (fl 4).

Example 2.14(a). Olivier Messiaen, Improvisation theme A.⁸³

⁸³ * *Sic.*

The musical score is divided into four systems. The first system features a piano part with a treble and bass staff, and a string part with a single staff. The piano part begins with a treble staff containing the text "Pos: quintaton 16 & cor de nuit" and a bass staff with a whole rest. The string part has a single staff with a whole rest. The second system continues the piano part with a treble staff and a bass staff, and the string part with a single staff. The third system features a piano part with a treble and bass staff, and a string part with a single staff. The piano part begins with a treble staff containing the text "pp legato" and a bass staff with a whole rest. The string part has a single staff with a whole rest. The fourth system continues the piano part with a treble staff and a bass staff, and the string part with a single staff. The piano part begins with a treble staff containing the text "etc." and a bass staff with a whole rest. The string part has a single staff with a whole rest.

Pos: quintaton 16 & cor de nuit

legato

mf

JS:

R:

pp legato

legato

mf

etc.

etc.

Example 2.14(b). Olivier Messiaen, Improvisation theme B.

Both these themes suggest continuation along the same lines, and if theme A is to be varied on repetition, that introduces another instance of development that is not documented. A handful of further brief ideas occupy the following page, but it is unclear whether they continue the same project or are separate ideas.

Another element to consider in relation to these prompts is the musical element with which Messiaen later in life most wanted to associate himself: rhythm. This was already a prominent part of his thinking in *Technique de mon langage musical*, and at about the same time that he was working on the *Messe* he was also working on *Quatre Études de rythme*. In fact, the archive contains another short file containing work he began on a set of *Études rythmiques pour orgue*, on which is a note in his handwriting to the effect that some material was worked into the *Messe de la Pentecôte*.⁸⁴ Further evidence that his thinking concerning what became the *Quatre Études de rythme* was also bound up with his experiments on the organ is a page of written notes on which he considers writing for organ a *Mode Synchronique* in which ‘all’ the elements of music are treated systematically: his list runs to fourteen elements: sound (pitch), register, intensity, attack, tempo (glossed as changes in tempo, *accelerandi* and *rallentandi*), ornament, timbre, resonance, quantity, movement, transmutations, superposition of modes, interversion and simultaneity.⁸⁵ Though the latter of these are already combinations of previous elements rather than stand-alone parameters, this represents, perhaps, a maximal form of the idea that became, in a slightly more restrained but very influential way ‘Mode de valeurs et d’intensités’ in the *Quatre Études de rythme* for piano.

The sketches retained in the file of material for versets and improvisations, however, do not on the face of it indicate many of his rhythmic techniques as having been part of his

⁸⁴ Olivier Messiaen, *Études rythmiques pour orgue* [1949], BnF, FM, RES VMC MS-1496.

⁸⁵ Messiaen, *Notes et esquisses*, BnF, FM, RES VMA MS-1493 p.49.

practice: although he does not often indicate a time signature, and his bars are not usually consistent in length, there are few examples of non-retrogradable rhythms – and those that there are tend to be shorter than examples from his compositions – augmentation by addition of a dot is not common, and although there are some noted experiments with rhythmic permutations these are in another part of the file and not specifically related to the improvisation sketches. It does not follow, however, that these ideas were not used in his development of the initial ideas found in the sketches; indeed, the fact that we know that rhythm was then, and remained, a preoccupation of his makes it more likely that he took the harmonic, timbral and melodic ideas that he had noted and used the opportunity of improvisation to experiment with developing them using these techniques. There is, inevitably, a certain amount of speculation inherent in such a supposition, but it is consistent with what is known about his approach to music more generally. Section 5.1.1 returns to this thought with a comparison between a further example of a verset sketch and the final composed form of the same element as it appears in the *Messe de la Pentecôte*.

In the next chapter these observations about Messiaen's practice of liturgical improvisation as witnessed by various forms of documentary evidence are given further substance by engaging the other category of evidence for the practice; the various recordings that exist of him improvising. It should be noted that the recordings date from later in his life than most of the sketches considered in the last section of this current chapter, which are mostly associated with the *Messe*. Given that, as demonstrated above, his practice encompassed variety over time as well as between occasions certain differences between the witnesses to different time periods are to be expected.

In this chapter, Messiaen's training in improvisation has been discussed, and the impression his ability left on his contemporaries at the conservatoire noted. His description of

a regular pattern of Sunday services has been given additional texture by recognising the changes over time even of this relatively basic formal element of his role. The words that both he and others used with reference to his practice of liturgical improvisation have been considered, with a level of conscious awareness that there are power dynamics in play with regard to the framing of these observations such that they cannot all be taken at face value. The caution applied nevertheless allows a picture to emerge of a practice in which he commented on the whole range of situations and emotions aroused by the readings of scripture and liturgical texts and the seasons within which the improvisations took place. That there were adverse reactions to his music is acknowledged, as is his own defence of the propriety of his music despite its deviation from what some might have expected. Finally, a selection of sketches that Messiaen used to plan his improvisations have been considered, albeit with an awareness that the available documents are not complete and pertain principally to one fairly short period out of the sixty years in which he fulfilled this function. These sketches have revealed a care for timbre and an experimental approach to registration and the use of the different divisions of the organ. They have shown that both melodic and harmonic elements had their place in Messiaen's approach to improvisations, but have demonstrated less in other areas that might have been expected, specifically rhythm and the use of birdsong. The cultural and theological force of Messiaen's liturgical practice has been considered in light of what he and others said about it, and some elements of the more specifically musical content of his improvisations have been suggested. The following chapter complements the latter by analysing recordings of Messiaen improvising.

3. Messiaen's improvisations recorded

If the difficulty to which most attention is given in the preceding chapter is the impossibility of knowing from documents how Messiaen actually made music at his organ, recordings of him doing so make available – albeit in still mediated form – precisely what he did, at least on certain occasions. The mediations of the recording medium and the curation by interested (and/or disinterested) parties who determined which improvisations are retained are considered in detail in section 3.2 along with the practical issues of method in relation to deriving information and framing knowledge from sources consisting of recorded music. The tension which informs much of the material in this chapter is the inverse of the previous: that these artefacts give us direct information on the musical content of Messiaen's improvisations, but little about the context or the cultural and theological significance of each specific instance. Some of this can be inferred, most frequently by considering the implications of quotations from plainchant, though even these provide only partial information suggestive of an occasion rather than determinative of a specific function.

This chapter will first establish what recordings are known to exist, and of these, which are available to the researcher. A number of these have been used in previous research, so some engagement with existing scholarship based on recordings of Messiaen improvising belongs to this first stage of clarifying the relevant sources. This being done, questions of method are considered in more detail, to set up the approaches taken in sections 3.3 and 3.4 to the recordings: section 3.3 introduces the set of recordings that form the bulk of the primary evidence with which this chapter engages. Section 3.4 considers the most notable elements of Messiaen's approach to improvisation as witnessed by these recordings. Read together, chapters two and three therefore combine the insights thus derived from the recordings with the impressions given by the written sources to give a general characterisation of Messiaen's practice as a liturgical improviser.

3.1 Existing and available recordings

During his lifetime Messiaen published two recordings of himself improvising at the organ. The first in 1977 formed part of his attempts to make his mother's poetry better known, and consists of an LP in which readings from her poetry cycle *L'Âme en bourgeon*, written to her unborn child while she was pregnant with the composer, are accompanied by soft improvisations.¹ The second dates from 1985 and consists of a video of three improvisations on the plainchant introit for Christmas Day, *Puer Natus*, introduced by short spoken extracts from the Christmas story which they illustrate.² Since the principal focus of this thesis is specifically liturgical improvisation, it should be noted that neither of these strictly occurs in the liturgical context; the latter is closer to it, since it takes inspiration both from plainchant and from scriptural *pericopae*, but still carries the self-consciousness of a concert improvisation rather than the devotion of a liturgical function.

Each of these has been subject to previous research, and it is worth considering this work before proceeding. The *L'Âme en bourgeon* LP is the subject of a doctoral project by Adrian Foster.³ In that project, he transcribed the improvisations and sought to recreate the event, with an actress reading the relevant poems and the researcher accompanying using his transcriptions. Foster was helped in that task by fairly extensive notes Messiaen had made in preparation for that event, meaning that he was able to use the improviser's own orthography in much of the transcription; although there was some development, he noted only a handful of deviations from the planned material in the final improvisations. Being able therefore to analyse the musical material in some detail Foster succeeds in demonstrating links between

¹ Olivier Messiaen, *L'Âme en bourgeon*, improvisations to poems by Cécile Sauvage read by Gisele Casadesus, rec. June 1977; Erato STU 71104.

² Olivier Messiaen, *Improvisation sur le theme Grégorien "Puer Natus Est,"* Paris, Sainte-Trinité, October 21, 1985; Image Entertainment ID5085GCDVD.

³ Adrian Foster, *From Recorded Sound to Musical Notation: Reconstructing Olivier Messiaen's Improvisations on L'Âme en bourgeon*, D.Mus Dissertation, McGill University (2017).

these improvisations and the *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, certain of Messiaen's theoretical ideas outlined in the *Traité*, and the programmes indicated by the poems. On the latter, however, he remains both brief and tentative: his most extended discussion of the signification of musical elements relative to poetry concerns a single theme, identified in Messiaen's notes for the improvisations as *thème de l'ombre* – and closely related to the theme discussed above as ex. 2.5 from the *Messe de la Pentecôte*. This theme Foster relates to the 'things invisible' illustrated in the 'Offertoire' of the *Messe*, and to the poem *Ai-je pu t'appeler de l'ombre* from the *L'Âme en bourgeon* cycle suggesting a level of intertextual possibility for mutually reinforcing interpretations.⁴ Given the weight of psychological association Messiaen had with these texts, it seems unlikely that this instance of intertextuality exhausts the interpretative possibilities for research on these improvisations.

In terms of the musical materials Foster identifies in the *L'Âme en bourgeon* improvisations, he discusses the modes of limited transposition, the 'turning' chords, the chord of the total chromatic and birdsong as expected elements in Messiaen's music, and adds to them a couple of ideas related to handshape on the keyboard. These he labels 'white and black key alternation' – often in trills, and also used in the *Livre du Saint Sacrement* (see below, section 3.4.9) – and 'geometric' patterns, essentially meaning symmetrical movements and similarly familiar from Messiaen's published works for both organ and piano. There is no surprise that all these elements should be represented, though it is useful that they are catalogued, and they tend to reinforce a sense of similarity between Messiaen's improvisations and his compositions. Foster's conclusion, indeed, is that 'the above examples have revealed how deeply Messiaen's composed and improvised vocabularies were intertwined'.⁵ Although this conclusion is broadly supported, there is not a significant

⁴ Foster, *Recorded Sound*, pp. 60–63.

⁵ Foster, *Recorded Sound*, p.65.

discussion of its inverse, the ways in which Messiaen's composed and improvised musics are dissimilar. In this respect, it is worth noting in particular that Foster's argument focusses on melodic and harmonic materials – the pitch elements – and he says little about rhythm. Given Messiaen's preoccupation with that parameter of music, it might be thought surprising that more is not said in this area, either to identify which rhythmic techniques discussed in Messiaen's writings are reflected in these improvisations, or to reflect on their absence. That said, as discussed below (section 3.2), the act of transcription involves a judgement when it comes to rhythm as to how to treat minor variations; it is entirely possible both that rhythm as felt and realised in a performance does not entail durational exactitude, and that the subsequent act of transcription further smooths over rhythmic complexity.

The DVD of improvisations on the Christmas theme is used in an article by Vincent Benitez entitled 'Messiaen as Improviser'.⁶ The major part of that article concerns some of the accounts considered above, as well as the undoubted influence on Messiaen of both Dupré and Tournemire. Most of the musical examples, however, are drawn from composed works, and there is a significant element of speculation in Benitez' suggestions that given gestures are 'improvisatory'. The final section of the article, however, does provide a detailed analysis of the first of the improvisations on the DVD, identifying thematic material derived from the plainchant, and tracing the tonal areas which are touched on. His discussion of tonal areas, despite an acknowledgement of the modality of the chant itself, raises further questions about the relationship for Messiaen between the modes of plainchant, the modes of limited transposition from his own particular vocabulary, and the tonal system (see below, section 3.4.8). It seems arguable that Messiaen used both modality and tonality in his improvisational language, but Benitez does not feel the need to interrogate that further. His analysis, while

⁶ Benitez, 'Messiaen as Improviser', 129–144.

fairly detailed, is limited in scope only to the shortest of the three improvisations in that one recording.

A handful of less official recordings also exist;⁷ there are recordings from a Stations of the Cross event held on 21 March 1989 in which Messiaen improvised on plainchant melodies for Holy Week.⁸ This consists of seven improvisations, each with a title taken from the narrative of the Easter story from Palm Sunday (Jesus accepts royalty) to Holy Saturday (at the tomb, in expectation). These add to the Christmas chants in the published video an opportunity to hear Messiaen's take on other familiar chants, such as *Ubi caritas* and *Pange lingua*, which may still be recognisable to audiences no longer exposed to the breadth of Gregorian material. A further, unauthorised and poor quality, recording exists of Messiaen improvising before Midnight Mass in 1991, thought to be one of the last times on which he played the organ.⁹

The *Fonds Messiaen*, held by the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* also contains a significant number of recorded improvisations. Some of these have been digitised and are therefore available to researchers; the project to digitise them is ongoing, and those not yet treated are restricted for reasons of conservation. They are catalogued along with recordings of birdsong and 'other recordings', the unit apparently containing 36 magnetic tape reels and 160 audio cassettes.¹⁰ Not all of these contain organ improvisations, and of those that do, not all are identified as having been made at Ste Trinité – indeed it is not always clear that

⁷ These are unofficial recordings held in private collections; I have been able to listen to them, and trust their provenance, but they are not publicly available.

⁸ The event is described in Hill & Simeone, *Messiaen*, p.372.

⁹ Loriod, *Transcription des agendas*, BnF, FM, RES VMB MS-122 p.862 confirms that he was still playing for services on 19 and 26 January 1992, so that Midnight Mass was not the absolute final time. The same document suggests, p.869, that he had also hoped to play on Maundy Thursday that year, only eleven days before his death, but that he had, reluctantly, agreed to a deputy.

¹⁰ BnF, FM, cote: DONAUD0501.

Messiaen himself is the one improvising in each case. Appendix 4 details the recordings that do appear to contain organ improvisations by Messiaen.

A range of occasions from which improvisations have been captured and retained are represented, though as is to be expected from the fact that recording technologies improved drastically over the course of the twentieth century, they reflect only the later part of Messiaen's life. The fact that the catalogue identifies some of the sound labelled as improvisations with works by other named composers also entails some caution in assuming that everything else labelled as improvisation is in fact that. It must be assumed possible, at least, that the recordings include other performances of composed works. The nature and status of these recordings is not always clear, but Messiaen did explain to Jean-Christophe Marti, with reference to the origins of his *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, that he was in the habit of listening back critically to his improvisations, which would have been recorded by his wife.¹¹ There is every reason to suppose that many of these recordings exist for that reason.

Deeper engagement with these archival recordings, though desirable, is beyond the scope of the current project given the constraints on access and the time available. There are some areas in which they could very fruitfully be interrogated, not only with respect to the musical language Messiaen used in these improvisations, but also in terms of how the music functioned within the religious services of which they formed a part. The fact that sermons are retained alongside improvisations, for example, suggests the possibility of making more concrete links between words, musics and occasions.

The final instance of Messiaen's improvisations having been recorded is a two-CD set released in 2001 by La Praye, entitled *Olivier Messiaen: Live: Improvisations inédites*.¹² These twenty-nine improvisations had been recorded by the organ builder Olivier Glandaz

¹¹ Marti, "It's a secret of Love", p.237.

¹² Messiaen, *Live: Improvisations inédites*.

between 1984 and 1987 during the course of services at Ste Trinité, and were released to mark the tenth anniversary of Messiaen's death. Unfortunately, they were withdrawn from sale, and are not widely available. It appears that the reason for this withdrawal concerns the fact that the music as presented is taken out of context, and Messiaen's estate was concerned to respect the fact that this music was precious to Messiaen as part of his religious service.¹³ The remainder of this chapter analyses the improvisations on these two discs; it is hoped that this is done in a way which respects the religious nature of the music, and might even help to elucidate to some extent the contexts from which the improvisations have been taken. That this has not been done previously is largely a result of the recordings not being widely available: although their existence has been known to Messiaen researchers, the longest commentary previously available is only a couple of short paragraphs towards the end of an essay by Michael Frith considering the ontological status of organ improvisations vis-à-vis written compositions.¹⁴

Frith notes a couple of points where similarities exist between the improvisations on these discs and the *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte-Trinité* and the *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, while also noting a general dissimilarity to many of Messiaen's composed works, and to the more dramatic descriptions of cavernous or anarchic sounds in the descriptions of Messiaen's practice from earlier in his career; both these observations are supportable. Before turning to consider the content of these improvisations it is necessary to consider some of the difficulties encountered in working on them.

¹³ Christopher Dingle, private communication.

¹⁴ Michael Frith, 'Donner l'illusion de la chose écrite: Reflections on recordings of organ improvisations' in Mine Doğanatan-Dack (ed.) *Recorded music: Philosophical and critical reflections* (London: Middlesex University Press, 2008) pp.131–3.

3.2 Methodology for engaging with recorded improvisations

The questions to consider concerning how best to engage with these recordings to answer the guiding research question about Messiaen's practice as liturgical improviser can be broadly divided into two parts. The first is how to render recorded music into a form that is amenable to being analysed; in this regard, transcription of the improvisations into score form is the simple answer, though there are significant practical difficulties entailed in doing so. The second set of questions concern what sorts of analysis will yield relevant information from the recordings, or from the transcriptions thereof; how are they best interrogated and what sorts of data can such analyses provide to address the governing questions?

The first interest in each case is to identify Messiaen's sources of musical material, whether it can be specified as an external prompt, such as a piece of plainchant, or simply as a short idea which may have functioned as a generative cell for the improvisation in question. Plainchant is an expected source of material, given the situation of these improvisation within Catholic liturgy, but Messiaen's general musical practice suggests we may also find elements derived from birdsong on the surface of his improvisations. Without excluding at this point the possibility that there may well be others, these two sources of material also illustrate a division between material that may be thought of as 'native' to the liturgy and that which Messiaen brought into it from outside the church. Both, however, were intensely meaningful for Messiaen, and may be used to suggest narrative or symbolic meanings that might be imputed to the improvised music. Any such reading will necessarily be tentative in so far as both Messiaen's private intentions and the level of recognition of each element by the congregation present at the time are inaccessible to us. Without more context, the full extent to which these improvisations served to provide any form of commentary on the liturgy cannot be firmly established, but plainchant may at least provide a link with a particular

liturgical occasion, and the suggestions made for symbolism can then be more or less persuasive, even if not strictly demonstrable.

Identification of materials is insufficient, however: to characterise Messiaen's practice of improvisation, it will also be necessary to show how these materials are treated and developed. In this respect, each improvisation may reveal different aspects, and it is not helpful therefore to assume that any one analytical approach will yield the most useful insights in all cases. Messiaen's extension and development of his source material is one of the questions unanswered in the last section of the previous chapter, which considered some of his prompts for improvisations taken in themselves, and for that reason any recurring techniques he can be shown to have used in the recorded improvisations available are of particular interest. This should include identifying means of melodic or motivic development in the horizontal plane, and harmonisation on the vertical. In the latter aspect the relationship between inherited functions of tonal harmony, the modal nature of some of the given material in the form of plainchant, and Messiaen's own more particular thinking about modality are important. Especially given the role his 'modes of limited transposition' have in the demonstrated techniques with which he treated borrowed material in his compositions, it is necessary to be aware of any similar treatment in his improvisations.¹⁵ In addition to the modes themselves, it will be necessary to be aware of some of the chords he designated specifically, such as the 'turning chords', and the 'chords of contracted resonance', and also of the strong colour associations he made with various sonorities, which may also give suggestions as to appropriate interpretations of the improvisations.

In addition to these observations of a music-theoretical nature, however, the approach taken is also alert to the function of these improvisations within the liturgy. There are evident

¹⁵ Balmer *et al.*, *Le Modèle*. p.53.

limitations in this regard, given that the music is presented without any detail as to its specific context; occasion may be inferred by the use of identifiable material drawn from plainchant, but the difference between a *sortie* and a communion may be considered more speculative; the difference between an introit and a gradual even more so, insofar as the energy level of a *sortie* would usually be out of place at any other point in a service. The account given by Rößler of a service in which the preacher recognised Messiaen's commentary on the readings, however, invites us to consider the ways in which each improvisation as we hear it might function in that sort of a way.¹⁶ In other words, in at least some cases the music might imply a particular relation to a narrative or to a theological concept specific to a particular reading. Given the semantic imprecision of music such interpretations may only be more or less plausible and helpful rather than definitively demonstrated. Nevertheless, the second governing question of this project – a consideration of the theological nature of liturgical music – requires that attention be given to the possibilities of symbolism and even narrative inherent in these examples of Messiaen's improvisational practice.

The foregoing considerations relate to analysis and interpretation of the improvisations; logically prior to that is the rendering of the music into a form in which it can be made more amenable to analysis. Transcription of recorded music into score form is the approach taken; that is, the rendering of the music into score form, capturing principally the parameters of pitch, rhythm, dynamic and timbre. It should be noted up-front that the scope of this project does not extend to production of a complete performable edition of the scores so rendered; the transcriptions that have been made are intended as aids to inform the comments made below rather than as a stand-alone rendering of every relevant element in the music. To that extent, it is not deemed necessary to be certain of having captured every technical detail of the music, and certain ambiguities can remain in specific respects where

¹⁶ See above, pp.61–2.

necessary, notwithstanding the inherent difficulty of registering differing degrees of confidence on a score. The act of transcription becomes therefore less an end in itself, but rather a form of close listening, designed to facilitate the sorts of interpretation discussed in the foregoing paragraphs. A number of specific issues arise, however, in treating these recordings in this way, some of which arise from the quality of recording and remastering mediating between the original performance and the sound available for treatment, others from the inherent nature of the pipe organ as an instrument, and yet more from the technical innovations and prowess of a musician like Messiaen. The following paragraphs consider these difficulties under the categories of timbre, pitch, and rhythm.

Timbre in organ music is largely synonymous with registration, though as discussed below that also affects pitch. As noted in section 2.5, many of Messiaen's notes for improvisations appear to consist only of combinations of stops, and even his brief notes of thematic material also include registration indications, so it is necessary to proceed on the basis that timbre was an important factor in his conception of his improvised music. For practical reasons, however, in first approaching each improvisation for transcription a family of stops often suffices to suggest the timbre: foundations, flutes, strings, reeds define the basic timbres of organ music, and it is not always necessary to specify further for the purposes of the approach taken to interpreting Messiaen's practice. The notes in which Messiaen had specified registrations, together with the plan of the *Trinité* organ and the list pre-set combinations given in the score of *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte-Trinité* have been used to suggest more specific stops where this has been deemed useful. In instances of uncertainty, the recordings that exist of Messiaen playing his composed works on the organ at Ste Trinité have provided useful comparisons.

Registration also has implications for pitch when transcribing; it is not always possible to distinguish a melody on an 8-foot stop in one octave from one on a 4-foot stop

played an octave lower, since the audible pitch of each of those would be identical. In practice, much of the time both are engaged, and indeed Messiaen several times commented that his manual registrations often call for 16-foot stops on the manuals, meaning that even in relatively simple passages, each key played by the fingers is audible in at least three octaves. Not only does this mean that the octave in which it is played is not always clear, but that the spacing of individual notes within a chord is often impracticable to fix with certainty. Add to this proliferation of octaves the presence of mutation and mixture stops, which reinforce harmonics that are not in octaves – often compound fifths and thirds – and the aural effect of even a simple triad for the fingers includes sevenths and ninths, obscuring (to an extent) the ear from determining whether a seventh has been intentionally added to a chord quality or appears only as the reinforced fifth above a played third. These observations would be true of any organ music, but given Messiaen’s usual musical style a typical succession of tonally functional chords is not to be expected, meaning that reliance on the expectations of harmonic progression and norms of voice leading is impossible.

Another feature of pipe organs in general is that the pipes are temperature sensitive, and pitch can therefore vary between occasions. When the *Trinité* organ was first built the mandated tuning standard was the *diapason normal* at $A_4=435$. In each of the improvisations considered in section 3.3, the NNLS Chroma plugin¹⁷ to the open-source application Sonic Visualiser¹⁸ has been used to calculate the actual frequency of the sounding pitch closest to the modern standard of $A_4=440$; this has revealed significant variation. Not only do the recordings not reflect either modern concert pitch or *diapason normal*, but they are not

¹⁷ Mattias Mauch and Simon Dixon, ‘Approximate Note Transcription for the Improved Identification of Difficult Chords’, in *Proceedings of the 11th International Society for Music Information Retrieval Conference (ISMIR 2010)*.

¹⁸ Chris Cannam, Christian Landone & Mark Sandler, ‘Sonic Visualiser: An Open Source Application for viewing, Analysing, and Annotating Music Audio Files’, *Proceedings of the ACM Multimedia 2010 International Conference* (2010).

consistent in pitch with each other, so it is not possible to apply a uniform adjustment to all tracks. Altering the sounding pitch to the modern standard by the smallest change involves flattening 18 of the 29 tracks by amounts ranging from 26 to 50 cents, while sharpening the remaining 11 by amounts ranging from 9 to 49 cents. It is in practice impossible to determine in what proportions these variations result from the actual pitches of the pipes when Messiaen played them as opposed to variations in pitch introduced by the mediation of the recording medium and the process of remastering to CD. Seventh String Software's *Transcribe!* has been used to apply these pitch adjustments, to follow layers by restricting to narrow ranges of the pitch spectrum where necessary, to slow down playback and, most usefully, to loop short passages for particular focus.

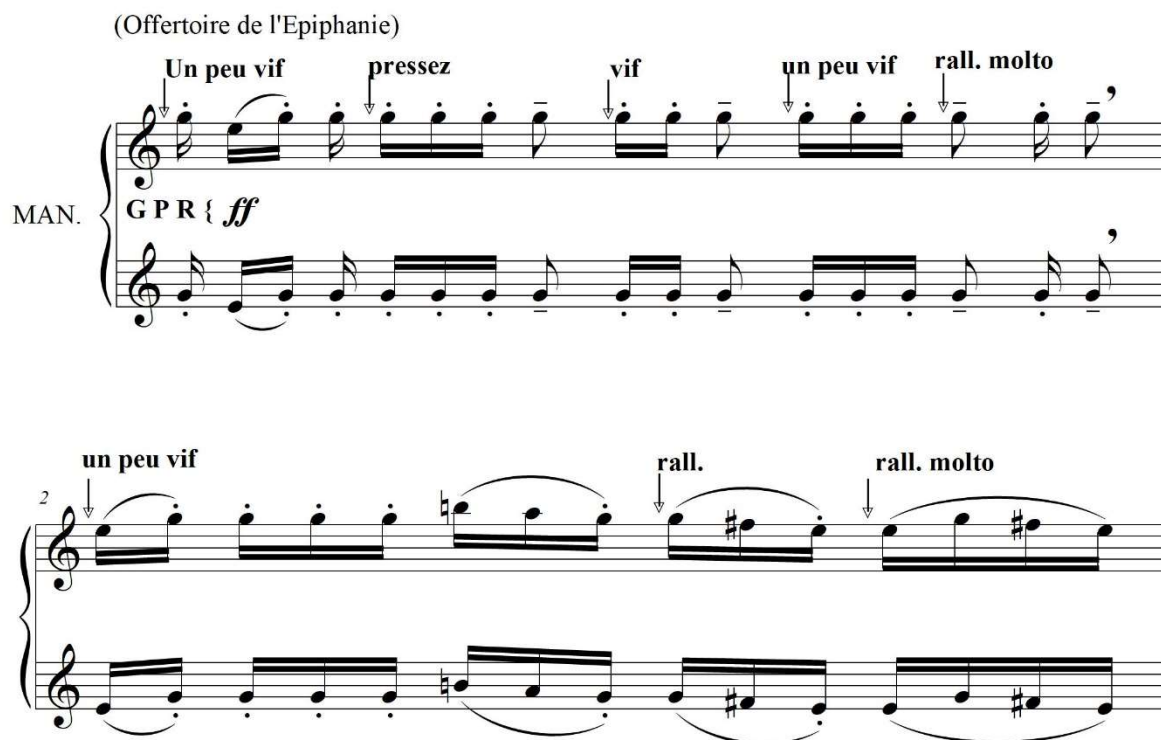
For the purposes of transcription, adjustments to the nearest semitone were used initially. In certain cases there is internal evidence suggesting that transposing the result by a semitone in the opposite direction may better reflect the keys played, though this is usually inconclusive. Where adjusting by a semitone in the opposite direction would better fit the audible plainchant melodies to the notation of the chants in the *Liber Usualis*, it may make sense to do so. That said, there is no question that Messiaen could have transposed as he saw fit, and Gregorian theory in any case has no concept of absolute pitch. On other occasions the discrepancy is greater than a semitone and therefore must be assumed to reflect transposition. Messiaen's composed works reflect affinity to certain keys and a tendency to avoid others; these preferences may relate to his association of tonality with colour, reflected in his avoiding G major, associated with the colour yellow, preferring F# (gold), A (blue) and E (red) majors; these preferences can similarly inform judgements as to which of the adjacent tonalities he is more likely to have chosen to improvise in.¹⁹ More persuasive may be the occasion in which flattening to the nearest semitone appears to involve playing a note lower

¹⁹ This point is discussed further on pp.125–6 below.

than the compass of the pedalboard, where sharpening would raise a B to a C rendering it actually playable on the instrument in question. In such cases the transcribed pitch has been readjusted on a reasonable best fit basis, though it must be acknowledged that doing so renders any interpretative observations based on key or tonal centre – especially based on Messiaen's colour associations with particular keys – less secure.

The other principal musical parameter to be captured in transcription is that of rhythm. This is the aspect of music which Messiaen theorised most assiduously, but also one which raises particular issues for transcription of performed music, and again some issues which are specific to the organ. On the latter, the most relevant is that the mechanism, not being touch sensitive, does not allow for accentuation using dynamic gradation as other instruments do, and therefore agogic accents are used; judgement is therefore necessary to determine whether a note is, for example, augmented by addition of a dot in one of Messiaen's theorised procedures, or conceived as one value and marginally extended only for the purposes of accentuation.

To this first consideration can be added the fact that the plainchant which provides stimulus for the majority of the improvisations considered is not rhythmically exact in either notation theory or in performance practice. In Messiaen's uses of plainchant quotations in his published organ works he typically notates in relatively even values, but within those he uses tenuto markings and written indications of tempo variation to suggest that they are not to be played metronomically; example 3.1 from the *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte-Trinité* illustrates this.



Example 3.1. Olivier Messiaen, *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte-Trinité*, VI, bb.1–2.

There is an inherent tension between the rhythmic freedom which Messiaen celebrated in plainchant²⁰ and the precision with which he typically specified rhythm in his compositions. This is further complicated by the frequent observation that in his performance of composed works Messiaen does not play his own notated rhythms with a metronomic strictness to match the detail of their conception.²¹ This being considered, it is tempting to transcribe especially the direct quotations of plainchant into neumes rather than onto the five-line stave, though this would be inconsistent once a harmonic dimension is introduced. In practice the transcriptions have tended to quantise freely, ascribing variations in duration of sounds more to expressive performance than to complex rhythmic conceptions, but this is done in full

²⁰ Following Dom Mocquereau. Messiaen, *Traité IV*, pp.43-6.

²¹ Ngim, Alan G., *Olivier Messiaen as a Pianist: A Study of Tempo and Rhythm Based on his Recordings of Visions de l'Amen*, DMA Dissertation, Miami, University of Miami, (1997); John Milsom, 'Organ Music I' in Peter Hill (ed.) *The Messiaen Companion* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008) pp.51–71; Peter Hill, 'Messiaen recorded: the *Quatre Études de rythme*' in Christopher Dingle and Nigel Simeone (eds), *Olivier Messiaen: Music, Art and Literature* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007), pp.79–90; Dingle, 'Messiaen as Pianist', pp.29–50.

recognition of the fact that Messiaen's general approach to rhythm, and his insistence on the importance of that particular musical parameter, means that doing so risks missing some of his conscious intentions.

These difficulties having been acknowledged, it may nevertheless be affirmed that transcription to a level sufficient for the sorts of analysis required has been possible. Uncertainty with regard to specific detail may remain, but the combination of careful listening with spectrogram analyses, each providing a check to the other, has enabled usable information to be brought together. That said, there are points at which the combination of imperfect recording quality with thick musical textures and fast tempi have led to various forms of approximation being engaged, such that the transcriptions produced, while sufficient for the sorts of analysis engaged, are not necessarily entirely accurate for other purposes, as perhaps any potential re-performance of the music.

Not only are the practical difficulties worth considering, but also the value and ethics of this approach. Though transcriptions have been made in the course of this research, the rights of both the musician, Messiaen, and the maker of the recordings can be asserted, such that use or distribution of the scores must remain within the bounds of fair dealing. Given that the recordings themselves have been removed from sale at the request of the musician's estate, it is appropriate to take a cautious approach in this respect. We must also be aware that even with the level of detail successfully captured in the act of transcription there are limitations on what can accurately be argued. Interpretation being bound to context, for which few indications are available, is a major constraint. Similarly, the musician's intentions and conceptions cannot be fully inferred from the music alone.

The remainder of this chapter consists of a detailed discussion of the improvisations recorded by Olivier Glandaz in the 1980s and released by La Praye in 2001. An overview of

the contents of these discs is given, to compensate for a lack of detail in the track listing. A sense of the scope of what is included having been outlined, the following section draws out the elements of Messiaen's approach to improvisation that are revealed by close listening to these examples.

3.3 Olivier Messiaen *Live: Improvisations inédites*: recorded improvisations for study

One of the most obvious limitations of the CD release itself is that each track is listed only as 'improvisation' with no further information given about the occasion on which it was made; the sleeve notes confirm that they date from 1984 to 1987 and were made 'either during Sunday Masses or important celebrations of the liturgical calendar'.²² As a first step towards analysis, each track has been described by character. To avoid pre-judging specific liturgical functions (such as introit, offertory, communion or *sortie*) these characterisations remain general: most commonly either reflection or toccata, depending on energy level. The majority of the improvisations have also been found to take their inspirations from a specific piece of plainchant, as was expected. These quotations are not always the first thing heard in each track, but they are prominently audible within the improvisations. These chants have been identified and linked to the occasion in the liturgical year at which the chant is used. Table 3.1 provides an overview of the contents of the discs according to those identifications.

Table 3.1. Contents of *Olivier Messiaen: Live: Improvisations inédites*

Disc	Track	Characterisation	Plainchant	Occasion implied by chant
1	1	Reflection	Gradual: <i>Haec dies</i>	Easter
	2	Reflection	Alleluia: <i>Pascha nostrum</i>	Easter
	3	Toccata	Gradual: <i>Viderunt omnes</i>	Christmas
	4	Toccata	Introit: <i>Puer natus</i>	Christmas
	5	Toccata	Alleluia: <i>Dies sanctificatus</i>	Christmas
	6	Toccata	Gradual: <i>Viderunt omnes</i>	Christmas
	7	Reflection	Gradual: <i>Viderunt omnes</i>	Christmas
	8	Toccata	Gradual: <i>Viderunt omnes</i>	Christmas

²² Messiaen, *Live: Improvisations inédites*. sleeve notes.

	9	Reflection	Alleluia: <i>Dominus dixit</i>	Christmas (Midnight Mass)
	10	Reflection		
	11	Reflection	Introit: <i>Puer natus</i>	Christmas
	12	Reflection		
	13	Acclamation	Alleluia: <i>Pascha nostrum</i>	Easter
	14	Acclamation	Alleluia: <i>Pascha nostrum</i>	Easter
	15	Toccata	Introit: <i>Puer natus</i>	Christmas
2	1	Reflection		
	2	Reflection		
	3	Toccata	Tract: <i>Laudate Dominum</i>	Easter (Vigil)
	4	Reflection	Alleluia: <i>Venite ad me</i>	All Saints
	5	Reflection	Alleluia: <i>Venite ad me</i>	All Saints
	6	Toccata	Introit: <i>Gaudeamus... Sanct. omnium</i>	All Saints
	7	Reflection	Alleluia: <i>Venite ad me</i>	All Saints
	8	Toccata	Alleluia: <i>Venite ad me</i>	All Saints
	9	Reflection		
	10	Reflection	Responsory: <i>Recessit pastor</i>	Holy Saturday
	11	Reflection	Responsory: <i>Recessit pastor</i>	Holy Saturday
	12	Acclamation		
	13	Reflection	Introit: <i>Gaudeamus... Sanct. omnium</i>	All Saints
	14	Toccata	Responsory: <i>Recessit pastor</i>	Holy Saturday

A first observation given these contents is that there is a significant amount of duplication in terms of the chants treated and occasions represented, and specifically that the improvisations included in the set are concentrated on major festivals. The sleeve notes claim that ‘some improvisations were not selected, either because they treated a similar Gregorian theme from the same liturgical period, or because their sound quality was not good enough’.²³ This claim notwithstanding it is evident that these selections have certainly not excluded significant overlap in terms of the plainchant materials treated – though for the present purposes this may be an advantage, allowing a sense of the range of treatments to which each chant may be susceptible. A similar reservation may be made about the claim that sound quality excluded certain recordings; though it is believable that those excluded were particularly poor, those

²³ Messiaen, *Live: Improvisations inédites*, sleeve notes.

remaining cannot be said to be pristine in this respect. Despite the processing to reduce background noise to which they have been subject in remastering for the discs, they were private recordings made onto tape in the church, without ideal acoustic placement of microphone or studio standard equipment.

Before continuing to the identification of relevant information derivable from these examples of Messiaen's improvisation, a limitation must be acknowledged: although a useful sample of evidence confirming the practice in a given timespan, it is certainly not a complete record. We cannot, for example, conclude anything from this set of recordings alone regarding change over time, either within the scope of the recordings, as they are not dated relative to each other, nor between these and earlier periods of his activity, since most such earlier improvisations were not recorded. Moreover, although a range of occasions is represented by the plainchant inspirations included on the CD, they do not cover the complete ecclesiastical calendar.²⁴ Notable omissions include Trinity Sunday – especially given the dedication of the church – and Pentecost; also not represented are any of the Marian antiphons, typically beloved of Catholic organists.²⁵

Nevertheless, with nearly two and a half hours of music there is a significant amount of material on these two discs, and from them it is possible to make a number of observations about how Messiaen approached the improvisations that he made in liturgical settings within the time period represented by these recordings. Inevitably, such observations will be generalisations, and seldom are they valid for every example in the sample – indeed, one

²⁴ Although as they were made over several years they do cover the three-year cycle of the Sunday lectionary.

²⁵ It is observable that Mary plays a relatively small role in Messiaen's theological compositions and writings; her only obvious appearances are in the first movement of *La Nativité* and the fourth and eleventh of the *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jésus*. It nevertheless seems unlikely that the antiphons were never sung, or that Marian feasts were not observed at Ste Trinité in such a way as to engage the organist with that material, nor is it plausible that the composer of 'Première Communion de la Vierge' could have been lacking in devotion to the God bearer! C.f. Bauer, *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, pp.15–16, on Marian literature among Messiaen's theological books.

would not expect an activity such as improvisation to yield uniformity of that sort. The next and longest section of this chapter groups these observations under a number of subheadings, using examples taken from various of the individual improvisations.

Before continuing to the analytical discussion, however, it is appropriate to consider some general impressions of the music represented in these discs, especially given the fair usage limitations on reproducing more extensive excerpts of transcribed scores. The twin influences of Tournemire and Dupré discussed above in relation to Messiaen's training may give a way into this: echoes of both being discernible, though more in the sound of their compositions than from the guidance of their textbooks. Tournemire's *l'Orgue mystique* is reflected in the clarity of Messiaen's use of plainchant, both in the use of fragments that are nevertheless recognisable, and in making use of the associated rhythmic freedom of that material. In terms of organ sonority, it is often Dupré's music that is most immediately recalled, particularly the *Symphonie-Passion*; indeed the striking motif of descending and reascending fourths from 49 seconds into improvisation 12 sounds initially similar to Dupré's use of *adeste fideles* in the second movement: 'Nativité'.²⁶

The overall aural impression given by these recordings includes moments where Messiaen's *Livre du Saint Sacrement* is evoked, but the innovative and distinctive voice of his composed works is somewhat muted. These improvisations stand solidly within the French Catholic tradition of which he was a part, and sound not dissimilar either to the five improvisations of Tournemire that were recorded, or to those of his contemporaries such as Jean Langlais and Pierre Cochereau (1924-1984). Both serenity and virtuosity are demonstrated at different points, but in both moods it is possible to discern both the

²⁶ Marcel Dupré, *Symphonie-Passion* (Paris: Leduc, 1925) pp.20–1. It may be noted that Dupré's *Symphonie-Passion* is itself a work understood to have originated in an improvisation.

composer's control over his medium and his devotion to using this music to reflect the celebratory nature of Christian liturgy.

3.4 The characteristics of Messiaen's approaches to improvisation

The headings under which the relevant aspects of these improvisations are grouped themselves constitute a level of analysis based on the considerations discussed above. The first subsection proposes ways in which the liturgical function of each improvisation might be inferred, and how such functions might interact with narrative or thematic (theological) interpretations of the music. Plainchant, birdsong, and allusion to other musics are then each considered as sources of material that Messiaen used and there is a discussion of how each type of material is treated differently. The specifically musical qualities of rhythm, timbre, tessitura and the nexus of tonality, modality and colour are each subject of further analysis, as are some relevant techniques and ideas that recur in the sample but do not necessarily fit the other categories. Finally in this section some elements that one might expect to hear in Messiaen's music but which are not represented in this set of improvisations are noted, since these too are relevant to an account of Messiaen's practice as a whole.

3.4.1 Distinguishing functions

In table 3.1 the improvisations are given a characterisation, the majority of them as a toccata or a reflection, although there are also a couple of acclamations. These characterisations may be thought of as the first stage in a process of discerning the liturgical function of the improvisations. Those given the characterisation toccata may be presumed to have functioned as *sorties*: it is possible that certain readings might entail a commentary with that energy and style, but without specific information it is less likely on any given instance that a toccata would be appropriate at a point in the service other than at the end. Improvisations 13 and 14, which are very similar, are arguably distinguishable from the others by the functional characterisation as acclamation: both are based on the Alleluia for Easter day, and most likely

represent the joyful response to the proclamation of the resurrection. If this is correct then it may be hypothesised that the commonalities between them represent Messiaen's instantiation of the same idea in the same liturgical position but in different years.

Beyond these, the improvisations characterised as reflections could have had any of several functions: they could have occurred before the service as the congregation gathered; as introits; as responses to the lectionary; as graduals; as offertories; or as communions.²⁷ The confidence with which each improvisation can be assigned to any of these functions on the basis of internal evidence alone is not high, but there are certain observations that can be made which are suggestive of a *Sitz im Leben*.²⁸ The first such observation is that, other things being equal, a plainchant gradual as the inspiration for an improvisation is most likely to indicate the function of the gradual, not only because of existing connections between musical material and the point in the liturgy, but also because Messiaen himself said, in 1985:

For example, at the high Mass we never sing the gradual anymore, and it's me that replaces it: I take the theme of the day's gradual, I improvise on it, taking inspiration not only from the melodic line of the neumes, but also from the Latin text and from what the text means.²⁹

That said, given that some of his uses of the plainchant graduals are certainly in the category of toccata, and therefore likely to have been *sorties*, a simple correspondence of plainchant function and use in improvisation cannot be conclusive. The audible influence of Tournemire, together with the way the offices in *l'Orgue mystique* often re-use specific chants within several movements is a further caution against such simple assumptions.

²⁷ The other staple of a French organ mass is the elevation, but this is significantly less likely to be represented since these improvisations were all recorded well after the Second Vatican Council.

²⁸ The German term is borrowed from biblical studies and was popularised by Hermann Gunkel with reference to the imputation of social situations to individual Psalms. Hermann Gunkel, *Einleitung in die Psalmen: die Gattungen der religiösen Lyrik Israels* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1933) p.10.

²⁹ Glandaz, *Messiaen à l'orgue*, p.14. c.f. p.62 above.

It may be possible in some cases to make inferences from non-musical elements captured, as it were incidentally, on the recordings. Background noises indicative of movement in other parts of the church might suggest a communion, though it may be hard to distinguish between that and a procession or other occasion for movement around a church.

The other principal basis for functional inference from the musical content are elements or forms that might be susceptible to some sort of narrative interpretation. Such interpretations themselves draw on multiple elements and may only ever be suggestive; thus it is the combination of plainchant from Easter, birdsong, and a general sense of the mood of the music that informs a reading of the second improvisation in the set as placing us in the Easter garden, early in the morning. This interpretation in turn suggests the liturgical function of the gradual, as introducing the Gospel of the Resurrection.

More dramatic still is an interpretation of the final improvisation in the set as a musical evocation of the harrowing of hell – the doctrine that, between the crucifixion and the resurrection Christ released captive souls from hell. The plainchant that is quoted in the improvisation is a responsory from the second nocturn of Matins for Holy Saturday, *recessit pastor noster*, the text of which reads

Our Shepherd is departed, the fount of living water,
At whose passing the sun was darkened,
For he who was holding captive the first man was himself made captive.
Today our Saviour has destroyed the gates of death and their bars as well.
Indeed He has destroyed the strongholds of the underworld
And he has overthrown the powers of the devil.³⁰

³⁰ Benedictines of Solesme, *The Liber Usualis with Introduction and Rubrics in English* (Tournai: Desclée & Cie, 1956) p.766.

That text signals a narrative of descent and combat which is matched by the sound of the music Messiaen produced, with ladder-style descents featuring tritones, underlying high-energy dissonant clusters (example 3.2).³¹

Example 3.2. Transcription from *Olivier Messiaen: Live: Improvisations inédites*, disc 2, track 14, beginning at 1 minute 11 seconds.³²

If that interpretation of the narrative is correct, there remains a further judgement to be made concerning the context in which that improvisation would be appropriate. It is relatively unlikely that an improvisation of this scale would in fact belong in an office of *tenebrae*,³³ which by tradition ends in a loud non-musical sound (usually made by clergy hitting the

³¹ This is one of the examples in the set which puts one in mind of the terrifying sounds described by Julien Green, see above, section 2.4 p.54.

³² * indicates that transcription at these points is approximate.

³³ The term, literally meaning shadows, was used first of a night office on Maundy Thursday, and subsequently extended to other night-time offices of the *triduum*.

pews), followed by silence, therefore not having a *sortie*. It is indeed probable that the *grand orgue* would not be employed at all between Maundy Thursday and the Easter Vigil, either in response to the proclamation of the resurrection or possibly not until after the Gloria. That means that proposing a setting for the improvisation is problematic; possibilities to consider might be a special event, along the lines of readings and music for Holy Week,³⁴ or perhaps a comment on the readings from the Easter Vigil. Another possibility might be a proleptic use of the chant in a *sortie* on Palm Sunday, a service which includes the passion reading, and manages the transition from the triumphal entry into the darker elements of Holy Week.

3.4.2 Use of plainchant

The last consideration in the previous section in turn raises a question of the extent to which Messiaen's improvisations were generally based on plainchants of the day, or whether it was common for him to draw on the wider corpus of plainchant to make connections between occasions in his improvisations. Regardless of the resolution of that question, the evidence of this set of recordings confirms that a significant amount of Messiaen's musical material used in improvisation is drawn from plainchant – a relevant observation, given that these improvisations were made against a background of declining liturgical use of plainchant after the Second Vatican Council. A number of further observations may be made about the way in which he treated this material.

Speaking of plainchant in his *Conférence de Notre-Dame*, Messiaen said:

Plainchant is not well known. It is not well known principally because it is not well sung. And the first wrong that our immediate ancestors had done to it is its harmonisation... It must therefore be sung without any accompaniment. It must also be sung by all voices: men, women, children....

³⁴ Similar to that held in 1989 of which a recording exists, described in section 3.1 above, p.82.

Let us add that this delicacy of plainchant cannot appear except in speed and joy. If we sang plainchant with the lightness and rapidity which belong to it, we would love it so much that we couldn't do without it.³⁵

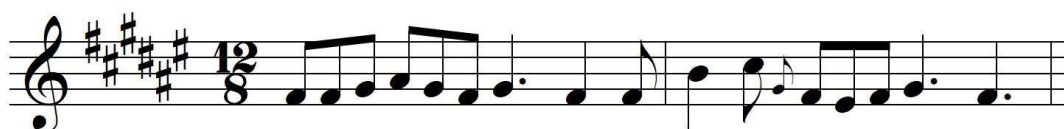
In keeping with this stated preference for plainchant to be sung with liveliness, his direct quotations of chant are often much faster than would be anticipated from the general expectations of the genre, some of them significantly faster than it would be conceivable that the music be sung. Indeed, the speed with which certain chants are rendered in these recordings is distinctive to Messiaen; other improvisers with similar training, influences and intentions, such as Langlais, routinely present plainchant at closer to its sung tempo. Unsurprisingly, this is most marked in the improvisations categorised as toccatas, and the two which are labelled acclamations, though even in the more reflective improvisations it is not always the case that plainchant is rendered on the organ in the same manner that one would expect it to be sung. Similarly, Messiaen's assertion that plainchant should be sung by all voices is reflected in his registration choices which include octaves and sometimes mutations. Equally, in the majority of improvisations, the first statement of the given chant is not harmonised; the registration echoes the multiplicity of voices, but the chant is not accompanied.³⁶

In most cases the plainchant is quoted with the rhythmic subtlety associated with that material, though in one marked case, improvisation 18, Messiaen appears to begin with a chant segment onto which he imposes a metre – though, being Messiaen, this initial impression of regularity is quickly destabilised. His initial statement of the tract *Laudate Dominum* from the Easter vigil³⁷ in the style of a triple-time dance is nevertheless very striking and serves to remind us that all generalisations have exceptions (example 3.3).

³⁵ Messiaen, *Conférence de Notre-Dame*, pp.3,4.

³⁶ Jaques Amblard has also noted that unison or octave playing is used in various works by Messiaen in structurally important ways, 'The Simplicity of Messiaen', trans. Robert Sholl in Robert Sholl (ed.), *Messiaen in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), p.237.

³⁷ Or possibly the tract *Jubilate Domino* from Quinquagesima – without the text the two are very similar.



Example 3.3. Transcription from *Olivier Messiaen: Live: Improvisations inédites*, disc 2, track 3, opening.

Despite this exception, not only is the plainchant in these recordings typically presented with the expected rhythmic freedom, but the material is also developed after the initial statement with a similar flexibility, which is usually better notated with frequent changes of tempo (as in example 3.1) than by varying note values (as in example 2.6). Further considerations of rhythm are discussed in section 3.4.5. below. Focussing for now on the use of plainchant material, it is useful to identify common ways in which the material once stated is developed as the improvisation progresses.

The most clearly audible observation regarding such development is Messiaen's tendency to isolate a short motif rather than an extended phrase to be the focus of his treatment. These motifs are often just a few notes – or perhaps, in his preferred way of thinking about music, a single neume. The use in improvisation 11 of only the first three notes of the Christmas introit, *Puer natus*, for example, is striking in not only being recognisable despite its brevity, but in that it repeats a treatment seen in the DVD of improvisations on the same theme, and indeed, the use of that distinctive opening motif in the *Livre du Saint Sacrement*. Thus, in example 3.4 we see the first phrase of the stated chant material ends with a *climacus* (three notes descending stepwise, marked *), and it is those three descending notes which are repeated, varied and transposed, as the development for the next section of the improvisation.

G.O. fonds 16, 8, 4
(Graduale de Noël)

Pos. 8, 4, 3ce

G.O.

Example 3.4. Transcription from *Olivier Messiaen: Live: Improvisations inédites*, disc 1, track 3, beginning at 1 minute 36 seconds.

Another significant treatment of plainchant in these improvisations consists of the type of development referred to as a commentary, which is described further in section 3.4.9 below, as, although commonly used with plainchant, it is not exclusive to that material. A final example of development of plainchant material is found in a number of instances in which an initially monodic statement of a chant is followed by a harmonised statement. In such cases, the harmonisation is never note for note, and seldom even neume by neume, but involves extended chords supporting the free re-statement of the chant, and articulating particular moments of *arsis* and *thesis*.

It is also relevant to note possible treatments of plainchant material that do not occur in this sample of improvisations. One listens in vain for a heavily ornamented version of

these melodic lines after the manner of certain Bach choral preludes, for example.³⁸ This in itself is explicable either by the inherent differences between the genres of chorale and plainchant, or by the sense that the chorale prelude, although certainly played in Catholic churches, was a Protestant innovation. Another possible treatment, again used in chorale preludes, but also in Catholic polyphony, is the *cantus firmus*. Since such a treatment would be less foreign to Catholic liturgy its absence may be better explained as arising from Messiaen's preference to hear plainchant at pace, where a *cantus firmus* treatment would slow it down. It would also disguise the material in ways which might have made it harder for the congregation to hear the improvisations as derived from the given material, which Messiaen may have wished to avoid since he was concerned to maintain the place of plainchant in the service.

It is well known that Messiaen claimed to believe plainchant itself to be the only truly liturgical music, and it has been argued that his theory of neumes constituted a significant element in his wider thinking about music.³⁹ It is therefore neither surprising nor original to argue that this material is a very significant source of inspiration for his liturgical improvisations as witnessed by the recordings considered. It is nevertheless noteworthy how frequently his treatment of this material is relatable to his own comments on the nature of the chants – that they be joyful and congregational and that they are given much of their character by their notation in neumes. It is, nevertheless, important that these observations be confirmed in this evidence of practice as well as in theory; what is said and what is done converge but may not necessarily be assumed identical without corroboration.

³⁸ e.g. BWV 622.

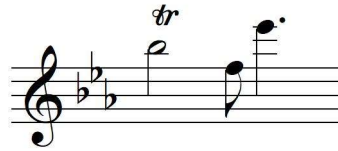
³⁹ Lundblad, 'Universal Neumes', 449–93.

3.4.3 Birdsong

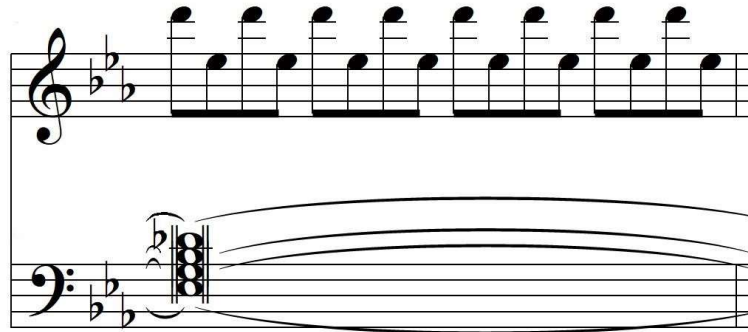
The second source of material which one expects to hear in music by Messiaen is birdsong. In this case the inspiration relates less directly to the liturgy than does plainchant, but it can suggest associations which may help in the interpretation of the improvisations in which they occur. Messiaen himself, however, was aware that even expert ornithologists were seldom able to identify the bird species his music recreated,⁴⁰ and although he was punctilious in identifying the birds in his composed scores after the mid-1950s, he had previously used material in ‘birdsong style’ rather than the song of a specific bird. The first of those observations confirms that it is not always easy to identify the bird in question, and the second opens the possibility, especially in improvised music, that the bird might not have been intended for specific identification. There is material in this set of improvisations which sounds likely to be avian but which it has not been possible to assign to a species, neither by comparison with actual birdsong, with Messiaen’s composed works, nor with the transcribed birdsongs which are reproduced in *Tome V* of the *Traité*. Material in this category may be thought to symbolise some of the ideas which Messiaen associated with birdsong as a whole, such as freedom and joy, or in some cases to give a generic pastoral or bucolic setting, although such an interpretation risks missing some elements that might have been specifically meaningful for Messiaen.

In other cases, however, an identification – even if sometimes only a tentative one – of a specific bird can suggest more specific symbolism. Thus, the second improvisation has a motif of a trill followed by an ascending seventh (example 3.5), and towards the end a distinctive pattern of rocking major sevenths (example 3.6); these two characteristics seem to relate to Messiaen’s invocation of the nightingale (c.f. example 3.7).

⁴⁰ Samuel, *Permanences*, p.137.



Example 3.5. Transcription from *Olivier Messiaen: Live: Improvisations inédites*, disc 1, track 2, beginning at 1 minute, 2 seconds.



Example 3.6. Transcription from *Olivier Messiaen: Live: Improvisations inédites*, disc 1, track 2, beginning at 5 minutes, 26 seconds.



Example 3.7. Nightingale examples one and two, from *Traité V*.⁴¹

If the identification of this birdsong with the nightingale is correct, then the bird may serve a dual function. First it suggests a time of day; as referenced above an interpretation of the

⁴¹ Messiaen, *Traité, V.i.* p.423. On this interpretation the trill in Example 3.5 substitutes for the bird's fast repetitions of a single note, which the organ is not technically apt to reproduce.

second improvisation as set in the approach to the tomb early on Easter morning is reinforced by birdsong.⁴² The nightingale in fact, as Messiaen well knew, sings in the day as well as the night, but it is more audible at night simply because fewer other birds are singing at the same time. Its association with night time nevertheless recalls that St John's Gospel specifically comments that it was still dark as the women approach the tomb. Added to this, Messiaen's other uses of the same birdsong at points of particular liminality between the earthly and the heavenly can also illuminate his use of this specific bird at the point of solemn mystery in which the resurrection is discovered. For example, in the fifth movement of the first septenary of *La Transfiguration*, 'Quam dilecta tabernacula tua', a nightingale rendered by the piano sings twice, the first time immediately before the choir sings the text 'my heart and my flesh rejoiced in the living God' (example 3.8), and again at the end of the movement.

Modéré (♩ = 100)
 8^{va}

Rossignol

mf ff mf

stacc. stacc.

(péd. sempre)

Red. Red.

Example 3.8. Olivier Messiaen, *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ*, 'Quam dilecta tabernacula tua', piano, figure 4, bb.4–6.

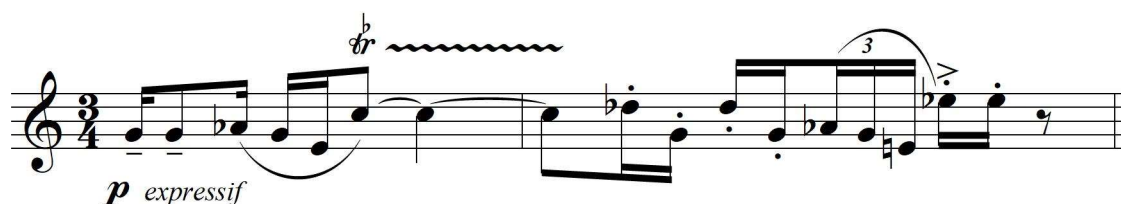
Two other occasions in this set suggest particular birds; at the opening of the sixteenth improvisation the clarinet stop sounds like a bird somewhat reminiscent of the clarinet part at the opening of the *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*, not only in timbre but also in trills and the interval of a diminished octave. The excerpt from the *Quatuor* is thought to represent a

⁴² Section 3.4.1.

blackbird (although the time of composition predated Messiaen's development of more specific studies of birds). The fact that the opening movement of the *Quatuor* has liturgy in its title is suggestive in the context of the wider argument of this thesis, and it is possible that there is direct allusion to his own earlier composition (which will be further considered in the following subsection). It is not clear in that context, however, whether the identity of the bird singing carries additional significance to the fact of its being birdsong.



Example 3.9. Transcription from *Olivier Messiaen: Live: Improvisations inédites*, disc 2, track 1, beginning at 8 seconds.



Example 3.10. Olivier Messiaen, *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*, 'Liturgie de cristal', clarinet, bb.1–2.

Similarly, in improvisation ten there is a descending iamb which can easily be heard as the distinctive call of the cuckoo, in timbre and effect, although it is seldom the major third most commonly associated with the bird.⁴³ It seems plausible to associate that with the arrival of springtime, and therefore, in the theological context, with new life in Christ. Birds did, therefore, as expected, provide Messiaen with material for his improvisations, but the witness

⁴³ Messiaen, *Traité V.i.* p.219 confirms that Messiaen also heard augmented thirds and fourths in a variety of cuckoo calls.

of the particular evidence of this set of recordings suggests that birdsong was less pervasive in his liturgical music than in his compositions of the same period.

3.4.4 Allusion and intertexts

Another source of material that Messiaen may have used for improvisation is reference to other musical works. Some of the connections thus referenced are to organ music frequently heard in church services, though Messiaen's claim that plainchant is the only truly liturgical music may lead one to think that he considered this material external to the liturgical context. Nevertheless, musical allusion brings wider associations which add to the overall impact and impression of the improvised music.

The opening of the toccata-style improvisation for Christmas which is number six in the set recalls the toccata from Widor's fifth symphony; arguably one of the most famous and recognisable organ works that there is. While not a direct quotation, the rhythmic stress of the block chords, and the descending movement of the upper note of the chord through the phrase give an undeniably audible effect of familiarity. It is worth noting that although Widor's symphony is not programmatic, there is an association of the toccata with the Christmas festival, both in wider consciousness and in Messiaen's own repertoire notes in the early period of his appointment.⁴⁴ It may be that this festive association is enough to explain the reference, although the familiarity of the original may also have been a reassurance to those in the congregation whose musical tastes were less attuned to Messiaen's own style.

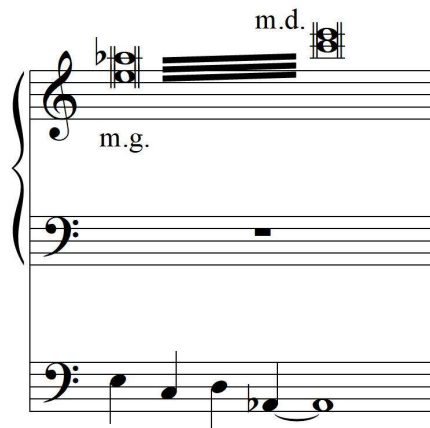
As noted previously, it is possible to hear an echo of the *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* in the opening moments of improvisation sixteen, although this association is brief and not sustained. Later in the same improvisation there is a further point of contact with another of Messiaen's wartime works. A melodic cadential figure beginning just before 4 minutes

⁴⁴ Messiaen, *Notes pour des offices*, BnF, FM, RES VMB MS-128. The toccata was played by Messiaen at Christmas services in the 1930s. See above section 2.3. p.51.

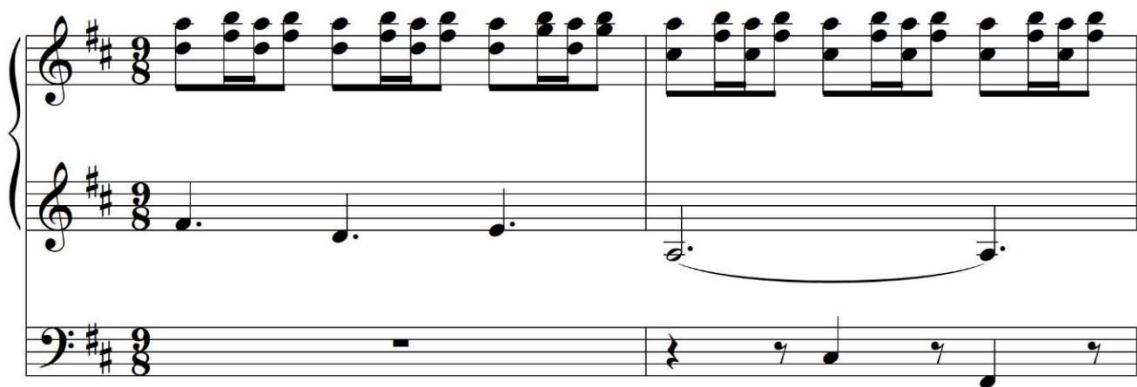
strongly calls to mind a similar figure used repeatedly in both the second and third of the *Trois petites liturgies de la Présence Divine*. There are, however, relatively few points in these improvisations at which direct and clear allusion is made to Messiaen's own compositions, and they are never more than moments, which might be reducible to technique rather than an intentional reference. Thus, in improvisation twelve there is a pattern of three chords in descending motion with a cretic rhythm. This recalls *Joie et clarté des Corps glorieux* and possibly also, in inversion, bars 6–8 of the eighth *Méditation sur le Mystère de la Sainte Trinité*, but being such a self-contained moment it is more likely simply to be a use of that particular 'Greek' rhythm from Messiaen's store of rhythmic formulae than a direct reference to either composed work.

Another interesting example of allusion comes in improvisation eight, in which a motif which may be thought of as the neume *porrectus flexus* is stated against background figuration on another manual (example 3.11). This can be heard as a reference to bells, and in the context of the sound of French organ music, might first be associated with Louis Vierne's *Carillon de Westminster*, dating from 1927 (example 3.12). It seems unlikely, however, that the Westminster chimes carried much meaning for Messiaen, and his notes on that particular neume suggest a different association: the bells from Wagner's *Parsifal* (example 3.13).⁴⁵ That in turn allows a more religious interpretation of the music, albeit that Wagner's grail knights do not exactly conform to orthodox Catholicism. There are enough links between Wagner's ritual and the Christian eucharist, however, that in the hands of a pious musician like Messiaen permit the listener to take from both the cultural reference and the liturgical context a composite of the best of each. As such the call to worship which is implied in the opera is fulfilled in referring to that motif in the context of actual divine worship.

⁴⁵ Messiaen, *Traité IV*, p.10.



Example 3.11. Transcription from *Olivier Messiaen: Live: Improvisations inédites*, disc 1, track 8, beginning at 6 seconds.



Example 3.12. Louis Vierne, *24 Pièces de fantaisie*, 'Carillon de Westminster', bb.16–17.



Example 3.13. Bell motif from Wagner's *Parsifal*.⁴⁶

The final body of composed work which requires consideration as possibly being referenced in these improvisations is Tournemire's *L'orgue mystique*, a cycle of organ music for the

⁴⁶ Richard Wagner, *Parsifal*, as quoted in Roger Scruton, *Wagner's Parsifal* (London: Penguin Books, 2020) p.156.

whole ecclesiastical year drawing on plainchant themes, and understood to be based on the composer's own practice of improvisation. Tournemire considered his work as a Catholic response to the cycles of J. S. Bach,⁴⁷ which dominated organ music, even in Catholic churches despite Bach's Protestantism. It has already been noted that Tournemire was an influence on Messiaen's approach to improvisation, and many of the observations made above concerning Messiaen's treatment of plainchant material could also apply to Tournemire's approach. Direct quotations of musical material other than plainchant are not a significant element in Messiaen's improvisation on these discs,⁴⁸ but brief moments of allusion do occur and do provide interesting suggestions as to how the improvisations may be understood, and perhaps how they were conceived.

3.4.5 Rhythm

Turning from sources of material to questions of technique considered on their own, the first to discuss, if only because of Messiaen's preoccupation with it as a dimension of music, is rhythm. As discussed above in section 3.2, this parameter provides a challenge in notating, as it is necessary to distinguish the rhythmic conception from performance adjustments for either phrasing or accentuation. This means that it is possible that some of Messiaen's more complex rhythmic ideas could have been missed in listening, smoothed over by a tendency to hear quantised values musically phrased rather than specific and deliberate treatment of slightly altered rhythmic values.⁴⁹ That limitation being acknowledged, however, there are occasions on which some of Messiaen's favoured rhythmic techniques are observable, including points at which one of the more simple such ideas, the destabilising of an implied

⁴⁷ Both the cantata cycles and the organ chorale preludes derived from them, and the *Orgelbüchlein*, which though incomplete was conceived as covering the church's year.

⁴⁸ There are suggestions that on special occasions quotation might have played a greater role, such as the improvisations held in the archive in which Messiaen improvised specifically on themes from Berlioz. BnF, DONAUD0501_000088_V1_1, see Appendix 4.

⁴⁹ One recalls the anecdote of Honegger listening to an early performance of the *Vingt Regards* and hearing limpidity in contrast to Alfred Désenclos who, following the score, noted complexity. Recounted by Balmer *et al.*, *Le Modèle*, p.255 n.24.

metre by addition of a dot to a given value, has been followed in transcription in preference to hearing that one value as merely slightly stressed. Other rhythmic ideas discussed by Messiaen are just as noticeable for their absence; the more extensive of the *deçitalas* he liked to borrow from Indian music theory,⁵⁰ for example, do not appear to play a big part in these examples of Messiaen's liturgical improvisation, nor do the rhythms he labelled non-retrogradable except in their least extended, three- to five-note, forms. The cretic rhythm which opens improvisation 12 (example 3.14) has already been noted;⁵¹ when similar material returns (albeit in a different key) in the same improvisation, at 1 minute 50 seconds, the motif is expanded to a five-note version of the idea with three short values between the two longer ones (example 3.15).

Lent

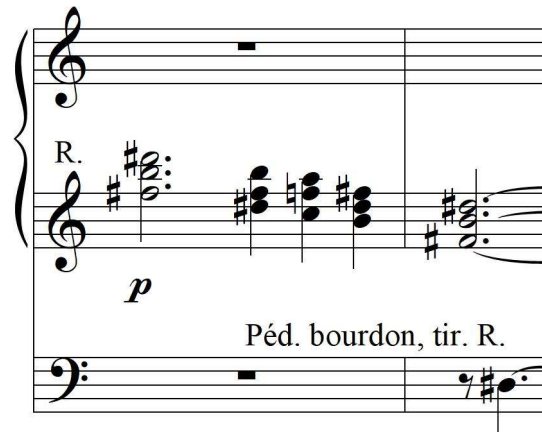
R. gambe, v. cél.

p

Example 3.14. Transcription from *Olivier Messiaen: Live: Improvisations inédites*, disc 1, track 12, opening.

⁵⁰ Some of the shorter examples of these Indian rhythms do appear, but those in that category are typically identical with Greek feet which is proposed as the preferable way to conceptualise them for the current purposes.

⁵¹ See above, p.112.



Example 3.15. Transcription from *Olivier Messiaen: Live: Improvisations inédites*, disc 1, track 12, beginning at 1 minute 50 seconds.

Again it may be useful to consider the reflective improvisations separately from the toccata-style improvised *sorties*. In the former the rhythmic flexibility of plainchant carries through into the whole of each instance, and there are many occasions on which verbal instructions to change tempo, rather than a careful gradation of note values, is the most practical solution in transcribing them. The improvisations in this style are typically legato, which in organ technique entails a slight overlap in notes, blurring in any case the precision of attack and release which could assist in marking out more defined rhythmic formulae.

The toccata-style improvisations by contrast, although dominated by sometimes-unrelenting fast passagework, do frequently gain energy from motivic employment of small rhythmic cells. These may be thought of in a number of ways, of which the two most relevant are to recall Messiaen's early interest in 'Greek' rhythms and hear these cells as poetic feet, such as the anapaest which dominates the figuration of improvisation 3, or to relate them to Messiaen's ideas about plainchant and conceive of them as 'rhythmic neumes'. Either of these conceptions seems congruent with Messiaen's approach to music, and each has some explanatory power; they need not be seen as exclusive of each other. Messiaen's interest in

the rhythmic application of Greek poetic feet dated from early in his formation, and may have been internalised to the point of instinctive application by the time these recordings were made. The articulation of rhythmic cells modelled on neumes derives from ‘Neumes rythmiques’, the third of his *Quatre Études de rythme* (1949–50) and naturally links the inspiration of plainchant into the rhythmic techniques displayed in these improvisations.

In practice, such rhythmic cells function to give character and energy to blocks of musical material; although themselves repetitive – that is to say that a given section may be characterised as ‘iambic’ or ‘trochaic’ for example – they are seldom grouped in a regular fashion, in the way that poetic feet would combine to give a linear metre (e.g. pentameter). Again, this fits with Messiaen’s aversion to regularity, which he generally thought destructive of rhythmic character:

Schematically, rhythmic music is music which disdains repetition, squareness and equal divisions, which is, in short, inspired by the movements of nature, movements of free and unequal duration.⁵²

The overall impression of the rhythmic dimension of the improvisations in this set is one of relative simplicity compared to the expectations one would bring to Messiaen’s composed music. Such a distinction between composed rhythmic complexity and relative simplicity in improvisation may, of course, arise from practical as well as theoretical considerations: the manipulation of extensive permutations and symmetries is difficult to maintain without the assistance of notation. Such an observation is not a denigration of Messiaen’s undoubted technique, but it is true that there is a level of complexity which might be simply impractical to perform *ex tempore*. Even those instances of rhythmic ideas which do match Messiaen’s theorizing tend to be those that appeared earliest in his development of his musical language,

⁵² Samuel, *Permanences*, p.102.

suggesting that his approach to improvisation, especially in the liturgical context, was more conservative than his highly innovative work for concert audiences.

3.4.6 Timbre

It is less useful to generalise on the question of timbre, as one of the first observations that can be made is that Messiaen employed variety in registration, within the constraints of a single instrument. Although there are a handful of occasions on which a caesura for the purposes of changing registration is heard, it is more common for changes to be made smoothly. One method for keeping a continuous sound while engaging variety in timbre, of course, is the use of all three manuals and the pedals each registered independently, engaging four different sounds which the organist can move between without having to draw different stops. A good example is improvisation 16, in the first section of which an accompanying manual division is joined alternately by timbres of flute and clarinet and occasionally supported by soft pedals in yet another registration. It is not always possible to be certain that the correct registration has been ascribed in transcribing, but there are occasions in which the most logical solution is to assume that the pedals are sounding in a similar range to the manual divisions, rather than consistently as a bass line.

The organ at Ste Trinité also allows for pre-set combinations on a crescendo pedal to manage a crescendo or decrescendo, and this device is also engaged, especially when moving to a contrasting dynamic in the toccata-style improvisations; in those instances, though, it seems the effect is more one of dynamic than of particular selection of stops from timbral considerations. Such changes do serve, however, to demarcate contrasting blocks of musical material which might not naturally sit together; such juxtapositions are also a notable feature of some of Messiaen's composed works. Such a step-change is heard, for example, in improvisation 8 at 2 minutes 20 seconds. In the reflective improvisations it is more common to hear combinations of stops which are particularly characterful, suggesting that they had

been individually and carefully selected. This confirms the observation above regarding the notes Messiaen made for improvising, many of which consist only of possibilities for registration. Sometimes the use of mutations create a problem for transcription, in so far as they engage pipes which speak at an interval to the key depressed.

The contrasts in registration that are evident often serve to highlight particular elements of the music; direct quotations from plainchant, for example, are often given a more colourful timbre than surrounding or accompanying material, which confirms again that this material is of particular significance in Messiaen's approach to the task of providing liturgical commentary. Improvisation 9 is a good example of this, in which a particular timbral contrast is made between the plainchant directly quoted and the surrounding commentary material which uses a variety of striking timbres to provide much of the interest. The plainchant quotations, from the Alleluia for Midnight Mass, are quoted on soft foundations in multiple octaves. The first commentary element (beginning at 17 seconds) takes up the contour of the first part of the *jubilus*, harmonised and played staccato on flutes, with a diminuendo by closing the expression box between each repetition of the phrase. A second, contrasting, development is given on a rich string registration, with melodic development over sustained chords; this is first heard at 46 seconds, and returns at 1 minute 10 seconds in a more extended form, with the melodic phrase further developed both by transposition and intervallic adjustment.

These recordings do demonstrate some of Messiaen's preferences in terms of registration. For example, he enjoys the powerful reed stops, especially in the pedal underlays to his toccata figuration, often selects 'hollow' registrations (in which a fundamental is paired with a high mutation without the intervening octaves, as heard for example from 4 minutes 17 seconds in improvisation 17) and seldom uses foundations on their own. Certain relatively conventional registrations are represented, such as a composed *cornet* which carries a

mournful melody from 1 minute 2 seconds in improvisation 26, and the *grand jeux* engaged in the acclamations, improvisation 13 and 14. Messiaen often, in these recordings, uses string stops to provide harmonic support for melodic material in flutes and reeds, as he does in improvisation 12. It is possible that this reflects orchestral timbres, though it is not uncommon in organ music. The string stops in French organs, including that of Ste Trinité, sound relatively strongly compared with other national schools of organ building, meaning that this timbre is not weak in contrast to the supported solo stops on other manuals. A further observation which sits with these comments on registration, though it is not specifically timbral, is the use of changes of registration to extend the range of the instrument; moving from an 8-foot flute, to a 4-foot, to the 2-foot piccolo effectively extends the compass of the manual in question by two octaves.

When composing music for organ Messiaen would put a lot of effort into defining registration, often returning to Ste Trinité with the manuscript at a late stage in the process to confirm everything.⁵³ Obviously this level of careful consideration is not available to an improviser, though by the time these recordings were made Messiaen had several decades of experience with the individual character of the stops on that particular organ. Thomas Lacôte's suggestion, however, that timbre was the principal element that Messiaen took from organ improvisation into composition does not seem to be further confirmed, given that within this block of evidence much of the registration is not especially distinctive.⁵⁴ Once again, this may be because the recordings date from the period when the midday Mass dedicated to modernist music was no longer a fixture, so Messiaen was not working in his most innovative and distinctive style; Lacôte's argument relates to an earlier period in his practice.

⁵³ e.g. Hill & Simeone, *Messiaen*, p.348. See also Lacôte, 'La forge de la Trinité'.

⁵⁴ Lacôte, 'La forge de la Trinité'.

3.4.7 Tessitura

A relatively brief but nevertheless striking observation to be made on this set of improvisations is the very limited use that Messiaen made of the lower part of the manual compass. Especially bearing in mind that one of his stated requirements for an organ on which to play his composed works was that there be 16-foot stops on the manuals,⁵⁵ it is the more notable that in a significant proportion of the transcriptions both hands are best written in the treble clef. This is especially the case in the toccatas, in which there is an extent to which the relatively high manual figuration serves to balance lower register motifs or punctuation from the pedals, and indeed the advantages in playing technique from keeping the hands relatively close together. Even in improvisations in the more reflective style, however, which are more likely to sound in the mid-range it is rare to hear the manual part descend to the lower part of the compass.

It is possible that this observation can be adequately explained by the role of the pedals in supporting any necessary bass line, though two other considerations might apply. One is a limitation in the evidence: the example within this set which provides an exception, improvisation ten, which is noticeably lower in range, is also among the hardest to hear. This suggests the possibility that the combination of the acoustic and the recording medium lowered the quality of sound in this register, which might have meant that improvisations in the lower range were more common than this set represents but less likely to have been selected for inclusion on the discs.

The second possibility is that Messiaen did have a preference for using the upper range of his instrument in his liturgical improvisations; that could have been for either aesthetic or theological reasons. The theological rationale, if there were one, would be likely

⁵⁵ Samuel, *Permanences*, p.29.

to relate to the ascent of the soul, or to an association Messiaen made between elevation, joy, and freedom, in turn related to the connections he made with birdsong. Birdsong itself is, of course, another source of musical material which would provide a bias towards the upper range of the instrument. It has separately been observed that Messiaen's composed works dating from after the completion of his opera, *Saint François d'Assise*, are also marked by 'a distinct absence of bass and extreme bass textures'.⁵⁶ The reason for this is not clear, but it seems to reflect a more general preference at this stage in Messiaen's life.

3.4.8 Modality, tonality, and colour

For Messiaen, harmony is closely bound up with his perception of colour associations with specific complexes of sound. Any consideration, therefore, of the harmonic aspects of his music must include colour in its scope. Added to this first observation, it is also necessary to account for the fact that the plainchant material on which he drew in these improvisations is based on the eight Gregorian modes; that his own harmonic theory described the famous modes of limited transposition;⁵⁷ and also that significant elements in these improvisations give an aural impression of being driven by functional tonality. These apparently contradictory harmonic conceptions produce a nexus of ideas which must be considered together as co-inherent in Messiaen's approach to improvisation.

To account individually for each in the first instance, it is inevitable, if inconsequential, that direct quotations from plainchant reflect the church modes. Beyond this, and at least in part because Messiaen seldom harmonised the chant material itself, Gregorian modality does not seem to play a highly determinative role in the derived improvisations. There are some instances, for example, in which a dominant functioning chord is built on the

⁵⁶ Christopher Dingle, *Messiaen's Final Works* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), p.311.

⁵⁷ These modes themselves appear to have been developed in improvisation at the organ: Marti, "It's a secret of Love", p.232.

flat seventh rather than the fifth of the mode, which may relate to common techniques for harmonising plainchant – though as observed by Benitez concerning the published *Puer natus* improvisations it is also common to borrow from the subdominant⁵⁸ – but in Messiaen’s hands it is just as likely to derive from his own modes, or simply to chromatic enrichment of the tonal system in the line of the late romantic and early modernist musicians he admired.

The function of the modes of limited transposition in these improvisations is more often a matter of transitory coloration of the harmony rather than the sustained basis of harmonic drive. Where they are most noticeable is where they serve to undermine a tonal centre established in the line of a more functionally tonal progression. Often this is as simple as a succession of augmented triads giving a sense of repose (example 3.16).



Example 3.16. Transcription from *Olivier Messiaen: Live: Improvisations inédites*, disc 1, track 1, beginning at 1 minute.

In overall aural effect, however, these improvisations typically appear to use an enriched form of standard tonal functional harmony. The climax of improvisation three (beginning at 5 minutes 51 seconds), for example, is recognisable as entirely based on tonic, subdominant and dominant (seventh) of E major. The dominant is further enriched beyond the simple

⁵⁸ Benitez, ‘Messiaen as Improviser’, p.140.

addition of the seventh, and approaches Messiaen's own *accord sur le dominant*, but this does not lead the ear to hear anything other than a prolongation of the dominant function.

Even in improvisations which include significant chromatic and modal passages, the end of each improvisation is an unequivocally tonal triad, almost all major (the exceptions being improvisation twenty, a reflective improvisation drawing on the alleluia for All Saints Day, which comes to rest on D minor, and a highly chromatic reflective improvisation, number twenty-four, which rests on a long E without a third, though with minor quality implied by what had gone before). Taking these final chords alone as indicative of a key – acknowledging that to do so smooths over modulations, inflections and modality within each recording – we can observe certain keys seem to be preferred, others are avoided. Table 3.2 shows these keys alongside the modal final of the plainchant source material for the improvisation where applicable.

Table 3.2. Modal and tonal finals in *Olivier Messiaen: Live: Improvisations inédites*.

Improvisation	Modal final of plainchant source (As notated in <i>liber usalis</i> in parentheses); as transposed in Messiaen's improvisation without.	Tonal closure of improvisation (major unless indicated)
1	(La) G#	E
2	(Sol) Eb	Eb
3	(Fa) E	E
4	(Sol) F#	F#
5	(Re) D	C
6	(Fa) F#	F#
7	(Fa) E	E
8	(Fa) F	E
9	(Sol) F#	F#
10		C
11	(Sol) Eb	Eb
12		Eb
13	(Sol) F#	F#
14	(Sol) F#	F#
15	(Sol) F#	B
16		B
17		F#

18	(Sol) F#	F#
19	(Sol) G	G
20	(Sol) G	D minor
21	(Re) E	D
22	(Sol) G	G
23	(Sol) G	C
24		E minor
25	(Sol) G	E
26	(Sol) A	E
27		B
28	(Re) E	E
29	(Sol) G	E

The table demonstrates clearly Messiaen's preference for the keys of E and F# major. It is also notable that in a majority (thirteen out of twenty four) of the improvisations in which a plainchant source is identified, the modal final and the tonal closure are founded on the same note. Of those where that does not hold true, there is often a relation by fifths, suggesting a dominant-tonic relationship, and there are also a couple of mediant relations.

Messiaen's strong associations between sound complexes and colours are not easy to categorise, in so far as the tendency to expect one to one correspondences between a given sound and a single colour does not quite match his descriptions of complexes of sounds matching to non-static patterns of colour. Nevertheless, and following Håkon Austbø, it is possible to suggest the principal colour of a major or minor chord for Messiaen's conception of the music, and doing so adds a level of suggestive interpretation to the pattern of keys given in table 3.2.⁵⁹ For example, the relatively infrequent use of G major, despite much of the modal material leading to a final on Sol, could be explained by the association of that key with the colour yellow, which Messiaen did not much like.⁶⁰ More positively, the golden-

⁵⁹ Håkon Austbø, 'Visualizing Visions: the significance of Messiaen's colours', *Music & Practice*, vol 2 (2015), n.p.

⁶⁰ Samuel, *Permanences*, p.67.

tinged multicolour of F# major, the red of E major (the two most frequently used keys in this set) and the white of C major all suggest not merely aesthetic choices, but at least plausibly symbolic and liturgical associations. There is not a discernible direct correspondence between the musical colour and the liturgical colour of the feast – although that is at least in part explainable by the relatively small number of feasts represented – but white and gold are both colours of celebration for the church, and red has double association with both martyrdom and with the Holy Spirit. Conversely, the blue of A major which could have been used to represent heaven, for example, but which is not a seasonal liturgical colour,⁶¹ is notable for its absence.

Messiaen's descriptions of colour associations with the modes of limited transposition suggest yet more complicated patterns of colour, and of course the table only gives the key at the end of each improvisation, and within the course of each various other tonal centres and inflection points naturally occur. This means that in any given improvisation the colour scheme cannot be thought of as uniform, but must nevertheless be understood as a significant element in the way Messiaen himself conceived the music.

3.4.9 Recurring ideas and techniques

There are a handful of ideas represented more than once in the set of recordings available but which do not fit naturally within the categories discussed above. They nevertheless need to be accounted for in this analysis of Messiaen's practice as an improviser, and therefore are included here.

Among the elements heard several times, especially in the more reflective improvisations, is a particular form of coda in which Messiaen uses a short figure in ascending sequence, often with a flute timbre over a sustained chord on the string stops, to

⁶¹ Blue may be used as a liturgical colour in honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary, though only in particular circumstances under the 'cerulean privilege'; this would not have applied to Messiaen's context.

end the improvisation in the highest register. Whether this represents a heavenward movement of the soul or the freedom Messiaen associated with the flight of birds, it is striking that a similar idea recurs eight times in the twenty-nine improvisations in this set.⁶²

Similarly recurrent, though likely related more to technique than to symbolism are patterns which may be related to the practicalities of playing; these observations confirm those Foster made of the *L'Âme en bourgeon* improvisations.⁶³ Figures in which the hands mirror one another, for example, are practical and enable the organist to realise a level of complexity which would be harder to conceive if the parts were more independent. That said, such figuration is less prominent in these improvisation than observed by Foster, the most prominent example being contrary motion broken chords at the opening of improvisation 26. Similarly tremolandi or trills⁶⁴ in which a hand-shape split between the thumb on a white key or keys and the fingers on black are relatively comfortable to play, while giving the aural effect of the sort of harmonic complexity more associated with a musician like Messiaen (example 3.17). Such tremolandi are common in the toccata-style improvisations represented on the discs, and they, together with glissandi and trills, can be thought of as the way in which Messiaen established and maintained the required energy level for that style of playing.

⁶² Nos. 2, 7, 9, 11, 16, 17, 19, 22.

⁶³ Foster, *Recorded Sound*, pp.31–39.

⁶⁴ These may be indistinguishable from one another; in *La Transfiguration* Messiaen indicates that the pianist should play written trills as tremolandi: Messiaen, *La Transfiguration*, p.416.



Example 3.17. Transcription from *Olivier Messiaen: Live: Improvisations inédites*, disc 1, track 15, beginning at 1 minute 58 seconds.

As indicated in section 3.4.3 above, Messiaen also frequently uses a form of melodic development that he called a commentary. This involves a phrase or part of a phrase being transformed, often by transposition, but also by modal shift and alteration of intervals. This treatment of material is of interest for several reasons. Not only does it require an account as a recurrent element in Messiaen's approach to improvisation, which is the focus of the current chapter, but it also provides, albeit in something of an equivocal sense, a suggestion of the function of the improvisation as a form of commentary on the liturgy. Furthermore, since it seems to be a technique Messiaen learned for improvisation, it may also be of interest in terms of how that activity impacted his approach to composition.⁶⁵ As discussed in chapter five, there are elements of his works which also fit this category, and the modal shifts involved also permit him to take material in the Gregorian modes or from tonal music, and alter it to his own sound-world – part of the 'deforming prism' of his technique towards borrowed elements in his music.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ This idea is discussed further below, pp.167.

⁶⁶ Balmer *et al.*, *Modèle et Invention*, p.39.

3.4.10 Notable absences

It is necessary in completing an account of Messiaen's practice as a liturgical improviser to comment briefly not only on the elements demonstrated by the recordings but also on ideas which might have been sought but are not heard. This is done with an acknowledgement that the recordings, while important as evidence, are not exhaustive, and therefore that absence from this source of evidence is not proof that such elements were never demonstrated in the totality of Messiaen's improvising activity. That said, the context being improvisation is itself a plausible reason why some of the more complex elements of Messiaen's musical language might not be represented.

Thus, as observed above (section 3.4.5), the rhythmic patterns on which Messiaen built his improvisations tend to be the shorter cells, describable in terms of Greek metrical feet, rather than some of the more extended *deçitalas* which he was fond of using in compositions. Equally, although the amphimacer (long – short – long) is represented among those feet, the longer, expanded, examples of non-retrogradable rhythms familiar from his theory of composition are not heard. If the perception is correct that Messiaen's practice when composing was to use the piano to develop harmony but to work out rhythms at the desk,⁶⁷ then one would not necessarily expect the same rigour in terms of rhythm in an improvisation, unless he had specifically prepared and noted a rhythm for a particular purpose. It is likely that he might have done so more readily for a special concert or recording occasion than for the more quotidian function which is now under investigation. Thus it is not surprising that Foster should have identified more examples in the *L'Âme en bourgeois* improvisations than are heard on these discs,⁶⁸ nor that such rhythms can be identified in the *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte-Trinité*, believed to have originated in improvisation

⁶⁷ Peter Hill, 'Interview with Yvonne Loriod' in *The Messiaen Companion* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008) p.285; c.f. Dingle, *Final Works*, p.14.

⁶⁸ Foster, *Recorded Sound*, p.52.

at a special event. Whether in the latter case the rhythms in question were indeed part of the improvisation or were added at a subsequent stage of composition is a question addressed below (section 5.1.2).

Also a notable, indeed innovative, element in the *Méditations* but not evidenced in the recorded improvisations, is Messiaen's *langage communicable*, an alphabetic cipher enhanced with certain leitmotifs for particular ideas and to indicate a sort of case system, with which Messiaen encoded theological propositions and ideas. This element may be thought more likely to appear in liturgical improvisation, since the expression of theological claims is directly in view in both the use of the *langage* and in the commentary on the liturgical action. That it does not appear in these recordings may be accounted for by a preference in context for deriving material from liturgical sources directly, by the fact that Messiaen could not assume that the congregation would recognise or understand the encoding, or that without some preparation material in the *langage* might seem intrusive on the more restrained music of the improvisations. Elsewhere, he referred to the *langage* as a kind of game, which might suggest he considered it insufficiently serious for a liturgical purpose.⁶⁹

3.5 Olivier Messiaen: *organiste-liturgiste*⁷⁰

Chapter two having considered documentary evidence of Messiaen's practice as a liturgical improviser, and the current chapter having complemented those descriptions with an account of the recordings that are available of Messiaen fulfilling that role, some conclusions may be drawn, taking these two sets of evidence together, towards giving a full account of the practice.

⁶⁹ Gillian Weir, 'Organ Music II' in Peter Hill (ed.) *The Messiaen Companion* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008) p.374.

⁷⁰ This sub-heading references one of Messiaen's predecessors as organist of Ste Trinité, Alexandre Guilmant, whose *l'Organiste-liturgiste* aimed to demonstrate a range of appropriate treatments of plainchant melodies for Catholic liturgy.

Messiaen's task as organist of Ste Trinite was to provide relatively short, improvised responses to the liturgical actions, the readings, the sermon, the season of the ecclesiastical calendar, and the mystery of the action of God in the service. As such, his practice in this respect contrasts with his compositional activity. Most obviously this contrast is evident in terms of scale; none of the improvisations is longer than ten minutes, and most are considerably shorter; his concert works are almost all substantially longer, and generally presented as integral cycles even where individual movements might be amenable to use as stand-alone pieces. There is also a contrast in terms of technique, which may be generalised as a sense that these improvisations were more restrained in terms of the more innovative and modernist ideas about music that he explored as a composer. Indeed, the overall impression of the recordings is a similarity to *l'Orgue mystique* of Tournemire, a relatively more conservative approach than Messiaen used in composition, even in those compositions in which he draws explicitly on plainchant, the material that most unifies the two bodies of music.

Although true to his intention not to disturb the piety of the simple faithful, there are elements in his improvisations which do nevertheless go beyond the inherited techniques, especially in respect of harmonic enrichment and rhythmic subtlety. In both of these aspects, the idea that might best conceptualise the approach is that of freedom. On the harmonic plain, these recordings suggest that Messiaen's approach included elements of common practice functional harmony alongside enrichments drawn from modality, from his association of sound complexes with colour, and some from his theoretical experimentation with particular chords, but that at no point is there a sense that he was bound by theoretical ideas; he neither restricted his innovation nor pushed himself to avoid what some of his contemporaries might have considered trite uses of received ideas. Again, this observation is congruent with an

observation about his compositional language during the same decade: ‘It is reasonable to assert that the basis of Messiaen’s harmony in these works is a kind of modified tonality’.⁷¹

Similarly, in the rhythmic dimension, the relative freedom to interpret plainchant with subtle pauses, *accelerandi* and *retardandi*, is expanded through the whole approach to improvisation as witnessed in the recordings. In part, at least, this relates back to the observations made above about organ technique and agogic accentuation being the best way to draw attention to particular points of climax or repose. It is however, noticeable that changes of tempo are frequent throughout the recordings, and recalls the fact that Messiaen drew on theorists of plainchant to suggest that at the root of Gregorian rhythm lie successive groupings of *arsis* and *thesis*.⁷² Listening with this idea in mind does lead one to hear increases in energy and tension, and tendency towards points of restfulness – sometimes following and at other times subverting the expectations built up within such patterns. This in turn affirms Messiaen’s stated aversion to regularity as being essentially unrhythmic, and demonstrates the freedom, playfulness and joy which he often wished to express in his music.

Such playfulness is not to be considered opposed either to the inherent seriousness of purpose with which Messiaen approached his religious ideas and duties, nor does it exclude the expression of ideas that might be thought rather darker alongside those of simple joy; the resurrection is only possible because of the crucifixion, and Messiaen knew that the Bible expresses the totality of human experience, violence as well as comfort.⁷³ In that respect, however, context is what makes the more shocking elements meaningful. The principal methodological issue in these two chapters (two and three) has been that the evidence available renders us unable to access both context and musical content at the same time. In

⁷¹ Dingle, *Final Works*, p.313.

⁷² Samuel, *Permanences*, p. 101–102 ; Messiaen, *Traité IV*, p.52.

⁷³ Goléa, *Rencontres avec Messiaen*, p.37–8. See above, p.35.

documentary forms of evidence we are given context, but only the most general impression of the sound of the music; in the recordings we hear the musical content, but these recordings are divorced from the context that would enable us to have greater certainty in inferring the intended effect.

One of the main conclusions of chapter two was that Messiaen's approach to liturgical improvisation changed over time and varied between occasions. Claiming precision in describing how these changes manifested is complicated by two senses in which power might be seen to have been operative: first the tension between the wishes and expectations of clergy, congregation and organist must have constrained each of those bases in their fullest expression, and second the interests of those curating the retention and presentation of evidence may have influenced the availability of contrary indications. The recordings considered date from a time at which Messiaen said the *Messe des fous*, the famous midday mass in which Messiaen was permitted to indulge in more modernist techniques in his improvisations, had been discontinued. It is therefore to be expected that the improvisations on the discs discussed in this chapter represent examples towards the more restrained range of approaches he might have taken. Even with that constraint we hear elements of the dramatic and surprising alongside the calm meditateness one might more readily expect from a liturgical function.

Before finishing this chapter there are some further ideas that can be drawn out of our analysis of Messiaen's practice as an improviser that will set up the arguments in the following chapters in which the nature of his liturgical practice is used to help understand his wider religious and musical approaches. First on the question of musical technique, as we have observed Messiaen's approach to rhythm while having some similarities to his theorising seems significantly less complex in his improvisations than in his composed music. Dingle, in a chapter describing certain of Messiaen's common techniques, draws on a

comment that Loriod had made to Peter Hill to suggest that when composing Messiaen tended to work out harmonies at the keyboard but rhythm at the desk.⁷⁴ Messiaen himself identified the independent treatment of these two elements as one of his principal innovations. It is not clear that such a distinction can be taken to be absolute and unvarying, but these recordings may be taken as broadly supporting the argument that the more technical approaches to rhythm for which Messiaen's compositions are known are not a significant part of his *ex tempore* practice. This in turn supports the idea of a division of labour in which rhythms were worked out separately and rather more cerebrally than his harmonic approach, in which colour and experimentation allow for a more instinctive approach.

Considering a similar tension between the relatively calculated as opposed to the more subliminal or reflexive, this consideration of Messiaen's improvisations enables an alternative look at the demonstrated technique whereby he borrowed material from a number of sources in his compositions. Where the argument of Balmer, Lacôte and Brent Murray seems to position this approach on the cerebral side of that distinction, the use in liturgical improvisation of given material in the form of plainchant seems to suggest the possibility that memory and musical instinct played a greater role than they allow. In his tendency to develop a fragment of plainchant by altering intervals within a given contour in his 'commentary' the sorts of melodic and harmonic transformations to which his material is subjected in the compositional approach are present in at least an embryonic form. Even in the rhythmic dimension, which has been suggested as less innovative in these improvisations than in his compositions, some elements of his 'deforming prism' are audible in the way he treats a line of melody as freely malleable with regard to note values and tempi.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ See above, p.129, n.67.

⁷⁵ Balmer *et al.*, *Modèle et Invention*, p.39.

Finally, what can be found in this music to demonstrate Messiaen's religious and theological approach to his liturgical task? The following chapter argues for a particular theological account developed from a specific perspective drawn from the discourse of liturgical theology. To set this argument in context it is necessary to suggest what can be heard in the recorded music and derived from the accounts of Messiaen's improvisation to connect the music itself with a liturgically theological approach. Listening with that in mind may lead one first to hear the music as prayerful, both in the sense that it is designed to support a praying congregation and in the sense that the organist himself might be thought of as having prayed through his music. In particular, much of the more reflective style of music demonstrated on these discs can be heard as incantatory, or as encompassing a sense of sublime mystery; an audible equivalent of incense bearing prayers towards God. For audiences so inclined, the same sense can also be heard in Messiaen's composed religious music.

Furthermore, although in a sense a solo task by Messiaen as an individual organist, these improvisations are part of a greater whole. The clarity with which he set out his plainchant themes is an inclusive gesture, making his material obvious; it is perhaps this inclusivity that enables his 'reputational entrepreneurs' to frame his liturgical activity as an act of restrained service, distinct from the more challenging music which often characterises his work as a composer. Even when the improvisations convey a higher energy level, the implication is that the organ responds on behalf of the congregation, expressing the joyful response of the fellowship of those gathered in the church to the action or proclamation which provides the context.

The liturgical style evidenced in Messiaen's practice is, therefore, engaged with and subject to the requirements of the situation; his personal aesthetic preferences are not imposed on the congregation, but nor are they entirely absent. Messiaen's musical personality

is present, but as one among many. The symbolism with which he endued his liturgical music is rich and was evidently recognised as such by those who heard it; it is harder to assess at this distance, given the observation above that the evidence we have tends to give context or content but not both at once. Nevertheless, a number of suggestions have been made confirming that we can hear this music's participation in the multi-valent symbolism of Christian liturgy.

Messiaen's improvisations must be acknowledged as rather serious in intent, as were the overwhelming majority of his compositions, but nevertheless expressing deep joy and not without a certain playfulness in their execution. A high-minded intention alone, however, may not be sufficient to suggest that music is capable of expressing theological truth in the way that Messiaen hoped it might; the following chapter considers the various ways in which this possibility has been approached and proposes that a theological understanding of the specifically liturgical context as well as of the intended symbolism might serve as a hermeneutic aid in approaching that question.

4. Music, Liturgy and Theology

Among the most commonly cited of Messiaen's claims regarding the religious nature of his music is his contention that it is theological rather than mystical:

I have tried to be a Christian musician and to sing of my faith, without ever succeeding. No doubt because I am not worthy (if that may be said without false humility!) Pure music, profane music and above all theological music (and not mystical, as the majority of my listeners believe) alternate in my output.¹

Later he would elaborate:

Personally, I deeply distrust this word [mysticism]. It doesn't suit me at all and I'd like to say why not. As soon as one starts talking about mysticism, people think of a diseased state, of a neurotic who has vague sentiments and ecstasies. I don't like that; I'm a devout man and I love the sound, solid gifts of Faith. [...] What can be said is that I believe and that I've done theological work and that I've tried to bring the realities and the mysteries of Faith into my music.²

Given that both times it was in response to a question, and on the second occasion it was his interlocutor who introduced the word mystic, it is possible that this is over-interpreted, but it requires one to ask what it might mean to describe music as theological. This chapter, led by the research question regarding Messiaen's theological conception of his role, proposes that Messiaen's fulfilment of the functions of a liturgical musician provides overlooked grounds for interpreting this claim, and can enrich our understanding of how Messiaen's music can express theological ideas.

The chapter begins with an interrogation of previous approaches to understanding the theological element of Messiaen's musical approach, before turning to consider Messiaen's formation as embedded within the liturgy. A wider discussion of the discipline of liturgical theology then prepares the ground for the case that liturgy provides the primary *locus* in which it is possible to talk about music as theological. In the light of that argument, the

¹ Claude Rostand, *Olivier Messiaen* (Paris: Ventadour, 1957) p.19.

² Rößler, *Contributions*, p.89.

chapter concludes with a consideration of the ways in which Messiaen's liturgical music – as described in the previous chapters – and his composed works, most of which are not explicitly liturgical, can be understood as related through a liturgical sensibility, and that it is this which validates the claim that the music is theological. This final element leads into chapter five, in which case studies on specific works will consider the influence of Messiaen's liturgical function as organist on his approach to compositions intended primarily for performance outside the church.

Before turning to the substance of the chapter, there is an additional consideration that may be worth addressing up-front. There are many audiences for Messiaen's music, and indeed for musicological writing; these audiences inevitably include many whose own religious presumptions sit within the Catholic tradition of which Messiaen was a participant, but also Christians of other denominations, and many who would not subscribe to any of the religious positions held by Messiaen, or by the present (Anglican) writer. Listeners and readers of any religious conviction, or of none, may be interested in the argument advanced and no presumption is made about the degree to which a reader would concur with Messiaen's beliefs; whether or not Messiaen's creed accords with any external standard of truth may not be strictly relevant and need not deter anyone's interest in the topic. In fact, one of the counterintuitive advantages to framing the argument in relation to liturgy is that, despite seeming initially esoteric and being couched in a certain amount of theological language, liturgical acts – and liturgical music(s) – are observable and concrete, where theological truth claims are often unobservable and unprovable. This means that observations made about liturgical function are susceptible of etic as well as of emic interpretation, arguably making this approach to Messiaen's musical-theological thought more, rather than less, accessible to audiences that might be uncomfortable with religious truth claims, as well as suggesting new perspectives of engagement for audiences who share his religious views.

Before expounding the possibilities afforded by a liturgical-theological approach, previous proposals for understanding what it meant for Messiaen to describe himself as a theological composer must be considered.

4.1 Messiaen as a theological composer

One way in which researchers have approached the question of Messiaen's claim to express theology in his music has been to relate his works to the writings of theologians, including St Thomas Aquinas (c.1225–1274), the Irish-French monk Dom Columba Marmion (1858–1923), and the philosopher Ernest Hello (1828–1885). The central place that Aquinas had in Messiaen's thinking is unarguable, and has been noted by many. Siglind Bruhn observes not only Messiaen's explicit quotation and meditation on Thomistic themes, but also 'his implicit translation of what he understood to be Thomas's thoughts on the role of music in the life of a Christian and on music's possible spiritual content'.³ Vincent P. Benitez's chapter specifically entitled 'Messiaen and Aquinas' adumbrates numerous instances of Thomistic ideas in the texts Messiaen sets.⁴ Benitez chooses to downplay the significance of the attribution to St Thomas of the prayer 'O Sacrum Convivium', set by Messiaen in 1937, presumably because the text is now commonplace and not specifically tied to the wider scholastic project. Less comprehensibly, he also minimises the clear derivation from the *Summa Theologica* – Aquinas's major work – of the characterisations of resurrected bodies that Messiaen illustrated in *Les Corps glorieux*.⁵ Benitez does not explain why he deems Aquinas's influence on these earlier works 'indirect' as opposed to the 'direct' influence he discerns in works beginning with *Trois petites liturgies de la Présence Divine*.⁶ Perhaps more

³ Bruhn, 'Theology and Aesthetics of Aquinas', p.119.

⁴ Vincent P Benitez, 'Messiaen and Aquinas', in Andrew Shenton (ed.), *Messiaen the Theologian* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010) pp.101–23.

⁵ St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. The Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1947) Supplement to the Third Part, Questions 81–85.

⁶ Benitez, 'Messiaen and Aquinas', p.110 n.34.

critically, although musical observations support some illustrative word painting integrating music and text, and it is observable that some of the Thomistic ‘texts’ in question are set directly in Messiaen’s *langage communicable*, it is Aquinas’s influence on Messiaen’s texts, rather than his music, that provide the substance of Benitez’ observed influences.

The relationship between text and music is inevitably a significant element in the question of whether music can express theology, indeed whether music can express anything at all, so if Benitez and others are to be critiqued for identifying links between textual elements, and only weakly to musical ones, a detour into this area is in order. The detailed arguments of formalism and various hermeneutic approaches to meaning in music are well rehearsed elsewhere,⁷ but perhaps we can follow Nicholas Cook in trying to navigate a course somewhere between the ‘Scylla of inherent and the Charybdis of ... constructed’ meaning.⁸ By this he intends to suggest that we can concede that music does not encode meaning in the way that language does, without conceding that anyone can impose whatever construction they choose on any given piece of music. What sometimes seems absent in this sort of discussion, however, is the importance of context and the implication of questions raised over the reification of a musical ‘work’. On the latter point, Lydia Goehr’s probing of the ‘work concept’ forces us to remember that music is an action rather than a thing.⁹ Among the consequences of this observation is the fact that while things are relatively easy conceptually to decontextualise, activity necessarily occurs at specific times and in specific locations. That specificity means that the task of what Eric Clarke and Mark Doffman call ‘distributed

⁷ A polemical but very readable survey may be found in Peter Kivy, *Antithetical Arts: On the Ancient Quarrel between Literature and Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); more positive and with a number of different emphases is Maeve Louise Heaney, *Music as Theology: What Music Says about the Word* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2012), pp.27-68.

⁸ Nicholas Cook, ‘Theorizing Musical Meaning’, *Music Theory Spectrum*, vol.23, no. 2 (2001) p.177.

⁹ Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: and essay in the philosophy of music* (rev. ed, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

creativity'¹⁰ – that the final interpretation of music is a shared task between composers, performers and audiences – is not unconstrained in the way formalists have argued. That in turn pushes one towards another of Cook's titles, in which he claims that the boundaries between Musicology and Ethnomusicology are blurring, in so far as the latter has always encompassed circumstance and setting as vital to the explanation of a musical activity where the former has more often tried to abstract formal elements of sound and treat them as independent.¹¹ It should not be surprising to argue that the context for an act of music making is inherently part of what gives that music its significance, and its meaning. In doing so we may not be quite as 'drastic' as Carolyn Abbate would wish us to be, but we may hope nevertheless to avoid her charge of an esoteric and privileged 'Gnosticism'.¹²

Returning, then, to Messiaen, when it is noted that Benitez and others link Messiaen's theological influences to his texts rather than to his music, this is not to be understood in an absolute sense, as the texts with which Messiaen surrounded his compositions must be seen as part of his contribution to framing the context in a particular way. Thus, papers by Balmer and Healy discussing the literary and theological texts that Messiaen can be demonstrated to have read,¹³ and observations that, as with Aquinas, other thinkers such as Marmion and Hello influenced Messiaen's thought, are made more relevant by the fact that Messiaen took particular pains to curate the verbal contextualisation of his works.¹⁴

A similar tactic to relating Messiaen's theology to his specific interests is exemplified by Stephen Schloesser, whose work does a lot to situate Messiaen in the context of wider

¹⁰ Eric Clarke and Mark Doffman (eds.) *Distributed Creativity: Collaboration and Improvisation in Contemporary Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹¹ Nicholas Cook, 'We are All (Ethno)musicologists Now', in Henry Stobart (ed.), *The New (Ethno)musicologies* (Lanham MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008).

¹² Abbate, Carolyn, 'Music-Drastic or Gnostic?', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 30, no. 3. (Spring 2004) 505–36.

¹³ Yves Balmer, 'Religious Literature in Messiaen's Personal Library', in Andrew Shenton (ed.), *Messiaen the Theologian* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 15–27; Gareth Healey, 'Messiaen - Bibliophile', in Christopher Dingle and Nigel Simeone (eds), *Olivier Messiaen: Music, Art and Literature* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007), pp.159–71.

¹⁴ Balmer, 'Entre Analyse et Propagande', pp.27–47.

theological tendencies in his cultural milieu. His biography of Messiaen is careful and substantial, despite its scope focussing only on the ‘early’ life of the composer;¹⁵ it is arguably even better read alongside his wider history of inter-war French artistic culture, which explores the uses made of aspects of Catholic doctrine in the wider currents of cultural production in that context.¹⁶ Another example of this sort of research is Douglas Shadle’s exploration of Messiaen’s relations with Jacques Maritain and the ideas of Neo-Thomism.¹⁷ Shadle’s work is less theologically astute, setting up more of an opposition than is justified between the ideas of Neo-Thomism and those of the *Ressourcement* theologians, in order to suggest that Messiaen was smart to sit apart from such arguments despite there being no pressing reason why he might have been expected to take sides.

Another approach to theology in Messiaen’s work is to draw on theories of semiotics, and even some which properly belong to linguistics, to suggest that elements of theology are encoded in the music in the form of signs. This is perhaps applied most readily to Messiaen’s *langage communicable*, a cipher mapping specific pitch-duration data onto the alphabet, enriched with additional elements giving ‘cases’ as well as specific nominal forms, especially those for God. The *langage* was first described by Messiaen in the score of *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte-Trinité*,¹⁸ and the semiotic approach most thoroughly argued by Andrew Shenton.¹⁹ After considering various angles on semiotics and linguistics – albeit with something of an over-reliance on the popular science writings of Canadian-American psycholinguist Stephen Pinker for the latter – he concludes that

Messiaen’s music needs a listening practice in order for the listener to be truly engaged at the level of the signs, but at a deeper level of

¹⁵ Schloesser, *Visions*.

¹⁶ Stephen Schloesser, *Jazz age Catholicism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

¹⁷ Shadle, ‘Messiaen’s Relationship to Jacques Maritain’, pp.83–99.

¹⁸ Messiaen, *Méditations*, pp.3–5.

¹⁹ Andrew Shenton, *Olivier Messiaen’s System of Signs: Notes Towards Understanding his Music* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008).

communication, where words are insufficient, the music truly speaks for itself.²⁰

In the same paragraph he suggests, however, that for a non-Catholic listener the religious content is simply a superficial imposition; that conclusion cannot quite satisfy the question of Messiaen's theological approach to music. It is true that for some audiences the 'signified' of Messiaen's symbols may have less meaningful resonance, but Shenton's argument, in reducing the signs to correspondence with signified concepts, misses a dimension which might be thought of as something akin to narrative: that the signs do not function in an isolated way, but form part of Messiaen's 'poetics of the wonderful'.²¹ Brigitte Massin's book, on the other hand, explores the stories behind Messiaen's thinking very thoroughly, and largely allows him to articulate it for himself. She also provides a good example of the fact that non-religious audiences are as engaged and intrigued by Messiaen's theological claims as are religious listeners: her interest in Messiaen's religion, though she herself is not a Catholic, illustrates the false assumption behind the notion that not sharing Messiaen's beliefs must entail simply dismissing their usefulness.²²

Another important approach to Messiaen's expression of theology through music begins not with any of his musical works but with his articulation of his thoughts about sacred music in the *Conférence de Notre-Dame*, a speech he gave on 4 December 1977.²³ In this he identifies three ways in which music could be associated with religion: liturgical music, religious music, and dazzling music. The former he claimed encompassed only plainchant, although that is likely to have been a polemical overstatement in reaction to the implementation of the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, and arguably does not exclude the related improvisations in liturgical context which are discussed

²⁰ Shenton, *System of Signs*, p.169.

²¹ Massin, *Messiaen*.

²² Massin, *Messiaen*, p.14.

²³ Messiaen, *Conférence de Notre-Dame*.

in the foregoing chapters. His second category concerns simply music inspired in any way by religious ideas or stories, and suggests that any art which approaches a religious subject with a degree of reverence can be called religious. The third category, which he concedes is the most difficult to understand, is music in which sound and colour combine to dazzle the listener, in a way analogous to the dazzling excess of God's Truth, as described by Aquinas.

This third category of dazzling music may have been an attempt to rearticulate Messiaen's earlier claims on behalf of a 'living' music, which he had already described in terms of luminosity.²⁴ The claim of dazzlement is considered in significant detail by Sander van Maas.²⁵ His book is very dense and sometimes rather circular in its argumentation, but it succeeds in bringing out connections between Messiaen's ideas and not only Aquinas but certain more recent theologians, most notably Hans Urs von Balthasar. Balthasar's conception of a theology which responds to the experience of beauty does indeed seem apt for Messiaen's theological aesthetic, especially as regards glory, but van Maas's treatment shows that Messiaen goes beyond existing theological ideas into territory that is new, but may be problematic. In the end this does not provide the solid grounding of Messiaen's musical theology that van Maas seems to be seeking.

A few other approaches are worthy of brief attention here. First, Paul Griffiths's suggestion that the 'generative and fundamental substance of Messiaen's music' is 'the denial of forward-moving time'.²⁶ Griffiths recognises both the inherent tension in the denial of time through a temporal medium – which music inescapably is – and the fact that this denial of time is bound up with the theological claims Messiaen makes for his music. The missing dimension, and one that it is hoped the current chapter can help to provide, is an account of

²⁴ Broad, *Messiaen: Journalism*, pp.63–4.

²⁵ van Maas, *Reinvention of Religious Music*.

²⁶ Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985) p.17.

the actual theological relevance of this temporal escape. Certain other commentators, especially on the *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*, pick up the same notion, again without quite stating its full significance on the theological plain. The key point being that eschatology is, theologically speaking, not only concerned with future hope but also in certain respects already realised. This is the way in which liturgical time is understood to be heavenly time; once again liturgy suggests itself as the point in which Messiaen's music makes theological sense.

Anthony Pople's contribution to *The Messiaen Companion*, a chapter which aims to introduce Messiaen's musical language and thought in broad terms, once it has discussed modality and rhythm, subsumes much of the religious imagery under the somewhat equivocal heading of 'magic'.²⁷ While it is an understandable label for much of the more esoteric symbolic elements in Messiaen's thinking, it does not sit entirely happily with either Catholic teaching on forms of power, nor with Messiaen's stated aim to express and propound theological truths, and not to hide them.²⁸ Rather than this somewhat gnostic esotericism, Messiaen's signs may better be understood as active symbols taking part in ritual functions.

Père Pascal Ide, who had been a priest at Ste Trinité during Messiaen's last few years, speaking to Vincent Benitez, suggested Augustine and Bonaventure as more important to Messiaen, though often overlooked in favour of Aquinas. Perhaps more pointedly, though, he discussed aesthetic parallels between Messiaen and Balthasar.²⁹ The same *Père* Ide, writing on the question of whether Messiaen could be described as a theologian in the booklet accompanying an exhibition on Messiaen organised by the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* in 1996, makes a point of including as a subheading '*L'homme à genoux*'. The notion of

²⁷ Anthony Pople, 'Messiaen's Musical Language: an Introduction' in Peter Hill (ed.) *The Messiaen Companion* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008) p.43.

²⁸ Cf. Samuel, *Permanences*, p.116

²⁹ Vincent Perez Benitez, *Olivier Messiaen's Opera Saint François d'Assise* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), pp.13–14.

theology being primarily undertaken in prayer he ascribes to certain fathers of the church, but an important restatement of the idea is given by Balthasar,³⁰ and it is to this essay that *Père Ide* is likely to have been referring in talking about parallels between Balthasar and Messiaen.

One of the issues raised with some uses of the idea of theology in prayer is that it is too individualistic, even self-generated, and can lead people to heterodoxy. Perhaps the best counterargument is that the ideal prayer (in this sense and for this purpose) is done not individually but corporately, in public acts of the church; that is to say, in liturgy.³¹ The rest of this chapter considers in turn the importance of liturgy in Messiaen's formation as a Catholic musician, and the role liturgy plays in determining, regulating, and expressing the faith of the church. On this basis, it is argued that liturgy is the *locus* in which it is possible for music to function theologically, and that it is this sensibility which Messiaen 'transposes' out of church in his compositions. Robert Sherlaw Johnson, at the end of an essay discussing rhythmic symbolism in Messiaen's music, offers a hint of understanding in this direction, although it has still not been fully explored in research.³² Johnson suggests that the aim of escaping temporality, as per the argument made by Griffiths, can succeed as a temporary illusion, and adds 'This is also the aim of liturgy and liturgical music'.³³ He goes on to recount one of the founding myths of the Russian Orthodox church, in which the Grand Prince of Kiev sent emissaries to various religions, and it was those who visited Constantinople who observed a worship in which heaven and earth were brought together.³⁴ The Eastern Orthodox view of liturgy as transcending time and providing an experience of eternity may represent a higher view of liturgy than Messiaen himself articulated, but one

³⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'Theology and Sanctity' in *Explorations in Theology, Vol. I: The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989) pp.181–209.

³¹ Romano Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. Ada Lane (Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2018) p.8.

³² Sherlaw Johnson, 'Rhythmic Technique', pp.121–139.

³³ Sherlaw Johnson, 'Rhythmic Technique', p.137.

³⁴ Sherlaw Johnson, 'Rhythmic Technique', p.138.

which, explored in more detail, may help to ground the claim that Messiaen's music could express theological truths.

4.2 Messiaen's theological formation in Catholic liturgy

If one of the problems with the more polemical claims for liturgical theology, which will be discussed in the next section, is that it makes a claim to primacy, it is worth remembering that there are several ways in which that term can be understood. In this section it is taken in perhaps its most literal sense, not of logical or ontological priority, but simply a temporal sense in which liturgy comes before both scripture and theology. This is arguably true corporately as well as individually: early Christians met for organised worship before St Paul wrote his letters, let alone before the formation of the creeds. But for individuals, too, especially those like Messiaen who grew up in a church-going family, the experience of public worship precedes catechism and instruction, and long precedes any further theological reading and study.

There is not much information available about Messiaen's early experiences in church, but Yves Balmer has demonstrated thoroughly that his own claim to have been a born believer in a family of non-believers is hardly credible.³⁵ Arguably his mother fell away from the church as her experiences left her increasingly disappointed in life, but Messiaen's upbringing was clearly one in which church attendance was a significant part, religious literature formed a significant proportion of the material he read as a child, and his father and brother shared in many of his religious interests and predilections. At an early age his mother reported that he 'knows the catechism'.³⁶ Additionally, when asked whether he became an organist because he was a Catholic, he recounted that he had always attended Mass without

³⁵ Yves Balmer, "'Je suis né croyant...'" Aux sources du catholicisme d'Olivier Messiaen' in Sylvain Caron and Michel Duchesneau (eds.), *Musique, art et religion dans l'entre-deux-guerres* (Lyon: Symétrie, 2009), pp.417–441.

³⁶ Hill & Simeone, *Messiaen*, p.9.

reference to the musical possibilities, and only became an organist because his piano instructors recognised his gift for improvisation.³⁷ All accounts agree that he read prodigiously in theology, and apparently began reading Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* as a teenager,³⁸ but he did not receive formal theological education as such. His grounding in the subject matter and sensibility of the Catholic religion arose first and foremost from the experience of worship, and the forms of theological instruction which support it: catechesis and preaching.

Another particularly telling biographical detail supports this point, and that is that he told Brigitte Massin that he owned a Missal before he owned a Bible – though he knew the stories of the Bible.³⁹ There is an underlying point to all this: although we tend to think of religions in terms of a set of propositional claims about the nature of existence, they tend, in fact, to be constituted as much or more by sets of associated practices and rituals. It is immersion and participation in those rituals which constitute a community of believers, who share assent to beliefs primarily in and through participation in liturgy. This is not to restrict the implications of liturgical participation to the assembly itself: a good Catholic, having participated in the liturgical mysteries, would hope to live-out the faith in other contexts. Nor is it to suggest, as Paul Bradshaw rightly objects, that participants in any given liturgical situation arrive with minds *tabula rasa*, but that without the liturgy, the first elements of instruction would not be offered to or received by many of those participating.⁴⁰

Certainly, the more commonly cited account of the beginnings of Messiaen's liturgical theological explorations presupposes that history of participation. The account he himself gave is that having been appointed organist of Ste Trinité, a conversation with his

³⁷ Samuel, *Permanences*, pp.26–7.

³⁸ Massin, *Messiaen*, p.31.

³⁹ Massin, *Messiaen*, p.29.

⁴⁰ Paul Bradshaw, 'Difficulties in Doing Liturgical Theology', *Pacifica: Australasian Theological Studies*, vol. 11, issue 2 (1998) p.191.

confessor noted that although he had been well trained in the profession of organist, he had still to understand the liturgy.⁴¹ The work recommended to him for that purpose, Dom Columba Marmion's *Le Christ dans ses mystères* which had a demonstrable influence on some of Messiaen's ideas, may not immediately be understood as an instruction in liturgy. It is certainly not a manual on liturgical choreography, mechanics, or even symbolism. These things a faithful and life-long Catholic such as Messiaen already knew. Marmion's text discusses, from a devotional perspective, certain significant events in the life of Jesus; although these events are reflected in the patterns of the liturgical calendar, in many ways the links between the stories and the liturgy are not spelled out. What this means is that the book could be thought to function as an education in liturgy only for someone already aware of, even immersed in, the rhythm and dynamics of the cycles of the church's year. A similar observation might be made of Dom Prosper Guéranger's *L'Année liturgique* which was so influential on Charles Tournemire's *L'Orgue mystique*.⁴²

The implication of this last point is that rather than needing to learn about liturgy *per se*, what Messiaen's confessor advised was that he should think about the way in which liturgy links with theology; how, in this first instance, the Gospel stories stand in relation to the church's calendar, with both elements of which relationship Messiaen was already familiar. The argument of liturgical theologians, which will be introduced in the next section, is that where some might assume that the liturgy is subsequent and subservient to the truth-claims of theology, the nature of the relationship is significantly more complex, and indeed, some argue that it is in certain respects the opposite. Thus, Messiaen's theological reading is subsequent to his initial exposure to theological ideas in the context of the liturgical assembly, and his understanding of theological and philosophical texts inevitably coloured by

⁴¹ Massin, *Messiaen*, p.68.

⁴² Lord, 'Liturgy and Gregorian Chant', pp.43–92.

his experience. Of course, this attempt to understand in more detail feeds back in turn to the implications of theological learning for the practice of Christian living and worship, each of the elements mutually reinforcing the other.

A final question in this section on Messiaen's formation in liturgy is what impact liturgical music had on his musical formation. Any attempt to answer this is necessarily speculative to some extent, but it is clear that he attended church regularly before he learned the organ, and long before he obtained work as a liturgical musician. It is to be assumed that in doing so he heard organ music and liturgical chant, and these will have formed some part of the background to his general musicianship in the way that early experiences always must. Indeed, Messiaen's father wrote of having taken his sons to visit churches because they demonstrated interest both in ceremonies and in the music to be heard.⁴³ Since we do not know precisely what he heard, musically speaking, either in terms of repertoire, or in terms of standards of performance, we cannot draw many conclusions, but it seems impossible to deny that liturgical music must have constituted a significant proportion of the music he heard as a child, especially as his childhood pre-dates readily available recordings or public broadcasts. It does seem that plainchant already formed a significant musical influence early in his career, which can be taken to support the claim that liturgical music played a role in his musical as well as his theological formation. Interestingly, in *Technique de mon langage musical* he discusses plainchant in both motivic and formal terms.⁴⁴ It functions not only as an inexhaustible mine of melodic ideas, but also a way of thinking about motifs in terms of neumes, and a way of thinking about formal structures that enabled him to expand on the repertoire of classical and romantic forms inherited.

⁴³ Schloesser, *Visions*, p.134.

⁴⁴ Messiaen, *Technique*, pp.34, 54–60.

Another striking aspect of Messiaen's music is that he consistently relates musical works to short quotations, principally from scripture. This also seems likely to stem from the liturgical practice of using music to respond – in ways that will be discussed in the rest of this chapter – to texts, both the lectionary and the ordinary and proper texts of the Missal. We also know that although Dupré was his only organ teacher, Messiaen was influenced by other older organists in Paris during his formative years. Among these Charles Tournemire is particularly significant. Writing in 1983 Messiaen recalled hearing Tournemire improvise and drew a distinction between his concert improvisations and his improvisations during Masses, which 'were much more beautiful'.⁴⁵ It is, of course, possible that this is an idealisation, projected onto the music rather than inherent in it, but if that is how Messiaen heard it then it must be significant. Even if it is such a projection, it is as a function of the context – the liturgy – that such a claim might be made.

This section has argued that whether or not Cardinal Lustiger was right to claim that 'Messiaen was not a writer for the liturgy' it is certainly possible to say that he was absolutely a writer *of* or *from* the liturgy.⁴⁶ To put these observations into a theoretical context, Catholic liturgy could be said to have formed a significant element of Messiaen's *habitus* in the sense introduced by Pierre Bourdieu: 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures'.⁴⁷ Although Bourdieu wrote about these structures as essentially immutable, where it seems likely that they are better seen as in constant (re-)formation in a dialectic between individual and environment, I take the term to mean that certain repeated ways of engaging become embedded in an individual's approach. In the case under consideration, then, engagement in Catholic liturgy was a constant of Messiaen's thought, and especially from his appointment to

⁴⁵ Simeone, «*Bien Cher Félix...*», p.51.

⁴⁶ Kars, 'Messiaen and Liturgy', p.332.

⁴⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1990) p.60.

Ste Trinité he regularly used improvised music inspired by liturgical chants to respond to aspects of the service. This was so-far ingrained that even without theorising it, he transposed some of this way of thinking to his wider musical work. In the next section a set of theological ideas are introduced under the label of ‘liturgical theology’. These ideas will approach from the other side the theological implications of formation by and in liturgy and help guide an understanding of why thinking about Messiaen’s music liturgically helps to clarify his theological intentions.

4.3 Liturgical theology

In considering religious imagery in Wagner’s *Parsifal*, Roger Scruton gives a pithy summary of Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* which he argues had been anticipated by Wagner’s approach to religion:

Ethnographers had assumed that rituals owe their meaning to the myths that they summarize. In fact, Frazer argued, it is the other way round: the myths are to be explained by the rituals. The central fact in any religion is the ceremony: the sacred moment whose inner meaning cannot be stated in prose. Myths are commentaries on these sacred moments, attempts to rationalize them by providing a narrative into which they are subsumed, as the ritual of Holy Communion is subsumed in the story of Christ’s Passion.⁴⁸

Liturgical theology, in the sense it is used in this thesis, requires careful definition; it consists of a set of ideas which have sometimes enjoyed a level of popularity among certain theologians, though it has arguably fallen rather out of fashion recently. It can perhaps be summarised, however, as taking up the challenge implied by the interpretation of *The Golden Bough* summarised by Scruton, accepting that there is at least some sense in which rituals have a level of primacy, and exploring what implications that might have for the self-understanding of Christianity. Although some writers in this tradition appear partisan in setting up an opposition between this approach and other more traditional understandings of

⁴⁸ Scruton, *Parsifal*, p.68.

theological authority, there is no necessity to make a reductive distinction between them: Christian liturgy is part of Christian tradition and bound to the use of Scripture – these more traditional authorities are not to be set against liturgy but inhere within it. The distinction of ‘liturgical theology’ is one of perspective rather than substance. In the first instance it is important to distinguish it from other related disciplines, clearing the way to a more positive definition; it will then be possible to explore some of the history and criticisms of liturgical theology, before, in the next section, constructing more specifically the way it is used in this work to understand a theology of liturgical music, and thereby substantiate a reading of Messiaen’s claim to compose theological music.

Liturgical studies, as distinct from liturgical theology, tend to function either as a normative explanation of ecclesiastical rubrics or as an historical exploration of the origins and evolution of the texts and rituals that constitute Christian liturgy. In the former sense it can be seen in relation to ecclesiology, or more often to Canon Law, and may justify the normative claims with appeal to theological concepts and authorities, but can otherwise seem somewhat insular in aim and methodology. As an historical discipline, liturgical studies aims to explain the origin and development of practices and ideas. Such explanations are sometimes then used to advocate for reform and restoration, though it need not necessarily follow that original is always preferable. This approach is absolutely necessary to understanding how Christian liturgy functions, but it can seem rather aloof to theological questions as to the implications of one form of rite rather than another.

Another related discipline that is to be kept distinct from liturgical theology is the discourse of homiletics, or the science of preaching. For many modern Christian liturgical participants, there is a sense that, within the liturgy, ‘theology’ is delivered in a sermon or homily; although it is to be hoped that this is true, it overlooks the theological import of the rest of the liturgy. In other words, it is also true that theology is delivered in the creeds, in the

canon, in the singing of hymns and the attitude of supplication, to name only a handful of the elements that make up Christian liturgy. Liturgical theology aims to give a theological explanation and relevance to all of these elements.

As a final negative definition, we can distinguish liturgical theology from Ritual Studies, although these often treat of the same material. Arguably, the difference here is one of perspective and method; Ritual Studies may take an etic approach to the texts and actions of liturgy, drawing on sociological and cross-cultural methods to understand the dynamics of the liturgy as a social activity. Liturgical theology might be considered the emic counterpart of this, attempting to comprehend from the inside what, theologically speaking, is done in liturgy, and how that in turn functions as a source within the wider discourse of theology.

Russian Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann (1921–1983), whose studies began in Paris in the 1940s and were completed in the United States – his doctorate was awarded in 1959 – began working in the field of historical liturgical studies. His aim was to describe the origins of the liturgical *ordo* from the earliest witness up to what he terms ‘the Byzantine synthesis’.⁴⁹ As a piece of historical work, his conclusions have arguably been superseded, but of interest here is his desire to frame this work as of more than antiquarian interest by assigning to liturgy a significant theological import:

Therefore the task of liturgical theology consists in giving a theological basis to the explanation of worship and the whole liturgical tradition of the Church. This means, first, to find and define the concepts and categories which are capable of expressing as fully as possible the essential nature of the liturgical experience of the Church; second, to connect these ideas with that system of concepts which theology uses to expound the faith and doctrine of the Church; and third, to present the separate data of liturgical experience as a connected whole, as, in the last analysis, the ‘rule of prayer’ dwelling within the Church and determining her ‘rule of faith’.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Schmemmann, *Introduction*, p.149.

⁵⁰ Schmemmann, *Introduction*, p.17.

The last sentence of that paragraph refers self-consciously to the dictum of Prosper of Aquitaine ‘*ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*’ (that the rule of belief may be founded upon the rule of prayer).⁵¹ This phrase, giving patristic respectability to the attempt to suggest that liturgy is primary to dogmatics, is often cited by liturgical theologians, though often in the sense of an out-of-context proof text; as Paul Bradshaw has argued, in context its force may not be quite as the liturgical theologians wish it be.⁵² Liturgical historians may also argue that Schmemmann’s claim that the ‘rule of prayer’ can be defined and expressed as a coherent whole is also a little naïve, given the range of texts and practices known to have been used at different times and in different places, a problem to which we shall return in due course.

Schmemmann’s idea of a liturgical theology in the sense of an internally coherent understanding of the essential nature of liturgy as a basis on which to ground the wider discourse of theology – or perhaps more specifically to suggest that liturgy can contribute to the tasks of dogmatics and ecclesiology – was taken up with some enthusiasm by the succeeding generation, of whom American Benedictine Aidan Kavanagh (1929–2006) is worth noting in particular.⁵³ Acknowledging that Schmemmann’s ideas originated in Orthodox thinking, Kavanagh aimed to synthesise the central ideas with the Catholic tradition, and to extend the basic premise in a couple of interesting ways. Positioning liturgy as the first form of orthodoxy – which Kavanagh argues means primarily right worship, before it means right belief – he suggested that all Christian living can be related to what he calls ‘rite’, and goes on to say that:

⁵¹ Migne, *Patrologiae Latina*, Vol 50, col. 535.

⁵² Bradshaw, ‘Difficulties’, pp.186–7.

⁵³ Kavanagh, *Liturgical Theology*.

While liturgy does not exhaust rite, it does anchor it in the faithful assembly's regular encounter with the living God in Christ through worship in Spirit and in truth.⁵⁴

Liturgy, therefore, is 'the primary and irreducible theological act of Christians' and thus the very ground on which any theological discourse is based. To illustrate this, he considers a hypothetical 'Mrs Murphy', discussing faith with her pastor. Mrs Murphy's information on theology derives not from study but from participation; it is nevertheless impossible to define 'theology' in a way which meaningfully excludes their discourse. For Kavanagh, not only are Mrs Murphy and her pastor theologians, they

are *primary* theologians whose discourse in faith is carried on not by concepts and propositions nearly so much as in the vastly complex vocabulary of experiences had, prayers said ... emotions controlled and released ... and in many other ways no one can count or always account for. Their critical and reflective discourse is not merely about faith. It is the very way faith works itself out in the intricacies of human life... Nowhere else can that primary body of perceived data be read so well as in the living tradition of Christian worship.⁵⁵

This primacy is caveated, of course; Kavanagh makes it clear both that the discourse consequently positioned as secondary theology is not to be dismissed, and that he is not 'advocating emotion over the hard labor of clear thought'.⁵⁶

Lutheran theologian Gordon Lathrop's (b.1939) trilogy considering theology, ecclesiology and cosmology from a liturgical perspective, takes up the reasoning inherited from Schmemmann and Kavanagh, and extends it in a number of directions.⁵⁷ Two elements of his contribution will be particularly important in the next part of this chapter: first that he puts a significant weight on symbolism and action rather than merely text, and secondly that he generalises from a number of examples a dynamic in which such symbols contradict, or

⁵⁴ Kavanagh, *Liturgical Theology*, p.177.

⁵⁵ Kavanagh, *Liturgical Theology*, p.146–7 emphasis added.

⁵⁶ Kavanagh, *Liturgical Theology*, p.178

⁵⁷ Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998); *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006); *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).

‘break’, each other. The liturgical dynamic he therefore develops is one of apposition and creative tension rather than positive identity of simple symbols reducible to singular truths. That dynamic requires that liturgy contains multiple voices, which opens up a number of possibilities for interpreting particular instances of liturgical action in relation to a coherent whole without requiring that each instance directly express the same thing.

The next most significant interventions in the development of liturgical theology in this sense sought to critique some of its important bases. Paul Bradshaw identified a tendency among liturgical theologians to talk about ‘the liturgy’ as a singular phenomenon with the definite article, and, as a liturgical historian, argued strongly that different liturgies have existed in diverse times and places across Christian history; Schmemmann’s attempt to identify an irreducible essence of the liturgical *ordo* which could validly form the basis for a theological understanding of liturgy may not be possible, at least in the West.⁵⁸ Indeed, among the problems of framing liturgy as a ‘source’ for theology is the fact that most liturgies as we inherit them in different Christian denominations have been changed over time to fit with doctrinal orthodoxies, putting into question any claim that it is the liturgies themselves which form or provide foundation for the beliefs. Bradshaw further objects that description and prescription ought not to be elided, and that the hypothetical Mrs Murphy is in reality myriad participants with divergent attitudes towards particular issues, many of them at odds with what liturgical reformers are most likely to propound.⁵⁹

Writing shortly after Bradshaw’s essay, Michael Aune’s two-part critique argues that where Bradshaw calls for a better historical grounding for liturgical theology, it is also necessary to improve its theological grounding.⁶⁰ By this he means ‘to recover ... an

⁵⁸ Bradshaw, ‘Difficulties’, pp.182–3

⁵⁹ Bradshaw, ‘Difficulties’, p.192

⁶⁰ Michael B. Aune, ‘Liturgy and Theology: Rethinking the Relationship – Part 1: Setting the Stage’, *Worship* 81, no. 1 (January 2007) 46–68; ‘Liturgy and Theology: Rethinking the Relationship – Part 2: A Different Starting Place’, *Worship* 81, no. 2 (March 2007) 141–69.

awareness of the divine initiative, of God's action in the worship of the church'.⁶¹ In a sense this divine initiative *is* presupposed by liturgical theologians and the dispute marks a difference in ecclesiology – the assumptions about the nature of the church itself – by which Aune sees human activity leading, in a way which neither Schmemmann nor Kavanagh necessarily would. Aune's more positive construction of a theological understanding of liturgical elements appears in fact to rest on more commonality of assumption than his critique allows. He accords value to certain *Bausteine*, a term he borrows from liturgical historian Gabriele Winkler, meaning that he does concede that certain liturgical elements are foundational; he then discusses them in terms of divine revelation.⁶² Although certain emphases are different, it is not clear that he has in fact dismissed as much of the bases of liturgical theology as he is often supposed to have done.

Nevertheless, since his essay, major contributions to this line of thinking are relatively fewer: David Fagerberg stands out as partisan for the liturgical theology approach, and even his work reveals a level of defensiveness towards the criticisms, particularly those of Bradshaw. Part of this defence is encoded in his very definition of the task of liturgical theology in which he is concerned to define it as a singular thing: 'liturgical theology' as distinct from any locutions which suggest rather apposition of liturgy and theology as two distinct fields: theology of liturgy, for example.⁶³ His framing suggests that a liturgical theology properly so-called is a single systematic way to account for the bases of the Christian religion using the multi-faceted facts of liturgical design, participation, and response – in theological terms, to begin from God's self-revelation in the church corporately

⁶¹ Aune, 'Different Starting Place', p.142

⁶² Aune, 'Different Starting Place', p.143ff.

⁶³ David W. Fagerberg, *Theologica Prima: What is Liturgical Theology* (2nd ed., Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2004) p.ix.

at prayer, as distinct from approaches which begin from God's self-revelation in Scripture or Tradition.

Belgian scholar Joris Geldhof has written a more recent summary of where he considers the field of liturgical theology now to sit, covering much of the literature discussed above.⁶⁴ His framing is interesting both in validating the possibility of continued reflection in this area which, since the criticisms of Bradshaw and Aune, has often been overlooked by the wider theological discourse, but also because in doing so he situates it within a wider context. Instead of dealing with only the self-identified liturgical theologians, he discusses a number of more mainstream theological thinkers and shows how a liturgical dimension could add to our understanding of their contributions. He also makes a point in his historiography of the discipline of highlighting the relevance of devotional writers including Dom Columba Marmion – an acknowledged influence on Messiaen – and of liturgical reform movements including the work of plainchant restoration associated with Solesmes Abbey, which specific example serves to validate the relevance of music to the discussion as well as the relevance of liturgical theology to understanding liturgical music.

Geldhof also refers to earlier writings which would now attract the label of liturgical theology in Schmemmann's sense, though pre-dating Schmemmann, of which Romano Guardini's *The Spirit of the Liturgy* is worthy of note,⁶⁵ if only because Guardini is another theologian Messiaen himself spoke about having read, and yet the influence of whose thought on Messiaen has not previously been extensively considered.⁶⁶ Geldhof emphasises Guardini's focus on truth and thought, implying perhaps a contrast with some of the liturgical theologies which might be characterised as insufficiently rigorous. From the point of view of

⁶⁴ Joris Geldhof, *Liturgical Theology as a Research Programme* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

⁶⁵ Guardini, *Spirit*.

⁶⁶ Samuel, *Permanences*, p.18.

liturgical music, however, it seems more relevant to note his juxtaposition of chapters on style and symbolism, playfulness and seriousness. These ideas are revisited in the following sections in which the ways liturgical music both mirrors and contributes to liturgical theology are considered.

In keeping with Geldhof's widening of the context, once aware of the discourse of liturgical theology it becomes possible to recognise glimmers of related thinking in theological writings not explicitly related to it. Karl Barth, for example, in choosing to name his work *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (*Church Dogmatics*) already foregrounds the church, rather than the academy, as the locus for undertaking dogmatics; his introduction even more explicitly engages the corporate liturgical activity of the church as both source and goal of theological reflection:

Dogmatics is a theological discipline. But Theology is a function of the Church.

The Church confesses God, by the fact that she speaks of God. She does so ... through her special action as a community; in proclamation by preaching and the administration of the Sacrament, in worship.⁶⁷

Barth, though not a thinker likely to be associated with liturgical theology in the sense described above, nevertheless anchors the very task of theology in the corporate action of the church, in the administration of sacrament, in other words in liturgy.

Returning to Messiaen's own denomination and a thinker closer to his own sympathies, Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote little about liturgy, but he did write an essay on the relationship between theological reflection and holiness. This essay draws a distinction between 'kneeling theology' undertaken in prayer and 'sitting theology' done at the desk, and argues that the prioritisation of the latter since the era of scholasticism has impoverished

⁶⁷ Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God (Prolegomena to Church Dogmatics, being Vol. I, Part I)*, trans. G. T. Thomson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936), p.1.

theology in a way which a restoration of the former might yet correct.⁶⁸ Arguably, the dimension that is missing from many appropriations of this idea is the corporate rather than the individual practice of prayerful reflection – in other words, liturgy.

This section has reviewed important contributions to the development of liturgical theology; the next section of this chapter will show how framing theological discourse as liturgical can help account for believers' relationships to theological ideas, and most importantly for the overall thesis, how this engages liturgical music(s) and, in converse, how doing so enables a coherent understanding of the possibility that music can express theological ideas.

4.4 A liturgical basis for theological discourse

This chapter has argued that Messiaen's formation as a Christian was largely grounded in his participation in Catholic liturgy. In this respect Messiaen is not to be seen as unique; for the majority of Christians who do not undertake significant formal study in theology, participation in the life of a church community, primarily by engaging with its liturgical expression, is likely to be their main exposure to theological thinking. Is it reasonable to add to this premise a broader claim that the discourse of theology as a whole is similarly grounded on liturgy? This is, inevitably, a question of definition: some will feel that the standard sources of theological authority (scripture, tradition, revelation, ecclesiastical magisterium) are inappropriately side-lined by such a claim, while others might suggest that the virtue of the framing is precisely that liturgy is a significant part of the Christian tradition, includes reading and reflection on scripture, and itself constitutes a locus for revelation, precisely in and as far as it is an expression of the corporate faith of the church. Arguably this

⁶⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'Theologie und Heiligkeit' in *Verbum Caro: Skizzen zur Theologie I* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1960) p.224. The published English translation renders 'Knienden Theologie' and 'Sitzenden Theologie' as 'theology at prayer' and 'theology at the desk' respectively, which keeps to the sense but loses some of the potency and directness of the original: Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'Theology and Sanctity', p.208.

question sits along a wider philosophical fault line in which individual and corporate identities are conceived as opposed to one another.

Without pretention to resolve all of these tensions, it seems that there are some minimal affirmations that can be maintained in support of a liturgical grounding of theological discourse. First, the claims of dogmatic theology arise initially from reflection and discussion within communities of believers; such communities come together in the first instance not for theological seminars but for acts of public worship. Even where the primary cause of a gathering is the consideration of points of doctrine, as in a church council, the proceedings always include and are framed by liturgical worship. Conversely, the conclusions of theological reflection and disputation often lead to implementations in the context of liturgy. Perhaps the most obvious example is the inclusion in every eucharistic service of a creed: the most common form of the creed is based on texts agreed by ecumenical councils at Nicaea (AD 325) and Constantinople (AD 381); it is designed less to be a full statement of Christian belief than it is to exclude particular heresies, primarily Arianism. It is a liturgical text, in so far as it is regularly recited or chanted in liturgical context; it is a theological text in so far as it aims to clarify and expound on theological claims.

A second minimal affirmation is that people who profess to be Christian do not merely understand propositions about their faith, but respond to that faith in ways which typically (if not universally) include liturgical participation. The sacraments in general are the defining mark of the church, and the Eucharist specifically is understood to be ‘the source and summit of the Christian life’.⁶⁹ Certainly from an external perspective, Catholics can be recognised more easily by what they do than by what they think – what any individual thinks

⁶⁹ Catechism of the Catholic Church §1324.

or believes is strictly inaccessible to an external observer – and any religion is accounted for in terms of practices as much as it is in terms of claims about the nature of God.

From within the Catholic tradition, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms, citing Irenaeus, that ‘our way of thinking is attuned to the eucharist, and the eucharist in turn confirms our way of thinking’.⁷⁰ *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (the constitution on the Sacred Liturgy promulgated by the Second Vatican Council) does constrain a recognition that ‘the Sacred Liturgy does not exhaust the entire activity of the church’, but this need not diminish a claim that the church acting as the church is primarily a liturgical gathering, and therefore that theology within the church arises from a grounding in that activity.

A third minimal observation is that, given the multiple perspectives of each liturgical participant, it is in the nature of liturgical theology used in this sense to be both participatory and multi-faceted. Bradshaw’s objections – that liturgy is not a single phenomenon, and that different participants bring with them particular assumptions and emphases – are not to be dismissed. They may, however, be a strength rather than a weakness of the approach. Lathrop’s framing of liturgical symbols as ‘broken’, and in particular his suggestion that liturgical responses often serve to qualify rather than to confirm the biddings that give rise to them, affords an approach which recognises and builds on the multiple perspectives present.⁷¹ Though there are certainly those who find it easier and safer to have clear authorities determine a singular ‘truth’ in its entirety, there are others for whom such a systemisation is precisely the problem they see with the nature of religious claims.

Catherine Pickstock’s *After Writing* is relevant here; part of her argument is that elements in the Medieval Roman Rite that were circular and repetitious, rationalised by the Tridentine Mass and later revisions, may actually have been part of the nature of liturgy. She

⁷⁰ Catechism of the Catholic Church §1327.

⁷¹ Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), pp.27, 132–8.

reads this as set along a fault line between spoken and written language – alongside three other dualities, between space and time, ‘between reality as given’ and ‘reality as gift’, and between empty subject and liturgical subject.⁷² On this view, to excise repetition is to privilege the written form over the spoken, which in turn prioritises spatial over temporal conceptualisations, thereby becoming unintentionally reductive of the nature of liturgical experience.

On minimal specifics, therefore, liturgy is of its nature temporal as well as spatial, and allows for multiple participants to contribute, not necessarily in unison but in complementarity. A final argument to bring on the nature of liturgy, especially eucharistic liturgy, is its relation to Eschatology. As stated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church: ‘by the eucharistic celebration we already unite ourselves with the heavenly liturgy and anticipate eternal life’. As Thomas Rausch has argued, the importance and implications of this claim have often been overlooked.⁷³ While Rausch goes on to link an improved liturgical-eschatological understanding to the transformation of Christian lives and the imperative of social justice, our interest here is to establish the theological relevance of what happens in the Mass itself. The whole action of the Mass functioning as proleptic (that is anticipatory) participation in the *eschaton* – the final time, in which creation is subsumed into its fulfilment – has the function of looking both back into history and forward out of it. The term liturgists use is *ἀνάμνησις* (*anamnesis*), essentially the Greek word for memory, but allowing also for a forward-looking calling to mind of the future consummation of Creation. Add to this the idea that, time itself being part of the created order, the *eschaton* is characterised by the cessation of time, and an understanding of liturgical action is developed in which considerations of the

⁷² Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. xiv.

⁷³ Thomas P. Rausch, *Eschatology, Liturgy, and Christology* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012), pp.4, 127–130.

nature of memory and of time are primary, two themes particularly emphasised by Messiaen.⁷⁴ In this regard one recalls Paul Griffiths's characterisation of time as the central organising component of Messiaen's music, to the extent that his book is entitled *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*: arguably the element most obviously missing from Griffiths's understanding is the liturgical grounding of Messiaen's inhabiting this sensibility of temporal stasis.⁷⁵

This section has considered the possibility of a liturgical grounding for theological discourse in a general sense, and some of the essential characterisations that such a basis will entail. In the next section the focus will return to music, arguing that this liturgical basis of theology includes a significant role for liturgical music, and conversely that to describe music as theological is to relate it to liturgy, even when the music concerned is not explicitly liturgical. We will then return to the specific case of Messiaen, and the way in which his liturgical formation and sensibility make sense of his claim that his music is theological rather than mystical.

4.5 Liturgy as the *locus* in which music can be theological

Most of the writers discussed above who identify as liturgical theologians state more or less explicitly that liturgy in the sense they understand it consists of multiple elements; not only texts, but buildings, ornaments, movement and music(s). It is relatively seldom, however, that they proceed from that basic observation to a detailed consideration of the implications. Geldhof, for example, dedicates only three and a half pages under the heading 'Music, Feasts and Buildings' to conclude that 'this entails promising avenues for research in liturgical theology'.⁷⁶ He cites Louis Weil quoting Don Saliers to the effect that 'liturgy is inherently

⁷⁴ Messiaen, *Traité I*, pp.7–12.

⁷⁵ Griffiths, *Music of Time*.

⁷⁶ Geldhof, *Liturgical Theology*, pp.104–7.

musical’ while decrying the fact that this is ‘not found in the typical church-going experience of many Christians’.⁷⁷

The inherent musicality of liturgy could be mere assertion, or even wishful thinking – and indeed in practice many treat liturgical music as no more than ornament. Some connection between music and religious ritual does seem however to be cross-cultural,⁷⁸ and there is significant historical evidence that singing has been an essential part of liturgy from the earliest times. It is worth adding additional context to Weil’s quotation from Saliers:

Music in Christian Worship is an embodied form of praying. Liturgy is inherently musical. That is, it involves speaking, listening, movement and rest – all of which is rhythmic and has pitch, intensity, and tonal register.⁷⁹

In these claims, however, the all-encompassing form of the musicality understood to inhere in worship is such as to override the specificity of liturgical music in the narrower sense; little is to be inferred here regarding what is, for example, added to the text of a hymn by the fact that it is sung, or by the particular tune to which it is sung, let alone of the way in which instrumental music in liturgy responds to the occasion.

Many of those involved in making liturgical music, however, intuit that in doing so they are making a direct and meaningful contribution. Charles Tournemire, for example, declared that an organist who cannot improvise can only be considered ‘half an organist’ precisely because ‘he is unable to comment on the office’.⁸⁰ The language of commentary is of interest, having significant resonance with other forms of theologically relevant activity – much biblical scholarship is considered to consist of commentary, for example. It also allows, possibly with a level of equivocation, for engaging a musical use of the same term. Marcel

⁷⁷ Louis Weil, *A Theology of Worship* (Lanham: Cowley Publications, 2002) p. 83.

⁷⁸ Jeffers Engelhardt, ‘Music, Sound, and Religion’ in Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert & Richard Middleton (eds.), *The Cultural Study of Music: a critical introduction* (2nd ed., London and New York: Routledge, 2012) p.299.

⁷⁹ Don E. Saliers, ‘The Integrity of Sung Prayer’, *Worship*, vol. 55, no. 4 (July 1981) p.292.

⁸⁰ Tournemire, *Précis*, p.104.

Dupré's improvisation textbook designates as a commentary an answering phrase which is different from its antecedent, thus distinguishing the commentary from the consequent which it replaces. He also proposes that the first exercise towards improvising a commentary is to transpose the theme.⁸¹ Messiaen takes this idea and explicitly applies it to composition in *Technique de mon langage musical*, in which it is described as a form of melodic development in which fragments of a theme can be transposed and varied.

The commentary is a melodic development of the theme. In it, one or more fragments of the theme are repeated in the initial key on several degrees, or in other keys, and varied rhythmically, melodically or harmonically. The commentary can also develop some elements foreign to the theme, but presenting with the latter a certain concordance of accent.⁸²

This description audibly matches much of his treatment of thematic material in the recorded improvisations discussed in chapter three, above. It is not clear, however, that in doing this, a commentary on the office is also provided in the wider sense of an addition of meaningful observations that extend or explicate the meaning of the original, rather than purely musical considerations.

Further evidence, however, that liturgical music is understood to be of theological significance can be found in the various documents by which ecclesiastical authorities have aimed to regulate it: if it were insignificant there would be no need for them to do so. At the time of Messiaen's first appointment to Ste Trinité the church's understanding in this area was dominated by Pope Pius X's 1903 *motu proprio* instruction on Sacred Music *Tra le Sollecitudini*. The main aim of this document was to exclude from Catholic services musics which the Pope considered too much influenced by theatrical mores and considerations, and therefore not suitable to the 'sanctity and dignity' of liturgical use. It especially commends,

⁸¹ Dupré, *Cours d'Improvisation*, p.20. Louis Vierne uses the term in a similar way, suggesting it had currency in organ improvisation: Maw, David, 'Improvisation as composition: the recorded organ improvisations of Vierne and Tournemire', in Eric Clarke and Mark Doffman (eds.) *Distributed Creativity: Collaboration and Improvisation in Contemporary Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p.245.

⁸² Messiaen, *Technique*, p.43.

therefore, Gregorian Chant and ‘classic polyphony’ – as exemplified by Palestrina – for liturgical use. It also allows for the use of modern compositions ‘of such excellence, sobriety and gravity, that they are in no way unworthy of the liturgical functions’.⁸³ It did, however, require special permission for any instrument other than voice and organ to be played. It did so because it envisages the purpose of liturgical music as ‘to clothe with suitable melody the liturgical text’ and ‘its proper aim is to add greater efficacy to the text’.⁸⁴ Although this again suggests the primacy of text, *Tra le Sollecitudini* introduces the instruction by affirming that ‘Sacred music, being a complementary part of the solemn liturgy, participates in the general scope of the liturgy, which is the glory of God and the sanctification and edification of the faithful’.⁸⁵ Such a framing confirms once again the theological relevance of liturgical music.

The conclusions of *Tra le Sollecitudini* concerning modern music were echoed in Pope Pius XII’s 1947 encyclical *Mediator Dei*,⁸⁶ but during the 1950s Vatican pronouncements became more critical of various forms of artistic modernism, including music, even when sincerely intended in the service of the church. *Menti Nostrae* (1950) largely concerns vocations and the ordered life of Catholic priests, and yet in guarding against an uncritical ‘spirit of novelty’ it takes a side-swipe at ‘monstrosities of art which even pretend to call themselves Christian’.⁸⁷ Later in the decade, *Musicae Sacrae Disciplina* opposes appeals to the nature of art itself, in order to insist that the church remain regulator of sacred music, while asserting that in so doing it is not making a specifically aesthetic judgement.⁸⁸ This encyclical was followed up in 1958 by a detailed instruction from the Sacred Congregation for Rites, *De musica sacra et sacra liturgia*, which is even more

⁸³ Pius X, *Tra le Sollecitudini*, §.II.5.

⁸⁴ Pius X, *Tra le Sollecitudini*, §.I.1

⁸⁵ Pius X, *Tra le Sollecitudini*, §.I.1

⁸⁶ Pope Pius XII, Encyclical on the Sacred Liturgy, *Mediator Dei* (1947) §193.

⁸⁷ Pope Pius XII, Encyclical on the Development of Holiness in Priestly Life, *Menti Nostrae* (1950) §118.

⁸⁸ Pope Pius XII, Encyclical on Sacred Music, *Sacrae Musicae disciplina* (1955) §22–3.

explicitly conservative with regard to modernism in music, which it considered to be uncondusive to piety. While rightly cautious as to drawing conclusions, Stephen Broad is correct at least to raise the question of how far such debates affected Messiaen, and whether they might form some part of the reason that there is an apparent hiatus in his composition of works with explicitly religious programmes between the *Messe de la Pentecôte*, published in 1951 and *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ* first performed in 1969, or for the organ between the *Livre d'Orgue* (1953) and the 1969 completion of the *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte-Trinité*.⁸⁹

Although Messiaen presented himself as a serene and obedient son of the church, especially later in life, his earlier writings, compiled by Broad, reveal a more activist mindset, in which Messiaen argued for a religious music that embraced the modernist aesthetic:

The word 'life' recurs constantly in the gospels; our Catholic sacraments and liturgy are, above all, an organism of spiritual life, and all Christians aspire towards eternal life. The language of the musician-believer will thus try to express life. This life – inexhaustible and ever fresh for those who seek it – calls for powerfully original and varied means of expression.⁹⁰

Similarly, speaking to Antoine Goléa in the late 1950s, Messiaen was still willing to take the offensive with regard to critics who found his music insufficiently in accord with their pre-conceived notions of religiosity:

These people who reproach me for not knowing dogma, don't know it themselves. They are even less familiar with the texts of Holy Scripture and the Fathers of the Church. They expect of me a sweet music, vaguely mystical and above all soporific. As an organist, it is my duty to comment on the texts belonging to the office of the day. These texts uphold very different truths, express very different sentiments and stimulate equally different graces, following the special colour of the season in which the office takes place.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Broad, 'Messiaen and *Art Sacré*', p.278.

⁹⁰ Olivier Messiaen, 'Religious Music' in Broad, *Messiaen: Journalism*, p.125.

⁹¹ Goléa, *Rencontres avec Messiaen*, pp.37–8, c.f. above p.35.

Messiaen was happy to assert that his music could express religious themes in his own musical language precisely because his understanding of religion included not only the sentimental but also the terrifying, the fairy-tale dramatic, the surreal, the distressing and the overwhelming. Though evidently, with hindsight, a position not adopted by Catholic authorities, this suggests Messiaen would have preferred to approach the question of the style of liturgical music from a position not of restriction but of possibility. A similar reversal of perspective was proposed in the aftermath of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* by Guardini, who, in an open letter to Johannes Wagner asked:

Or does it [liturgical renewal], basically, mean the same to them as to the parish priest of the late nineteenth century who said: 'We must organize the procession better; we must see to it that the praying and singing is done better'? He did not realize that he should have asked himself quite a different question: how can the act of walking become a religious act, a retinue for the Lord progressing through his land, so that an 'epiphany' may take place?⁹²

In similar vein, can we ask how music might be understood as a vehicle for divine revelation within the context of liturgy? How can Messiaen's wish to infuse his music with life, which he understands as encompassing originality and variation, function within the liturgical context to 'become a religious act', as opposed to the prevailing notion that music must conform to a particular sensibility in order to be accepted within the liturgy?

To approach this, Guardini's characterisation of 'the spirit of the liturgy'⁹³ can be added to the minimal characterisations of liturgy – that it is temporal, multi-vocal, and eschatological – defined above. Guardini's book, first published in German in 1918, has seven chapters, each of which discusses some aspect of what he takes the spirit of the liturgy to be; some of these aspects juxtapose things that might initially seem contradictory, such as playfulness and seriousness, but which when read in apposition work together to give a richer

⁹² Romano Guardini, 'A letter from Romano Guardini', *Herder Correspondence*, vol. I, no. 8 (1964) p.238.

⁹³ Guardini, *Spirit*.

understanding.⁹⁴ Guardini seldom explicitly mentions liturgical music, but his categories can help to give a framework for thinking about how music can function theologically in the liturgical spirit. The categories will be discussed in the following paragraphs in inverse order to their appearance in the book.

Guardini ends with a chapter entitled ‘the primacy of the *logos* over the *ethos*’.⁹⁵ He problematises the apparent lack of utility of liturgy and leverages that issue for a discussion of the relative value assigned to knowledge and will respectively, critiquing Protestantism generally and Kant specifically for prioritising will.⁹⁶ His point is both that contemplation is inherently valuable in liturgy, without having to lead to action, and also that the basis of theology is a notion of an existent truth – which he acknowledges is to be distinguished from comprehension.⁹⁷ What he terms the primacy of the will – of action, direction, and purposiveness – is, for him, what leads to absolute relativism with regard to truth, which is opposed to the possibility of religious truth. For the Catholic, that an absolute truth exists (even if we have not fully understood it) is foundational for theology, and enables Guardini to reassert the primacy of knowledge, rationality and contemplation over the goal-oriented will. It is this grounding on the notion of truth that enables his liturgical theology to escape the charge of individuality or vagueness. In terms of liturgical music, this speaks to an aesthetic of contemplation rather than of programme, and relates again to the eschatological nature of liturgical participation, both strong themes in Messiaen’s music. There is a similarity of vocabulary between this chapter and Messiaen’s response to a questioner:

Mr Vos, a young theologian from Holland, asks a lengthy question which above all concerns Messiaen’s relationship to contemporary reality and

⁹⁴ Bauer, *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, p.14, n.25, noting that Messiaen’s bookshelves contained a number of titles by Guardini specifically notes that the *Spirit of the Liturgy* is not among them. She notes, however that a number of other titles that Messiaen is known to have read are also not in her inventory, and its absence from these shelves is not evidence that the composer had not read it.

⁹⁵ Guardini, *Spirit*, pp.75–85.

⁹⁶ Guardini, *Spirit*, p.79.

⁹⁷ Guardini, *Spirit*, p.82.

suffering; and in the course of it, the glimmer of a reproach becomes apparent: that Messiaen in his music, caught up in mediaeval thinking, too abstractly and esoterically pursues a kind of *theologia gloriae* which scarcely has anything to do with the actual situation of today's human being.⁹⁸

In answering Messiaen refers to the same Greek concept of *logos*:

In the Greek view of things, the Logos, the Eternal Word, is the beginning and the central point of everything. But we know through Christ that God, who's beyond everything, in Himself is the Trinity...⁹⁹

I allowed myself to be stimulated by the Book of the Apocalypse for my work '*Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*'. The Apocalypse is a terrible book in which two aspects confront each other: one, the catastrophes which bring about the end of the world and the other, the adoration, the ecstasy and the glory and majesty of God.¹⁰⁰

This similarity may not be sufficient to demonstrate direct influence, but it provides a point of resonance between Messiaen's thought and Guardini's liturgical understanding.

Guardini's penultimate chapter characterises the liturgy as serious.¹⁰¹ By this he means to temper his previous chapter (which will be discussed below) on playfulness, by noting the close connection between beauty and truth, and asserting that the latter has primacy. The liturgy is beautiful, indeed Guardini begins the chapter with the strong assertion that 'The liturgy is art, translated into terms of life'.¹⁰² He cautions, however, that it is inappropriate to appreciate the beauty of the liturgy for its own sake, but rather that one should recognise that, for the faithful Catholic, it is beautiful because it expresses a truth.¹⁰³ This again, reverses a more common intuition: that art – including music – must correspond to a pre-conceived understanding of beauty in order to fit the dignity of the liturgy. Rather, if art conforms to the true spirit of the liturgy, it must therefore be apprehended as beautiful. There is another echo here of Messiaen's positioning, in his claim that what is most valuable

⁹⁸ Rößler, *Contributions*, p.51.

⁹⁹ Rößler, *Contributions*, p.52.

¹⁰⁰ Rößler, *Contributions*, p.53.

¹⁰¹ Guardini, *Spirit*, pp.63–74.

¹⁰² Guardini, *Spirit*, p.63.

¹⁰³ Guardini, *Spirit*, p.73.

in his music is its expression of Catholic truths.¹⁰⁴ The partisanship of the young Messiaen discussed above, seems likely also to have concurred with the idea that aesthetic means need not be restricted in order to conform to the liturgy, as long as the living truth could be maintained as the guiding principle.

The seriousness of the liturgy is in direct counterpoint with its playfulness.¹⁰⁵ By this Guardini answers critics who find too much of the liturgical tradition to be extravagant and superfluous. He argues that the function of liturgy is not to be purposive in every detail, but is more alike to a child's game and, indeed, to the creation of a work of art.¹⁰⁶ This is in some ways related to the eschatological understanding of liturgy already discussed: if liturgical space is heavenly space, it is sufficient simply to be there. This is not to say that it serves no purpose; indeed, Guardini's own illustration is that it serves an educational purpose as suggested above with reference to Messiaen's theological formation.¹⁰⁷ The purpose served, however, is not seen as the main point of the liturgy *per se*. At the culmination of the chapter Guardini poses as a rhetorical question: 'Will the people who do not understand the liturgy be pleased to find that the heavenly consummation is an eternal song of praise?'¹⁰⁸ Though there is some danger of taking poetic metaphor too literally, if the *eschaton* is characterised as song, then the liturgy, as proleptic of the end time, must also be musical; the inherent musicality of liturgy has a foundation. It also means that liturgical music must be part of the liturgical function and import.

The fourth chapter in *The Spirit of the Liturgy* concerns symbolism, and the theological validity of giving concrete material form to spiritual and theological ideas.¹⁰⁹ In

¹⁰⁴ Samuel, *Permanences*, p.24.

¹⁰⁵ Guardini, *Spirit*, pp.51–62.

¹⁰⁶ Guardini, *Spirit*, p.58.

¹⁰⁷ Guardini, *Spirit*, pp.55–6.

¹⁰⁸ Guardini, *Spirit*, p.62.

¹⁰⁹ Guardini, *Spirit*, pp.43–50.

this short chapter Guardini critiques not only theologies that so far separate material and spiritual as to make all spirituality remote, but also those for whom physicality and spirituality are so intertwined as to be indistinguishable. The former are encouraged to see the material as a ‘medium of lively expression’¹¹⁰ – and expression is elided with knowledge and experience – while the latter are enjoined to ensure that the material is not a subjugating force, but that natural elements are recast into ritual form. For the liturgical musician this chapter has less to add, except that the musical is part of the material symbol of the presence of God in the church gathered for liturgical worship.

Guardini’s third chapter concerns style, and problematises the coexistence of private devotion and personal taste with the universal comprehensibility and approachability which he expects communal, liturgical worship to exhibit. This is closely linked to his second chapter which explains that the liturgy is corporate action of the church, rather than disparate actions of individual believers. He does, in this context, discuss the implied sacrifice of individual expression in favour of the corporate, moderate, even modest, style of the liturgy, but resolves this not as a normative requirement that each person diminish, but simply as descriptive of the inevitable result of being in communion with others, across time as well as space. Yet again, this level of communion is a recognition of the eschatological nature of the liturgy, as regards its relationship to time. Musically, therefore, these chapters point towards moderation and respect for tradition, but tradition is understood in a living rather than an antiquarian sense. Messiaen’s improvisations, and many of his compositions, draw heavily on plainchant, which anchors his music firmly within that tradition, but it does not restrict his freedom to use such quotations in a modern way.

¹¹⁰ Guardini, *Spirit*, p.49–50.

Finally for us, firstly for Guardini, liturgy is prayer. In that sense it is obvious that it is an activity which involves worshippers engaging directly with their God, and therefore an essential grounding for discourse concerning divinity. Guardini argues that liturgy as prayer distinguishes itself from personal devotion in a number of ways, one of which is that individuals often gravitate to particular aspects of doctrine while the liturgy as it has developed over time imposes a discipline of considering all aspects.¹¹¹ Guardini also considers a balance between intellect and emotion in liturgical prayer, in which the latter is certainly not absent, but is restrained to an extent. It is towards the end of his discussion of this aspect that he explicitly considers gestures, actions, vessels, vestments, sculpture, architecture, art and music:

Religion needs civilization. By civilization we mean the essence of the most valuable products of man's creative, constructive, and organizing powers – works of art, science, social order, and the like. In the liturgy it is civilization's task to give durable form and expression to the treasure of truths, aims, and supernatural activity, which God has delivered to man by Revelation, to distill [*sic*] its quintessence, and to relate this to life in all its multiplicity. Civilization is incapable of creating a religion, but it can supply the latter with a *modus operandi*, so that it can freely engage in its beneficent activity.¹¹²

In this there is a statement by a theologian whose writing Messiaen is known to have read, which seems to validate his claim that the truths of the Catholic religion can be given expression by the products of culture, including music. But it is specifically in the context of the liturgy that this happens; liturgy is the locus in which music can be spoken of as theological. For Messiaen to have spoken of illuminating theological truths in his music may therefore appear to be founded on his intimate involvement with the practice of liturgical music, which can be understood as theological to the extent that liturgy is a ground of theology.

¹¹¹ Guardini, *Spirit*, p.14.

¹¹² Guardini, *Spirit*, p.23.

In this section it has been argued that reading Messiaen's suggestion that his works could illuminate theological truths in conversation with Guardini's understanding of the spirit of the liturgy suggests a way to comprehend his religious intentions with regard to his music. This is the case despite the fact that his claim for the religious propriety of a 'living' musical language encompassing variety and originality does not sit entirely comfortably with magisterial pronouncements concerning liturgical music. For Messiaen, liturgical music may be considered to partake in Guardini's categories of the spirit of the liturgy, which taken together provide a theological understanding of liturgical activity that enables liturgical music to be theological. It is prayerful, corporate, stylish, symbolic, playful yet serious, and driven by a deep connection to reason, which for the believing Catholic, is itself a function of truth. If this is a basis on which to understand the theological import of liturgical music, how can it be related to what we have seen of Messiaen's practice as a liturgical musician, and to what extent is it feasible to think Messiaen successfully transposed this insight into works not specifically intended for liturgical use?

4.6 Messiaen's liturgical sensibility in his compositional approach

The previous two chapters describe Messiaen's practice as a liturgical musician, by engaging with descriptions of his activity, and recordings of his liturgical improvisations. This chapter has argued that liturgical participation was essential to Messiaen's understanding of theology; that liturgy is an often-overlooked source for theology, both in individual and in ecclesiastical experience; that liturgy is inherently musical and inherently theological; and that therefore the liturgy is the locus in which it is possible to talk of music as theological. This final section of the chapter considers the way in which liturgical music sits behind Messiaen's approach to composition, before chapter five makes case-studies of selected works, linking them to both his improvisational activity and his theological conception.

Arguably the greatest limitation on the possibility of transferring a ‘sort of liturgical act to the concert hall’¹¹³ must be the fact that the congregation in a church can be presumed to share to at least some extent the background assumptions and experience, and to be participating in the same contextualising rite. They will hear a liturgical improvisation as a response to the ritual that surrounds it, the narrative that frames it, and will be spiritually invested in the religious connotations of the service. Notwithstanding the fact that aspects of concert attendance could be described as ritualistic, this shared intention cannot be assumed of a secular audience. Messiaen’s extensive commentaries and the programme notes that he considered so essential to his music may have been intended to provide some of that background, but it is not obvious that his intentions in this respect could be imposed simply by his will. There is no inherent contradiction in someone choosing to appreciate the music with no reference to the composer’s programme, and the argument that the programme may be approached as anchored in the composer’s experience of religious ritual rather than in the composer’s religious metaphysics does not alter that.

It does, though, afford a way of considering a sensibility with which Messiaen’s music can be approached. In Messiaen’s music the spirit of the liturgy is rendered audible; playing and listening to it with a greater understanding of that spirit can assist us in following the internal logic of his sound-world, which still feels alien to many audiences. As demonstrated in chapters two and three, the musical language Messiaen applied to his liturgical function was often fairly restrained in terms of his ‘modern tendencies’ relative to his composed works. There are, however, significant connections to be made, which may help us to appreciate the way in which his ecclesiastical role as organist anchored his other musical activities.

¹¹³ Samuel, *Permanences*, p.26.

Perhaps the most obvious connection between Messiaen's compositional work and the liturgy is that of apparent subject matter. That the majority of Messiaen's titles and superscriptions are quotations of various sorts from religious texts, often from scripture, already situates his music as an illustration in some form of his religious ideas. That even when compiling his own texts to set he tends to construct these from existing texts, usually those approached as having some religious authority, is another trait that is familiar from the drafting of liturgical prayers. Messiaen's liturgical music in context is always a response to a stimulus, whether an occasion or festival, a narrative, a scriptural pericope, or a thought or homily derived from the service. There are strong connections between these liturgical responses and the way in which Messiaen uses his composed music to illustrate religious themes.

Another point of connection is Messiaen's well-known interest in the nature of time, to which he devotes the first chapter of his *Traité*. Even without that text, the *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* invites commentary on time, and several other of his compositions concern themes around the end of the world: *Les Corps glorieux*, *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum*, *Couleurs de la Cité céleste*, and *La Ville d'En-haut* to name only the most explicitly eschatological. Recalling the close connection between liturgical time and eschatological time, it is inevitable that the idea of music for the end times and music for the liturgy must resonate strongly with each other.

Moving from the explicit subject matter to questions of style and technique, the connections to be made may be somewhat more abstruse, but nevertheless very suggestive. The first such connection can be made between his use of given material in the form of plainchant, which provides the basis for so many of his liturgical improvisations, and his wider compositional technique of 'borrowing' as extensively demonstrated by Yves Balmer,

Thomas Lacôte and Christopher Brent Murray.¹¹⁴ There is inevitably some speculation involved in considering the origin of particular techniques, but it is worth considering whether Messiaen's claim that he discovered his modes of limited transposition by improvising at the organ,¹¹⁵ and the observed modal transpositions of plainchant fragments, together with the case made that his melodic development of borrowed material is shown to be closely related to his use of these same modes,¹¹⁶ might suggest that improvising on given melodic ideas in his liturgical role stands behind his use of such techniques.

Another approach under the aspect of style may be to consider the relevance of Catholic liturgy to what Julian Anderson calls, with reference to Messiaen's friend and colleague André Jolivet, a *style incantatoire*, identified as a tradition that evolved 'within and through the music of French, or French-influenced, composers, since the turn of the twentieth century'.¹¹⁷ This is closely related to ideas that could be called magic, and also to orientalism, both of which have been strands in commentary on Messiaen. The features that Anderson identifies with the style, however, include many that might be recognisable from Messiaen's liturgical role and influences: monody, modality, and irregular metres and phrase structures are all features of plainchant; a preference for wind and brass timbres and parallel harmonies recall the pipe organ; juxtapositions of contrasting musical ideas were demonstrated above to be a feature of Messiaen's toccata-style improvisations.¹¹⁸ The features Anderson groups under 'Society' – challenging of [nineteenth-century] concert norms, evocation of distant and historic cultures, and ritualism – are, if anything, yet more clearly applicable to liturgical

¹¹⁴ Balmer *et al.*, *Le Modèle*.

¹¹⁵ Marti, "'It's a secret of Love'", p.232.

¹¹⁶ Balmer *et al.*, *Modèle*, p.53.

¹¹⁷ Julian Anderson, 'Jolivet and the *style incantatoire*: aspects of a hybrid tradition' in Caroline Rae (ed.), *André Jolivet: Music, Art and Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), p.15.

¹¹⁸ Anderson, 'Jolivet and *style incantatoire*'. p.18.

music, since its native context is a ritual, not a concert, and it sees itself as in communion with the whole Catholic church, across time as well as space.

This latter point is of particular importance. It is easy to identify ways in which Messiaen was influenced by musical ideas from the orient – Indian *deçitalas*, Japanese *Gagaku*, Indonesian *Gamelan* percussion – and such usage can be read using the critical framework of ‘orientalism’ or even cultural appropriation.¹¹⁹ This is, perhaps, especially true when these borrowed ideas are explicitly grafted by him onto aspects of Catholic doctrine, having originated in close connection to the religions of the places they come from. Anderson’s discussion of the *style incantatoire* also raises the ethical question of the influence of non-western musics that were known in France largely from colonisation.¹²⁰ Without wishing to diminish the weight of such considerations, however, it is possible to argue that many – though not all – of the aspects of this style that other composers arguably found in oriental religious and philosophical ideas, were, for Messiaen, equally grounded in the living historical tradition of Catholic liturgy of which he was native. Ritualism and historical community bound up in nature were for him aspects of his Catholicism, rather than exotic ideas which could only be approached by seeking the magic of other cultures.

It is worth adding as this chapter on music, liturgy and theology concludes, that although the focus in this project is Messiaen, and these ideas have been illustrated with reference to Messiaen, many of the same arguments would certainly apply to innumerable others who have functioned as musicians in both liturgical and non-liturgical contexts. Messiaen is not unique in belonging to a liturgical church and in hoping to express his religion through the medium of his music in wider contexts; the arguments put forward in this chapter and illustrated with Messiaen as the case-study may well apply to others. It has been

¹¹⁹ Cheong, ‘Buddhist Temple, Shinto Shrine’, pp.241–261; Oliver, *Cultural Appropriation*.

¹²⁰ Anderson, ‘Jolivet and *style incantatoire*’, p.17.

necessary to make this case, however, in order to make sense of Messiaen's claim that his music could illustrate theological themes. It is not identical with the case he himself made, perhaps because liturgy was so much a part of his *habitus* that he did not recognise its particular contribution to his faith, in the same way that we are not generally aware of the air we breathe. A recognition of the importance of liturgical theology, however, enables a fresh appreciation of the way Messiaen's music could approach theological themes, which is dependent neither on abstruse semiotics nor simple fiat assertion but on the intimate connection of action with context, of religious ideas with religious practice, and of living tradition with innovative expression.

5. 'To transpose a sort of liturgical act to the concert hall'

Chapters two and three relate to the first of the research questions and add detail to our understanding of Messiaen's practice as an ecclesiastical, liturgical musician; chapter four takes a more theoretical look at the theology of liturgy and how this could have constituted a grounding for his assertion that music could be theological. In this chapter the final research question is addressed: what links can be established between Messiaen's liturgical improvisational and compositional practices, and is it possible to infer specific influence from improvisation to composition or *vice versa*? The influence of liturgical improvisation and liturgical theology on Messiaen's composed music is therefore to be considered, to show that his role in church made a substantial contribution to his wider musical persona. Messiaen was primarily a composer, and secondarily an organist. This is similar to many of the luminaries of the preceding generation of French composers: Franck, Widor, Saint-Saëns, Fauré and Tournemire, all of whom contributed substantial works for the organ, similarly considered themselves composers first. The force of this chapter is not to suggest that the organ was determinative of his compositional thinking, which took on a large variety of sources and influences, but that liturgical organ improvisation was one constitutive part of his wider musical persona. The chapter takes the form of a series of case studies on compositions by Messiaen, in each case considering a different aspect of the connection between improvised ecclesiastical music and composed concert music.

The subsections in 5.1 take the three published organ works whose origin story as told by the composer himself includes improvisation. The *Messe de la Pentecôte* was said to be a summary of his improvisations up to the date of its composition in 1950, the *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte-Trinité* grew out of a special event in which Messiaen improvised in response to a preacher, and the *Livre du Saint Sacrement* was inspired by an improvisation during a Maundy Thursday service. Section 5.2 takes up Messiaen's suggestion that his

works could be considered a transposition of liturgy to the concert hall; this suggestion he made first with reference to *Trois petites liturgies de la Présence Divine* and later expanded also to include *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ*.¹ Section 5.3 looks at a small selection of other works in relation to which particularly relevant observations can be made: *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum* as a work combining civic with religious ritual and expressing a theological theme; *Saint François d'Assise*, the opera often taken as a summation of all Messiaen's ideas and techniques; and then some brief observation on his earlier cycles for organ (*La Nativité du Seigneur* and *Les Corps glorieux*) and piano (*Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jésus* and *Visions de l'Amen*) which suggest that the liturgical and theological approach to composition may have developed from earlier to later stages of the composer's working life.

Inevitably given the number of works considered, each case study is relatively short, but taken together they demonstrate the pervasive influence of Messiaen's role as a church organist on his wider musical activities and therefore tie the evidence presented in previous chapters into the final argument of the thesis.

5.1 Messiaen's works which are known to have originated in improvisation

Beginning with the organ works for which improvisation is understood to have been an explicit and acknowledged part of the conception of the work, and taking them in chronological order of composition, we will address each with a slightly different lens. The *Messe de la Pentecôte* is considered with reference to some of the material held in the Messiaen archive concerning its composition, and the final form will be compared to some of the sketch material for improvisations which appears to have been used in developing the

¹ Compare Claude Samuel, *Entretiens avec Olivier Messiaen* (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1967) pp.13–14 with Claude Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen : Musique et Couleur : nouveaux entretiens avec Claude Samuel* (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1986) p.22.

ideas, through improvisation, to composition. The *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte-Trinité* in their final form are compared to an archive recording of Messiaen rehearsing prior to the event which stands behind the work. Archive material on the *Livre du Saint Sacrement* remains largely inaccessible while the *Bibliothèque nationale* continues its programme of digitisation, so in that case the approach engages more with points of contact between the score of the finished work and the recordings of Messiaen improvising that are considered in chapter three to gauge the understated influence of his liturgical approach to music, in the light of secondary material, alongside the acknowledged origin of the cycle in a specific improvisation which formed the basis of one movement in the final more extensive work.

5.1.1 *Messe de la Pentecôte*

In May 1951 Messiaen introduced the *Messe* in the parish magazine of Ste Trinité, saying

For the midday Mass, reserved for modern music, I have composed two pieces specially: an offertoire and a sortie. The offertoire comments on the words ‘Les choses visibles et invisibles’ (‘All things visible and invisible’) which we recite each Sunday in the Creed, and which are applied perfectly to the kingdom of the Holy Spirit... The sortie, entitled ‘Le vent de l’Esprit’ [‘The wind of the Spirit’], uses a text from the Acts of the Apostles.²

For the current purpose, the difference between only two movements and the five in the final form of the *Messe* is worth noting, as is the fact that at this point the verb used is ‘composed’.

Later, Messiaen linked the *Messe* to improvisation, explaining of his organ playing in church that

It was sometimes of a very classical character, as circumstances demanded..., but I nevertheless improvised in my own style...; sometimes I was lucky, I had strokes of inspiration. These improvisations lasted quite a long time until the day when I noticed they were tiring me and that I emptied into them all my substance, so I wrote the *Messe de la Pentecôte*, which is the summary all my improvisations combined.³

² Hill & Simeone, *Messiaen*, pp.194–5 (parentheses and brackets *sic*).

³ Samuel, *Permanences*, p.31.

These two slightly different tellings raise the question of how much of the *Messe* can be thought of as essentially written-down improvisation and how much thought-through composition. That both approaches may be in evidence is not necessarily problematic, but if it is possible to gauge the extent to which the two complementary but differently-conceived activities were distinguished or elided, that may enable a refinement of our understanding of how improvisation influenced Messiaen in his compositional process more widely. Arguably, this is especially the case as the composed form of the *Messe*, along with Messiaen's other works from the same time-period, was of interest to the post-war modernists among his students such as Pierre Boulez, as well as other organists and those whose religious sympathies were closer to Messiaen's own. Equally, with regard to the theological element of the argument made here, it is also reasonable to enquire whether there is a difference of interpretation between elements seen as improvised and those understood as composed, specifically whether improvised elements fit more naturally with the liturgical function of the music.

Addressing the first of these questions, it is informative to compare the final published form of the *Messe* with the notes for improvisations that are held as part of the Messiaen archive, and which have been collected as particularly relevant to the *Messe*.⁴ The catalogue listing for this file acknowledges that the papers have been collected from various provenances, and most of them are undated, though it is understood that they derive from the late 1940s or early 50s and consist mostly of notes for improvisation and sketches for the *Messe*. Two examples in particular allow relevant observations to be made of the relations between these notes and the *Messe* in its composed form.

⁴ Messiaen, *Notes et esquisses*, BnF, FM, RES VMA MS-1493.

The first of these examples is verbal rather than musical, and appears to be brief comments about an improvisation on the third Sunday of Advent 1950. It is not clear whether these were prompts to guide that improvisation or recollections shortly after the event, although elsewhere in that file he refers to using that improvisation, which indicates he was keen to use the inspiration he may have had in that moment. The notes enumerate a number of blocks, principally noting registrations (timbres) and articulation textures:

Another organ improvisation (on the 3rd Sun. of Advent 1950)

(1) Begin: *R.* bourd 16, octavin, 2 hands trem. Water droplets alternating, interior

(2) *Pos.* harmonic flute & quintaton 16 & 3ce (1 voice)

(3) *G.* montres 16 & 8, bourdon 16 & 8 _ theme in staccato chords

Very dry, modal, in the extreme low register

Rise, add some stops...

(4) *Pos.*: pl chant theme, quintaton 16 & 3ce (1 voice)

G.: flute, pl chant fl 4 and 5te (1 voice)

In canon of 2 voices

Tone 2 same register

(5) *R.*: gambe, v. celeste – different chords, held, pp.

Pos.: fl 4, piccolo, 3ce (staccato, drops of water)

Ped.: Vcl 8 – in unison (legato) with *Pos.*

Alternating with birdsongs & E-D#-E-D#-A \sharp on the *G.*: bourdon 8

(6) fl 4, bourdon 16, descending


Simple chords – *ped.* 16, 32 – couple *R.*

On that: low fanfare, very dry staccato

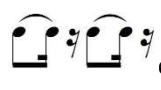
G.: montres 8, 16 – and fl 4, slc'n – trmp

Bourdon 16

Low – *pos.*: basson 16 only – low C – loured ff

 &c.

From time to time

(7) add clar., naz in the low: accompanied on E flat, D,  etc. 2 by 2.

Above, a solo in chords on the *R.*: foundations 16, 8, 4, pp

(8) to finish: ~~*R.* bourdon 8, tr~~ (1) *ped.* Trpt, slur A-B flat

(2) *pos.*: garlands clarinette in low register (3) *G.*: bourd 8 birdsong

(4) *R.*: bourdon 8 Tremolo chord < >

(different)

(5) *ped.*: sb 16, 32 – pizz –

Low C.⁵

⁵ Messiaen, *Notes et esquisses*, BnF, FM, RES VMA MS-1493, p.41.

The 'low C' from the *positif* bassoon at number 6 in these notes is recognisable as the interjection which occurs six times in the 'Offertoire' of the *Messe* (bb. 33–4, 46–7, 69–70, 99–100, 125–6, 129). Possibly more innovative is the texture he describes at note 5, in which he engaged the 4-foot flute, the piccolo and the tierce of the *positif*, playing a staccato which he likens to drops of water, while the pedal 8-foot string stop plays the same notes legato, accompanied by sustained chords on the manual strings. This texture is also found in the 'Offertoire' (example 5.1), albeit that the pedal legato line is given on a flute rather than a string stop; again the connection to the sound of water dripping is specified, and this texture is noted as being among the more unusual textures Messiaen created in the *Messe*.⁶

⁶ Messiaen, *Traité IV*, p.99–100.

R: gambe et voix céleste | pos: flûte 4, piccolo 1, 3ce | G. bourdon 8 | Péd: flûte 4 seule |

Un peu lent (staccato goutte d'eau)

The musical score is written for two systems. The first system is marked 'Un peu lent' and '(staccato goutte d'eau)'. It features a Pos. part (flute 4, piccolo 1, 3ce) and a G. part (bourdon 8). The Pos. part starts with a forte (*f*) dynamic and a staccato, dotted eighth-note pattern. The G. part starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a legato, dotted eighth-note pattern. The Pos. part then transitions to a piano (*pp*) dynamic and a legato, dotted eighth-note pattern. The G. part then transitions to a piano (*p*) dynamic and a legato, dotted eighth-note pattern. The Pos. part then transitions to a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic and a legato, dotted eighth-note pattern. The G. part then transitions to a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic and a legato, dotted eighth-note pattern. The second system is marked '3' and continues the Pos. part with a forte (*f*) dynamic and a staccato, dotted eighth-note pattern. The G. part continues with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic and a legato, dotted eighth-note pattern.

Example 5.1. Olivier Messiaen, *Messe de la Pentecôte*, 'Offertoire (Les choses visibles et invisibles)', bb.102–5.

It seems very possible that this improvisation in Advent formed the basis for the composition of the 'Offertoire' of the *Messe*, although not every element of the notes is identifiable with a part of the composition. This possibility is strengthened by the observation that the left-hand melody in bars 48 to 56 is a decorated and modally altered version of the gradual *Prope est Dominus* for the fourth Sunday of Advent (example 5.2). We have, therefore, another example of Messiaen using a plainchant inspiration, and indeed a whole improvisation, intended for one part of the liturgical year to form the basis of a composition for a different occasion: Pentecost is about as far from Advent as it is possible to be in the ecclesiastical

calendar. That said, there is a theological rationale for linking Advent, the approaching incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, with Pentecost, the gift of the third person of the Trinity to the early church. These twin advents sit more comfortably together than might at first glance be perceived.

Modéré
legato
mf

The musical score is written for a single melodic line in the treble staff, accompanied by a simple bass line in the bass staff. The tempo is marked 'Modéré' and the performance instructions are 'legato' and 'mf'. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The melody is written in the treble staff, and the bass staff provides a simple harmonic accompaniment. The score consists of three systems, each with a treble and bass staff.



Example 5.2. Olivier Messiaen, *Messe de la Pentecôte*, ‘Offertoire (Les choses visibles et invisibles)’, left hand, bb.48–56, (upper staff) compared with Gradual *Prope est Dominus* (lower staff, transposed: *fa* = G).

The second relevant observation to be made about connections between the notes in the archive and the published *Messe* concerns a prompt for improvisation which can be contrasted directly with the opening of the *Entrée* of the *Messe*.⁷ The registration matches,

⁷ Messiaen, *Notes et esquisses*, BnF, FM, RES VMA MS-1493 p.6.

with the *Récit* sounding a 16-foot bourdon and the cymbale, the *Positif* a 16-foot quintaton and the tierce, the *Grand Orgue* montre and quint and the pedal a solo 4-foot clairon.

Notwithstanding the orthography in which the staves are switched, the pitches are more or less the same; what is markedly different is the rhythm, which in the composed version is identified as derived from Greek rhythms treated in irrational values, and in the prompt is significantly less complex (compare examples 5.3 and 5.4). The rhythmic treatment is further foregrounded by Messiaen's later analysis of the composition,⁸ and it is fairly clear that the rhythmic framework has been imposed onto the pitch and timbre material at a secondary phase in the development of the music. What remains unknown, and cannot be demonstrated on the available evidence, is how much of such development might have arisen in improvisation and how much in a more cerebral effort of composition.

Example 5.3. Olivier Messiaen, notes for improvised verset.

⁸ Messiaen, *Traité IV*, pp.86–8.

R: bourdon 16 et cymbale | Pos: quintaton 16 et 3^e | G: montre 8 et 5^e | Péd: clairon 4 seul |

Modéré (*rythmes grecs traités en valeurs irrationnelles*)

MAN. *dr. mf legato*

PED. *f legato*

Pos. *mf*

legato più f

Example 5.4. Olivier Messiaen, *Messe de la Pentecôte*, ‘Entrée (Les langues de feu)’, bb.1–4.

That Messiaen was interested in the rhythmic dimension of music from an early age is well known, and that he had been introduced to Greek rhythm by Maurice Emmanuel at the conservatoire is similarly established.⁹ It is not feasible definitively to exclude the possibility that these ideas were among the ways in which he developed his prompt material in the context of instantiating an improvisation on the basis of the prompt given. That said, if the observation made above (section 3.5) is correct that Messiaen’s separation of the parameters of pitch and rhythm reflected an approach in which the latter was consistently more calculated, then the balance of probabilities might suggest that the more complex ideas were added at the later stage of composition. This claim is further supported by the relatively less complex rhythmic expression observed in the recorded improvisations.

Such a suggestion in turn raises a question of theological interpretation: if the rhythmic element is added at a remove from the improvisatory development of an idea, is it less implicated in the case made in chapter four regarding a liturgical understanding of the religious ideas explored? It is difficult to discern a direct connection between the tongues of

⁹ Samuel, *Permanences*, p.109.

flame that appeared above the apostles at Pentecost, which is the image given in the subtitle of the movement, and the rhythmic elaboration of the material. Messiaen in fact concedes that the irrational values add nothing to the Greek rhythms except making them more difficult to play:

In any case, they [irrational values] don't change anything in the spirit of the Greek rhythms. Only one valid criticism: the piece is difficult to perform: only a very conscientious performer will be able to play it with the required precision.¹⁰

As liturgical music, therefore, from an organist's point of view the additional complexity could end up being a distraction from the religious intention, by requiring greater focus on the technical difficulties. This may not have been the case for Messiaen himself playing with rhythmic ideas in an improvisational way, however. The musical material to which the rhythms are applied in any case, does seem likely to have been used directly in liturgy, so the impetus behind the work fits within the framework of this interpretation.

5.1.2 *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte-Trinité*

To celebrate both the centenary of the church and the reopening of the organ after refurbishment, a special event entitled 'The Mystery of God' was held in Ste Trinité on 23 November 1967 in which verbal meditations by the renowned preacher and rector of the *Sacré Coeur*, Monsignor Maxime Charles, alternated with improvised musical responses from Messiaen at the organ. Messiaen's organ cycle *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte-Trinité* grew out of this event, and consists of nine musical meditations on the nature of the Trinity. The movements are untitled, although the composer did later concede that labels might be used linking each to relevant theological ideas. The most significant technical innovation in the work is the introduction of Messiaen's *langage communicable*, an alphabetic cipher in which each letter is represented by a note defined not only in pitch class,

¹⁰ Messiaen, *Traité IV*, p.86.

but also in register and value, using which Messiaen could directly encode quotations from Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*. The cipher is complemented by a system of case markers and a short theme which represents God after the manner of the cartouches around royal names in ancient inscriptions.

Given that again the received story of the *Méditations* is that the published form of the music consists essentially of a written version of the improvisations at the event, it is valid once more to consider, in so far as evidence is available, the extent to which the improvised music and the final publication may be thought similar or dissimilar. To approach this there are two significant pieces of evidence in the Messiaen archive to which attention may be given: the first is a recording of Messiaen rehearsing on 21st and 22nd November 1967, the two days prior to the event;¹¹ the second is the autograph manuscript of the work.

In considering the recording some caution is necessary: it cannot be assumed that these rehearsals reflect in all particulars the event that they were preparation for, nor even that the recording captured every element of the relevant rehearsals. Nevertheless, it is clear both that a lot of the thematic material of the *Méditations* is represented and equally that certain aspects of the composed work do not appear in what is recorded of these rehearsals.

Recognisable material includes the bassoon solo labelled 'God is immense' which opens the fifth movement (example 5.5); short snatches of birdsong which seem similar in style to the song of the garden warbler, found in movements two and nine; quotations of the plainchant alleluias for All Saints' Day and the Dedication Festival; fast movement in octaves like that labelled 'the breath of the spirit' in the fifth movement; the pattern found in bars 17–21 of the eighth movement, based on the Çarngadevan rhythm *Miçra Varna*; rhythmic variation of

¹¹ Olivier Messiaen, *Improvisations à l'orgue. Répétition d'Olivier Messiaen pour concert improvisations, tri essai. – Eglise de la Trinité, 21 et 22 novembre 1967*, BnF, FM, NUMAV-1188765; this identifier refers to the digitised sound file created from a magnetic audio tape held in the archive, which is itself identified as SNUM-1223.

These recognisable elements do not seem in the recording to follow the order in which they occur in the composed work, but yet more striking given the prominence that it has in the *Méditations* as received, is the absence from this recording of any significant trace of the *langage communicable*. The exception to that is that the bassoon solo labelled ‘God is immense’ is a version of the theme of God in the *langage* (Example 5.5 and 5.6). Given that the distinctive disjoint melodies created by statements made in the *langage* are not heard in the recording (nor, indeed in any of the other recorded improvisations considered in this research) it seems likely that the cipher was created as part of the more cerebral composition process after the improvised event, though it cannot, of course, be conclusively demonstrated that it was not conceived between the recorded rehearsal and the event itself. If it is correct to suppose that it developed later, then it seems arguable that the leitmotif of God’s immensity can with hindsight be identified as the first element of the *langage*, borrowed from the themes Messiaen may have noted for the improvisations, rather than being the final element in the schema, as it is presented in the prologue to the published score in which the *langage* is more extensively described.

[illegible]

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Thème de Dieu



Example 5.6. Theme of God from Olivier Messiaen's *langage communicable*.

Given that a number of the elements recognisable from the recorded rehearsal are found in the fifth movement of the resulting composition, it is tempting to see that movement as the one most closely based on the improvisations of the event itself, and the observation that apart from that one motif there is no instance of the *langage* in that movement supports that supposition. Turning to the autograph manuscript score, it is striking that the file includes two versions of the fifth movement.¹² Although they have the same content, the first is significantly less neat than the other, and especially on the first page shows evidence of several erasure marks. This untidiness is sufficient reason, perhaps, for Messiaen to have wished to write a clean copy, indeed the front of the folio includes a note to re-copy the movement onto clean paper. It remains possible that the erasing in the earlier copy was to facilitate nothing more than re-spacing, though there are some hints that Messiaen may have added material: it is possible to read '*comb. 6*' erased a few lines above its actual return in bar 13 – although this could be merely to allow more space between systems and for registration indications, it could also imply that bars 10–12 might have been added to extend the section marked '*le Souffle de l'Esprit*' at a stage later than the original conception of the movement. Other erased markings appear to have been alphanumeric combinations enclosed in circles; it is not clear what they might represent though it is tempting to think the page might originally have consisted of labelled notes of thematic material for the improvisation that gave rise to

¹² Olivier Messiaen, *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte Trinité, pour orgue [musique manuscrite]*, BnF, FM, MUS RES VMA MS 1946.

the work. This leads to the speculation that this page might originally have contained the sketches and ideas from which Messiaen improvised in the event, and from which the composed work expanded; some themes moved only a small amount on the original page, others eventually found themselves placed elsewhere. There is an element of speculation involved in this suggestion, but it is not difficult to see it as at least a possibility.

As with the *Messe*, what these pieces of evidence seem to suggest is that ideas and themes from improvisation were reused by Messiaen in a compositional process that was rather more considered than a simple attempt to reproduce in score form the music that had been improvised. It should be noted, however, that in this instance the event in which the improvisation took place was a particular designated large-scale event, for which it is very likely that he prepared more thoroughly in terms of planning for the improvisations than he might for a regular Sunday service. Indeed, the very fact that he rehearsed the improvisations, and had that rehearsal recorded for critical listening, confirms the extent to which this music was already planned in more detail than would normally be associated with improvisation as a musical task. It is also the case that although the event took place in church with a speaker known for preaching, it was not strictly a liturgical occasion, and it may be that the wider questions concerning the influence that his role as an improvising liturgical organist had on his musical persona are not best answered with reference to this event. That said, the range of timbres engaged, the tendency to juxtapose blocks of material, and a palpably prayerful approach to the music do encourage the listener to see this event as related to his liturgical improvisation as witnessed by the recordings considered above of that latter activity.

5.1.3 *Livre du Saint Sacrement*

The origin of Messiaen's final organ cycle, the *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, is testimony to the function his role at Ste Trinité played in the constancy of his musical thinking. Having

experienced a kind of burn-out in bringing his opera *Saint François d'Assise* to completion, he would tell everyone that he had finished composing for good. However,

During this time without any composition, I continued to play my role as titular organist of the church of the Ste Trinité. So I had to improvise. At first I didn't react even to what I had just done. Then, little by little, I realised that I was beginning to reflect, after the fact, on such and such a point of what I had just played; I started to take some notes. It was from that starting point that I began to organise a work which became my *Livre du Saint Sacrement*. The flame came back to me, but really unexpectedly, thanks to the improvisations.¹³

He specifically identified an improvisation on Maundy Thursday which became the movement *Institution de l'Eucharistie*, the eighth of the cycle. It seems that there is some disingenuity in the recounting of the story, at least with regard to the dates: the improvisation which inspired that particular movement occurred not in 1984 but in 1981, at which point he was still orchestrating the opera.¹⁴ Nevertheless, we can take it that the work does relate to his improvisations, and it is temporally the closest organ work to the recordings on the disc *Olivier Messiaen Live: Improvisations inédites* discussed in chapter three, and therefore it is instructive to consider how far the music of the composed cycle and the music of the improvised liturgical contributions show similar features. Before considering musical features, it is worth introducing a consideration of the structure of the cycle as a whole. Dingle observes that there is a similarity between the order of the movements and the different parts of the Mass:

The acts of simple adoration provided by the first four movements are analogous to the opening prayers. The allusions to and representations of scriptural narrative, principally in movements 5 to 11, are equivalent to the liturgy of the Word. Finally, the meditations on liturgical mysteries of movements 12 to 18 correspond to the consecration and subsequent participation in the Eucharist.¹⁵

¹³ Massin, *Messiaen*, p.202.

¹⁴ Hill & Simeone, *Messiaen*, p.343. Orchestration may be distinguishable from composition, but work on the opera was ongoing.

¹⁵ Dingle, *Final Works*, p.51.

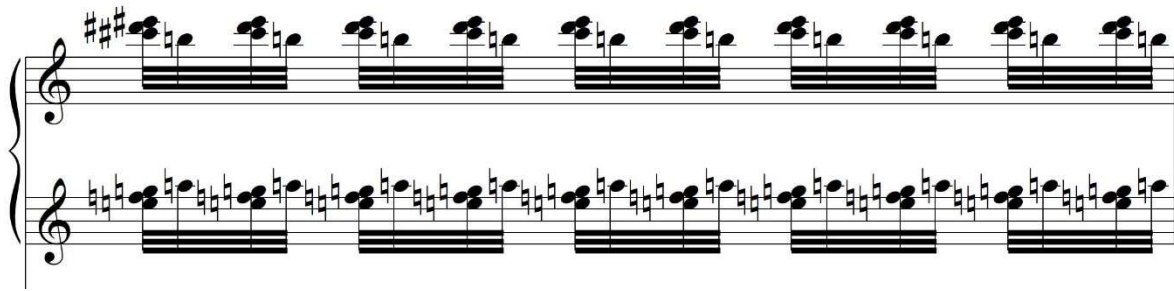
The context for Dingle's observation is that notes reveal changes in the ordering of the movements – and indeed the title of one of them – as well as the addition of three movements, between a draft stage and the final publication. Such a calculated redistribution of already-composed elements can hardly be thought of as improvisatory, but it does tend to confirm the influence of liturgical patterns on the musical thinking of the composer.

Considering the music itself there are a number of relevant connections between the pieces that make up the *Livre* and the recorded improvisations considered in chapter three. There are similar juxtapositions of blocks of material, quotations from plainchant and snatches of birdsong – although these last are often more extended in the composed work than those heard in the selection of recordings on the discs. The fourteenth movement of the *Livre*, for example, entitled *Prière avant la communion* alternates lines of plainchant in registrations based on 16-foot stops with added mutations but no sounding 8-foot ranks, with harmonic material in a string texture on the *Récit*, played using a coupler to the pedal-board as well as on the manual, but without any native pedal stops engaged. These textures are familiar from the recorded improvisations, although the plainchant lines quoted in this instance seem to stand alone without significant development.

The title of the final movement of the *Livre*, 'Offrande et Alleluia final', may be a reference to Tournemire's *l'Orgue Mystique* in which the *Pièce terminale* of each office is given a title several of which involve final alleluias, though the movement was originally conceived and composed with specific reference to the visitation of Mary to her cousin Elizabeth in which the unborn John the Baptist responded to the presence of the unborn Jesus.¹⁶ The music similarly builds up from a monodic line to a toccata-like texture, in which the pedal states motivic material under more exuberant figuration in the manuals, or under

¹⁶ Dingle, *Final Works*, p.51.

sustained *forte* chords. Towards the end of the movement there is a form of written out tremolo, giving an effect which is similar to a common feature of Messiaen's improvised postludes in the recordings (example 5.7).



Example 5.7. Olivier Messiaen, *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, 'XVIII. Offrande et Alleluia final', b.96.

Similarly, it is noted above that Messiaen's improvisational use of the opening of the Christmas introit, *puer natus est nobis*, is dominated by only the very recognisable three-note opening motif.¹⁷ The same can be said of the movement with the same title in the *Livre*, movement five. It is easy, then, to see how this cycle of organ pieces grew out of Messiaen's liturgical function as organist of Ste Trinité, and indeed how his habits as an improviser in that role influenced aspects of his composition for his own instrument. There are, however, a number of movements in the *Livre* which seem to relate less to the improvisations.

Movement fifteen, 'La joie de la grâce', for example consists almost entirely of birdsong. Although his improvisations do use birdsong, it does not seem in that context – and on the basis of the recordings that are available, which do not, of course, cover the entirety of the practice – to have stood entirely alone in this way.

¹⁷ See above, p.104.

It is argued in section 5.1.2 that the *langage communicable* appears to be a more cerebrally calculated element in the *Méditations* than part of the improvised event that gave rise to it. The *langage* reappears in the *Livre* though generally as a less pervasive element. Thus, the very brief statement of ‘joy’ in the final movement is sufficiently short to be a plausible stand-alone motif either remembered or noted down which might have been used in an improvised setting, although none of the recorded improvisations considered testify to such a usage. Such a supposition sits less easily, however, with the statements ‘your father’, ‘your God’, and ‘Apocalypse’ towards the end of the eleventh movement, ‘L’apparition du Christ ressuscité à Marie-Madeleine’, which sound less integrated with the surrounding material.

There are, then, many significant elements in this cycle which can be thought of as capturing techniques and ideas that are similar to those used by Messiaen in his liturgical improvisations, and other elements which may be more related to his theoretical approaches to music. Dingle argues that the cycle is in fact bound up with the same energy as Messiaen’s opera, and can be seen, as can *Saint François d’Assise*, as a summation of his technical innovations and practices brought together from their temporally disparate origins into a final compendium work.¹⁸ That assessment accounts for the range of techniques displayed across the eighteen movements of the cycle, but in the same measure plays down the dependence of the work on the composer’s diligent commitment to the task of providing liturgical music from the organ to accompany and respond to the actions of the liturgy, most frequently the Mass, to which the title of the work and his own story of its origin witness.

The points at which similarities can be noted between parts of the *Livre* and the recordings that provide direct evidence of Messiaen’s liturgical improvisations do not

¹⁸ Dingle, *Final Works*, p.58. A specific link between the seventh *Tableau* of the opera and the twelfth movement of the *livre* is suggested by Bauer, *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, p.219.

necessarily contradict the claim that the cycle is a compendium as described, but it expands the range of sources from which it can be imagined that the composer was drawing. Whether more or less self-consciously, the gestures that were so familiar to him as an organist that they recur in his *ex tempore* responses to the sacrament also show up in this considered set of musical prayers inspired by and responding to the eucharist. It may be this which enables Bauer to hear the cycle as ‘worship in sound’.¹⁹

5.2 Messiaen’s works identified as concert-hall liturgies

Turning from organ works which are understood to have originated in improvisation, the other aspect of the account given above is the nature of liturgical theology as expressed in music. The next case studies are, therefore, of those concert works which Messiaen specifically identified as having been conceived as ‘a sort of liturgy for the concert hall’:²⁰ the first of these are directly entitled ‘liturgies’, the *Trois petites liturgies de la Présence Divine*. Messiaen subsequently included his large-scale oratorio *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ* in the same category.²¹ In terms of the first of these, there are relevant observations to make concerning orchestration and the development of musical material, but also concerning the text set and how that appears to have been developed. Both these suggest ways in which liturgical material may be understood to stand in the background of the development of elements of the work. The second has been interpreted in relation to the possibility that it formed part of the composer’s response to the liturgical changes introduced after the Second Vatican Council.²² This reading is extended by adding to previous observations some further thoughts about the role Messiaen’s regard for the theology of

¹⁹ Bauer, *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, p.41.

²⁰ Samuel, *Permanences*, p.26.

²¹ Compare Samuel, *Entretiens avec Messiaen*, pp.13–14 with Samuel, *Musique et Couleur*, p.22.

²² Christopher Dingle, “‘La statue reste sur son piédestal’: Messiaen’s “La Transfiguration” and Vatican II”, *Tempo*, Issue 212, (April 2000), pp.8–11.

Guardini may have had in his response to the acts of the Council and their implementation; these thoughts relate to his musical expression in this work as well as his wider attitude.

In pursuing case studies on these works as well as the organ works above, Messiaen's role as a liturgical improviser is shown to have relevance to his wider musical personality, not only in relation to the organ as an instrument. Although arguably more forceful than most in defining the idea of concert music as being in some sense liturgical, there are, as Simeone has observed, other instances of a similar argument that might provide context for this sort of transference. Having begun by observing that before Messiaen setting 'devotional texts in a work for the concert hall was unusual,' Simeone sees precedent in Caplet's *Le miroir de Jésus*, the Psalm texts set by Lili Boulanger, religious-inspired theatre works of Arthur Honegger and several of the religious works of Francis Poulenc, as well as broadly contemporary context in the plainchant-inspired concert works by Duruflé.²³ The conception of this transposition goes beyond simply setting texts that originate in liturgical use using otherwise secular musical styles, as in many classic examples of concert Mass settings, but encompasses a pious use of concert music by a believing composer to express more or less explicitly their religious convictions in musical form.

Standing behind this conception are attempts from both sides to keep religion and secular culture separate from each other. On the church's side, *Tra le sollecitudini* opposed the use of popular concert and operatic styles of music in liturgical settings; the French political principle of *laïcité*, enshrined in law in 1905 and made a constitutional principle in the fourth and fifth French republics, while it does not proscribe religious expression has been used to limit cultural expressions of faith outside the private sphere. Even before these, French culture had tended to react negatively to religious subjects in non-religious settings, as

²³ Nigel Simeone, 'Church and Organ Music' in Richard Langham Smith and Caroline Potter (eds.), *French Music since Berlioz* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2006), p.179–95.

witnessed, for example, by the reception of Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Delila*, deliberately an opera rather than an oratorio, but first performed in Germany, and not staged in Paris until fifteen years later.²⁴

That Messiaen wished concert compositions to be understood in ways comparable to liturgy may be understood in a similar sense to his general aim of using his music to illuminate the truths of the Catholic faith, but it may also be seen as a recognition that there is a certain ceremonial aspect to a concert occasion, and that in the same way that a congregation is drawn into participation in the liturgy, so it is possible for an audience to be drawn into a concert. Although it is not plausible to maintain a similar collectivity of intention in a concert audience, the commonality and communality of activity make it possible to think that they can be attentive in an analogously participatory way, and therefore that the composer's intention to lead them in this way fulfils his aim of addressing them with the theological content of his music. The words that he sets need not be seen as exhausting the theological relevance of the work, which is also contained in his music, as the theological understanding of liturgy expounded in chapter four explains.

5.2.1 *Trois petites liturgies de la Présence Divine*

Messiaen's *Trois petites liturgies* were premiered in 1945, an event which was one of the significant causes of the press controversy sometimes referred to as *le cas Messiaen*, in which various aspects of his public personality and music were both critiqued and defended.²⁵ Given that a significant point of contention in this exchange was what it means for music to be 'religious' and that this was the first of the works that Messiaen specifically identified as an attempt to transpose a liturgical act to the concert hall, it furnishes an important case study for

²⁴ Hugh Macdonald, 'Samson et Dalila ('Samson and Delilah')', *Grove Music Online* in *Oxford Music Online* (2002), DOI: 10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.0904621.

²⁵ Hill & Simeone, *Messiaen*, pp.142–154.

the argument that liturgical theology can provide a grounding for the expression of theology in extra-liturgical music. The structure of the case study will first identify some specific connections between the music and text of the *liturgies*, liturgical texts, and Messiaen's liturgical improvisations, and then consider the model of liturgical theology and how successfully that may be applied to theological music when taken outside of the church.

Regarding the text, as with almost all of his settings the composer provided his own libretto, three linked meditations on the presence of God in the self, in revelation, and in loving relation. A preliminary observation is that the titles of the movements all relate to liturgical forms: the first is an antiphon, the second a sequence, and the third a psalm.²⁶ There is a recently recovered personal prayer that Messiaen himself had written in 1943:

You who are present at all times,
You who are present everywhere,
Without being divided or multiplied.
You who are three Persons,
With one indivisible nature,
You who do the impossible thing,
Beget God and remain God.
You who are Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
With a single action, a single power.
You who are incarnate,
Suffered, died on the cross,
While remaining the immortal God,
Eternally in the perfection of joy.
You who hide in the host,
You who speak in us,
You who are silent in us,
You who keep silence in your Love.
You who are called good, holy, eternal,
Because Goodness is You, Holiness is You,
Love and Eternity is You.
You who are near, You who are far,
You who are light and darkness,
You who are so complicated and so simple,
You who are infinitely simple.

Make me understand your Immensity,
May I imitate your Holiness,

²⁶ Although having referred to these as forms, it is necessary to acknowledge that of the three only the second, the sequence hymn, determines a form in the strict musical sense.

Deliver me through your Truth,
Pull me towards Your Eternity,
Strike me with your Simplicity,
Consume me forever in your lovely Unity,
So that I may drink from You forever and ever. Amen.²⁷

This prayer shows a number of similarities to the text of the ‘psalmodie’ most strikingly the following lines:

Entire in all places
Entire in each place
Giving being to each place
To all that occupies a place,
The successive ‘you’ is omnipresent
...
You who speak in us
You who are silent in us
And keep silence in your love,
You are near,
You are far,
You are light and darkness,
You are so complicated and so simple,
You are infinitely simple.²⁸

Although a personal prayer, considering this text as an intermediate point in the drafting of the third of the *liturgies* highlights the inspiration which the form of the prayer takes from liturgical texts. The almost repetitive consideration of the doctrine of the Trinity in the first half of the first stanza strongly recalls the so-called Athanasian creed.²⁹ Furthermore, the overall structure of the prayer, although extended, follows that of a collect: invocation or address to God, acknowledgement of divine attributes, petition, aspiration, response. A collect is an essential part of most services, both sacraments and offices; it is also common as a structure for the personal prayers of the faithful offered in the *Paroissien Romain*, a

²⁷ The French text was provided in private correspondence by Christopher Dingle, who had received it from Père Jean-Rodolphe Kars, it is reproduced, together with the translation quoted, at Malcolm Ball, oliviermessiaen.org (2023) www.oliviermessiaen.org/writings (accessed 26 July 2023).

²⁸ Olivier Messiaen, *Trois petites liturgies de la Présence Divine* (Paris: Durand, 1952), pp.118–20; 161–3.

²⁹ Creeds are liturgical rather than a doctrinal texts in so far as their function is communal recitation during services. Use of the Athanasian creed in the Catholic church had reduced in Messiaen’s lifetime: it used to be said regularly at the office of Prime on Sundays, but since 1911 it had been removed from Sundays other than those after Epiphany and Pentecost, and Trinity Sunday; after 1960 it was said on Trinity Sunday only, and since the Second Vatican Council it has not been regularly used.

liturgical aid for French-speakers following the Latin Mass which was commonly used in France before the introduction of vernacular liturgies after the Second Vatican Council.

Musically, the surface impression of the *liturgies* is not, it is acknowledged, very similar to the organ-based improvisations considered in this thesis; a lot of that dissimilarity however is the necessary result of timbre and instrumentation. The relatively static A major tonality, enriched rather than overwhelmed by Messiaen's modal decoration, does give some similarity however. Considering the second of the *liturgies*, it is possible to add a point of contact in the approach. The movement opens with all parts essentially in unison: the piano, celesta and ondes Martenot add octaves; piano and celesta ornamentation by acciaccatura; and piano a rhythmic drive by striking every semiquaver even where other parts sustain (example 5.8).³⁰ If that is taken as a thematic statement analogous to Messiaen's most direct quotations from plainchant in his improvisations, then the second idea of the movement, which takes over at figure 1, can be seen as a development of a derived fragment from that theme using repetition and harmonisation in a way similarly analogous to the development of thematic fragments in the improvisations (example 5.9). In this way, although the musical effect is rather different, one can hear a certain likeness in the approach between the improvisations witnessed in the available recordings of Messiaen's liturgical music and the composition of this *liturgie* for the concert hall. To this confluence of technique can be added the recollection of the observation made in section 3.4.4., in which a motif in one of the improvisations may be a direct allusion to the earlier composition.³¹

³⁰ Messiaen refers to this technique as *monnayage* (coining).

³¹ See above, section 3.4.4 p.112.

Presque vif, avec une grande joie (♩ = 144)

Célésta

Choeur;
vib.; pizz
vlms; onde
Martenot
(8va)

Piano

Il est par - - - ti le Bien - Ai -

mé, C'est pour nous! _____

Example 5.8. Reduction from Olivier Messiaen, *Trois petites liturgies de la Présence Divine*, 'II. Séquence du Verbe, Cantique Divin', bb.1–6.

The image shows a musical score for three parts: Célesta Choeur, Piano, and Cordes. The score is in G major (one sharp) and features complex rhythmic patterns, including 7/16 and 16/16 time signatures. The dynamics are marked with *f* (forte) and *ff* (fortissimo). The lyrics are: "Il a par - - - lé, il a chan - - - té,". The score is a reduction from the original work by Olivier Messiaen.

Example 5.9. Reduction from Olivier Messiaen, *Trois petites liturgies de la Présence Divine*, 'II. Séquence du Verbe, Cantique Divin', bb.21–4.

How, though, do these musical and textual connections apply to the idea that the concert occasion is able in some way to function theologically as a liturgy? Can these three short movements be conceived, after Guardini, as a cultured way of giving 'durable form and expression' to Catholic truths?³² That the content of the text is theological is undeniable, as is

³² Guardini, *Spirit*, p.23, see above, p.175.

the sincerity of the composer's faith and his intention to express that in his music. That he might have thought about this work as a kind of liturgy, however, does not in itself engage the audience in the same conceit. Indeed, the critical response to the *liturgies* suggests that those expecting to hear liturgically-inspired music were uncomprehending of the difference between what that idea implied for them and what it appeared to mean for Messiaen. Some, such as Roger Blanchard merely asserted that the music was not conducive to contemplation;³³ others were less polite: Claude Rostand described 'a work of tinsel, false magnificence and pseudo-mysticism'.³⁴ These responses appear to be as much statements about the relatively conservative style anticipated in music that styles itself liturgical as they are about the actual form and content of Messiaen's work, in so far as they provide little theological rationale beyond the normativity of general expectations. That Messiaen did not conform to a style he would have thought bland and saccharine is the more theological statement, in so far as he justified his approach with reference to biblical passages which are susceptible to readings which might shock, and the fact that the ideas which he is attempting to illustrate are in fact, if true, momentous and 'dazzling'.

The *Trois petites liturgies de la Présence Divine* therefore express Messiaen's conviction that his faith does not entail an approach different to the modernism he espoused as a musician, but rather required the full resources of his technical innovations precisely in order to draw his audience to an understanding of the magnitude of the Gospel as he understood it. That he did so using music which can be described using the categories with which Guardini characterised the spirit of the liturgy may be seen as confirmation that their liturgical nature is bound up with this theological intention, and inspired by his conception of his role as a Catholic liturgical musician.

³³ Hill & Simeone, *Messiaen*, p.150.

³⁴ Hill & Simeone, *Messiaen*, p.151.

5.2.2 *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ*

The oratorio *La Transfiguration* was first performed in Lisbon in 1969. Both that timing and the fact that it represents a return both to explicitly religious themes and to vocal writing after a significant period in which those had been in abeyance in Messiaen's work suggest that the implementation of liturgical changes in the wake of the Second Vatican Council is likely to have been on his mind as he composed. This argument has been made by Christopher Dingle, who notes the significance of the text being in Latin and the similarity of the *Récit Evangelique* movements to psalm tones.³⁵ Although explicitly stating that a reaction to the Council is not necessarily a reaction against it,³⁶ the impression from Dingle's article is that Messiaen was using the oratorio to express concerns. It may be possible, however, to see it as more an attempt at renewal and an expansion of possibilities rather than an inherently conservative resistance to change. This again relates to Messiaen's admiration for the theology of Guardini, who, although not a participant at the council, had been highly influential in the thinking that informed the reforms. Before developing this theme there are a few additional observations to be made connecting this oratorio to the influence of Catholic liturgy generally, and to Messiaen's liturgical improvisations specifically.

Regarding the general influence of liturgy, it is interesting to note not only that the texts set are in Latin, but that in addition to scriptural and scholastic sources, a number of the texts are drawn from the liturgical celebration of the feast: the collect, the preface and the Vespers hymn are all acknowledged in the score. In addition, the recurring text, *candor est lucis aeternae*, which Messiaen correctly ascribes to the book of Wisdom is also used as the verse of the Alleluia of the day, meaning that the connection between that text and the theme

³⁵ Dingle, 'La statue', pp.8–11.

³⁶ Dingle, 'La statue' p.9.

was received from the liturgical tradition rather than an individual connection made originally by the composer.

That Messiaen mentions the scriptural origin of that text rather than its liturgical use on the feast of the Transfiguration might be a form of misdirection away from an instance of his ‘borrowing’ technique,³⁷ if we note that the setting of ‘Alleluia’ at figures 5 and 6 of the sixth movement of the second septenary follows the contour of the Gregorian *Alleluia Candor est* (example 5.10). The interruption of the alleluia in octaves with thicker – and louder – chords recalls some of his treatments of plainchant alleluias in the recorded improvisations, specifically the Easter acclamation, number 14. This constitutes a concrete musical connection between the composer’s liturgical improvisations and the music of this grand oratorio.



Example 5.10. Reduction from the vocal parts from Olivier Messiaen, *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ*, second septenary, movement 6, beginning one bar after figure 5 (upper staff) compared to *Alleluia Candor est* (lower staff).

How does it relate, however, to the Second Vatican Council? First it is necessary to distinguish the text of the relevant conciliar documents, principally *Sacrosanctum Concilium* or the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, from the implementation of the changes which followed it. The Constitution itself affirms the normativity of Latin as the language of the church, and the central place of both plainchant and organ music in the accompaniment of

³⁷ Balmer *et al.*, *Le Modèle*.

divine worship. It does, though, permit a certain level of inculturation, and it requires the full and active participation of the laity in the service; it is the implementation of these elements which led to such significant changes in the experience of Catholic musicians. It has been argued that the implementation of change went beyond the intentions of the council itself, and it is in these differences that Messiaen's disquiet might be best located: in other words, as an admirer of Guardini, among other theologians, Messiaen may well have been expected to welcome the conciliar document itself, but is likely to have found that the changes as they were introduced did not match his reasonable anticipation of what would happen in practice.

To connect this thought with *La Transfiguration* it is also helpful to clarify the chronology. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* was promulgated on 4 December 1963, and considered as soon as January 1964 by the French Episcopal Commission on Sacred Music, but it was not until 5 March 1967 that the Instruction on Music in the Liturgy, *Musicam Sacram*, was issued (to come into force at Pentecost that year) which prompted the imposition of specific changes. Against that background it is to be recalled that *La Transfiguration* had been commissioned in 1965, with a view to performance the following year. That the timescale, and indeed scale of the work itself, expanded as it progressed was a common fact of many of Messiaen's compositions, but it seems that a version of the work in nine movements had been composed – and declared by the composer to be good – by the middle of 1966, meaning that, notwithstanding the subsequent changes, the conception of the idea and much of the compositional work that went into *La Transfiguration* was done between the promulgation of the Constitution and the issuing of the Instruction.³⁸

At the time of the first stage of the composition, therefore, it is plausible to hear the work not as reflecting what might be lost in liturgical change, but as a positive and intentional

³⁸ Hill & Simeone, *Messiaen*, p.264.

embrace of the spirit of reform. Considered in such terms it is possible to see *La Transfiguration* as a continuation of the quest Messiaen had argued for earlier in his life to provide a Christian music that was authentic in drawing from a well of life: in other words for expression of the received and accepted theological truths in ways which are fresh and varied rather than conventional and regressive.³⁹ Although rather less explicit than his previous advocacy in writing, it is possible to imagine that his response to the spirit of the council might have been positively to welcome the possibilities for renewal of religious and liturgical music, and to use his composition of this period to demonstrate how he hoped such renewal might take shape. In making this suggestion, specific disagreement is found with Bauer, who asserts that:

We can assume that Messiaen paid less attention to the theological statements of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) than to the provisions on church music in its liturgical constitution, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.⁴⁰

Such an assumption seems, in fact, improbable of a composer as widely-read in theology as Messiaen. That it subsequently became clear that a rather different aesthetic ideal would grow out of the reforms of Catholic liturgy would have been a disappointment for Messiaen – indeed comments in Loriod’s transcription of his diaries are unflattering towards the new forms of worship song, and especially about the influence of Joseph Gelineau, a priest-musician who dominated the French Episcopal Commission on Sacred Music.⁴¹ It seems more plausible, however, to see his retrenchment in the famous claim of his *Conférence de Notre Dame* that plainchant is the only truly liturgical music, than in the oratorio which seems to celebrate Latin declamation in the context of modern music as Messiaen understood it.

³⁹ Broad, *Messiaen Journalism*, pp.63–4, 125.

⁴⁰ Bauer, *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, p.24.

⁴¹ Loriod, *Transcription des agendas*, BnF, FM, RES VMB MS-122, pp.268, 299.

La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ is easy to hear as a liturgical act, albeit that the forces involved mean that the setting must be the concert hall – or a large church acting as a concert hall. Again, the extent to which an audience can be brought into that understanding inevitably depends on their preconceptions and cannot be imposed by the composer, although there is an expansiveness to his positivity which can be seen as drawing people into his conception. That it coheres with Messiaen's wish to transpose a kind of liturgical act to the concert hall, however, reinforces the suggestion that the composer's liturgical conception of the work is primarily positive with regard to the possibilities of expanded resources in the renewal of ecclesiastical music. This is in contrast with his rather more equivocal attitude towards the actual implementation of changes, which certainly did not reflect his hopes, and maybe also the reasonable expectations he may have had on the basis of the conciliar constitution itself.

5.3 Additional case studies

Having considered the works which Messiaen acknowledged as arising more or less directly from his practice of organ improvisation, and also the two concert works which he most explicitly referred to as being liturgical acts for the concert hall, the remainder of this chapter considers a selection of other works to suggest ways in which such a conception of his music might be argued to have infused his wider musical persona. First to be considered is a concert work which Harry Halbreich suggested is to *La Transfiguration* as 'a little as a crypt is to its cathedral':⁴² *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum* resulted from a commission to honour the dead of the World Wars, adding the trappings of state ceremonial to the religious idea Messiaen himself chose to foreground. Having considered that, it would be impossible to omit some consideration of the opera *Saint François d'Assise*, the work considered by many

⁴² Harry Halbreich, 'La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ (1969)', liner notes to Olivier Messiaen Complete Edition, various artists (Deutsche Grammophon, 480 1333, 2008), p.128.

to be the summation of Messiaen's career, and one in which it is possible to see the relatively self-conscious use of technical elements developed at each stage of his life up to that date.

Having considered these, the final case studies return to the keyboards, considering what might be added to an understanding of Messiaen's earlier works for organ and for piano – primarily *La Nativité du Seigneur*, *Les Corps glorieux*, *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jésus*, and *Visions de l'Amen* – by considering them in relation to what we know of his role as a church musician and improviser. Although these are the earliest-composed of the works considered, they are placed last as the link to liturgical improvisation is more speculative.

It is inevitable that in thus going beyond the warrant provided by Messiaen's own statements about the relationship of his composed music and his liturgical role there is an element of speculation about the application of this approach. Nevertheless, there is value in considering these additional works, partly because identifying additional relevant points of contact between his liturgical improvisations and his composed music affords additional perspectives on the nature of such correspondences, and partly because doing so reinforces the argument that his liturgical role underpins significant strata of his wider musical personality.

Further to this adumbration of which works will be considered, it is also worth noting decisions to omit detailed consideration of others. In a career the length of Messiaen's there are more works than it is feasible to treat in this way: the more case studies are to be included the less detailed each would have to be. None of the compositions considered belong to the period between the completion of the *Messe de la Pentecôte* in 1950 and *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum*, commissioned in 1964 and premiered in 1965. This period is notable within Messiaen's output for having appeared to represent a turn away from more explicitly theological topics for illustration in his music, as well as for his development of

greater detail and precision in his treatment of birdsongs. There is also no treatment here of the trilogy which the composer linked to the myth of Tristan and Isolde, not because the notion of love stronger than death is not susceptible to a theological interpretation, but because the composer's own statements regarding the works treated provide greater warrant for the approach.

Similarly, the *Livre du Saint Sacrement* is the last-composed of the works considered; *Éclairs sur l'au-delà* in particular seems equally susceptible to related considerations, but is omitted for reasons of space, as are Messiaen's earliest works, of which *L'Ascension* (in both the original orchestral form and its solo organ version) and *Le Banquet céleste* may be the most obviously relevant. Also tempting, from its eschatological subject matter and the use of the word liturgy in the title of the first movement, would be consideration of the *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*. If the approach is sound, then extending it to additional cases would be possible, but beyond the scope of the current project.

Having noted several of these omissions as relative to a periodisation of Messiaen's life raises the question of whether there are relevant changes to be perceived in the way in which his liturgical improvisation influenced his composition over time. This is discussed in more detail in section 5.4, but for now it is worth being aware that, having argued in chapter two that the detail of Messiaen's duties as a church musician changed over time, the connections that can be made between that practice and his published compositions may also vary. The evidence from the recordings of his improvisations, however, dates entirely from the later part of his life, meaning that a further level of speculation is involved in projecting that evidence in relation to works composed earlier.

5.3.1 *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum*

Messiaen's diary for 20th June 1965 records:

Everyone was in their places at 9.15 a.m. ... De Gaulle arrived and the Solemn Mass began. It was the Office of Corpus Christi. At the end of Mass, at 10.30 precisely, the A flat of the contrabassoon and saxhorn, assisted by the third tam-tam started to play. Suddenly the immense nave was filled with a vast and overwhelming presence.⁴³

The nave in question was that of Chartres Cathedral and the event was the second performance of his work for woodwind, brass and percussion, *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum*. This was the result of an official commission to commemorate the dead of the two world wars. The premiere had been given a few weeks earlier in the *Sainte Chapelle*; both these first performances took place therefore in ecclesiastical settings, the second actually following directly on from Mass. The presence of the President and the nature of the commission added the ceremonial trappings of a state occasion to that of religious celebration.

The timbres of woodwind and brass without strings recall an orchestral version of the pipe organ, and it seems impossible to suppose that Messiaen as an organist would not have thought about the orchestration of music for that ensemble without reference to his experiments in registration – indeed he himself talked to Claude Samuel about his orchestration in general terms being influenced by organ registrations.⁴⁴ To offer a concrete example, the opening timbre of *Et exspecto*, described in Messiaen's diary and intended to illustrate the cry out of the depths from Psalm 130, is audibly similar to sound of bassoon and trumpet stops in the lowest range of the *positif* manual which open the movement 'Combat de la Mort et de la Vie', the centrepiece of *Les Corps glorieux* (1942) the theme of which similarly relates to the eschaton.

⁴³ Hill & Simeone, *Messiaen*, p.263.

⁴⁴ Samuel, *Permanences*, pp. 84–5.

would alter certain musical parameters and misdirect attention from the source rather than explicitly identifying it.

Where *La Transfiguration* sets text for singers in Latin, *Et exspecto*, although carrying a Latin title, is non-texted music commenting on biblical texts in French, which occur as superscriptions to each movement. This association between short texts and instrumental music is a striking feature of much of Messiaen's music, and is not particular to *Et exspecto*, but this case study provides an opportunity to consider the relationship between such texts and the music attached to them. Taken individually there is often a relatively simple element of word-painting. For example, the first movement of *Et exspecto*, 'De profondeurs de l'abîme, je crie vers toi, Seigneur: Seigneur, écoute ma voix !' illustrates the depths by starting in the lowest register of the ensemble, and the final movement, 'Et j'entendis la voix d'une foule immense...', uses the full instrumental resources and has a dynamic range from *forte* to *fortississimo*. There are often multiple layers to the illustration, however, which militate against taking the examples individually.

There are, furthermore, times when the concepts are treated in less obvious ways. In the second movement of *Et exspecto*, 'Le Christ, ressuscité des morts, ne meurt plus; la mort n'a plus sur lui d'empire' there are two techniques worthy of particular note. First, that he illustrates the mysterious nature of the resurrection by having what he labels as the principal theme played *mezzoforte* accompanied by a harmonic rainbow which is in fact louder than the melody; second that at figures 2 and 15,⁴⁵ he indicates a 'melody by gaps', by which he means that the relevant thematic material is found in the cessation of each sound rather than its onset (though for the sake of audibility he suggests each instrument give a small crescendo just before the end of the note to accentuate it). The latter, as a cessation, may relate to death,

⁴⁵ 15 is the penultimate figure, thus suggesting a chiasm with figure 2.

either as the necessary precursor to resurrection, or to the idea that after the resurrection death no longer has dominion. In these two cases it is questionable whether these intentions can successfully be conveyed to an audience, but as a matter of technique there seems to be an important link between text and music.

This deep connection between texts and instrumental music is one which is essential to the role of organist as liturgical commentator. As such, a textual impulse can be seen to have functioned as inspiration in both Messiaen's ecclesiastical role as an improviser at the organ, and in his approach to many of his compositions. Arguably, those occasions on which Messiaen avoided an explicit textual inspiration are among his less successful works – what Julian Anderson has termed his 'problem of communication'.⁴⁶ Acknowledging also that there are occasions on which Messiaen reused musical ideas in different contexts, and that sometimes the text was added after the compositional work was well advanced, both of which suggest that the connection between music and text was not unalterable, it nevertheless seems that such links were important to him. There is *prima facie* reason to suppose that this sort of inspiration, which was an important part of his approach to his liturgical role, may have developed in that role into a *habitus* that structured his work as a composer. Such a claim ought not be overstated: many other composers illustrate programmes of various sorts in their music, but the reliance that Messiaen appears to have had on a textual inspiration is remarkable.

Another important link to be drawn between the ideas discussed in chapter four concerning liturgical theology and *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum* is that of eschatological fulfilment. The title of the work, taken from the Creed, concerns the awaited resurrection of the dead; as a response to the commission, to provide a work in memory of the

⁴⁶ Anderson, 'Problem of communication', pp.257–268.

war dead, it is a strong statement of Messiaen's belief that death is not a final end. As a claim of a Catholic theological idea it is clear and obvious. Given the ceremonial aspect to the work, it inhabits an aesthetic which overlaps the liturgical and the civic, and as such recalls Messiaen's ecclesiastical role, even on occasions when it might not be performed in a church as the first two performances were.

5.3.2 *Saint François d'Assise*

Messiaen's *magnum opus*, his opera about St Francis of Assisi, drew on all the resources of his musical technique, and as such must be seen as influenced by his role as organist of Ste Trinité as well as all his foregoing compositions. There are some elements which can be seen as improvisational, but which nevertheless do not seem to be especially influenced by the sense of improvisation which he exercised in church: that many of the birds in the opera sing *hors tempo*, for example, is an expression of freedom, and a naturalising element in his settings of this type of musical material. While there is a sense in which this freedom in performance fits with a general understanding of improvisation, it probably does not encompass the specific sense of improvisation that is of interest in this thesis.

Given the central place in the argument given to liturgical theology, however, there are certain relevant observations to be made both on the operatic depiction of the titular Saint and his friars at prayer, and about the eschatological associations of the final act of the opera and their relation to Christian liturgy. On the former, the first thing to note is that the second *tableau* in the first act shares its name with one of the offices of daily prayer: Lauds. The text set, however, is not directly based on the canonical office itself, but on a short set of 'praises' composed by St Francis and believed to have been recited by him before the offices.⁴⁷ Itself apparently based on liturgical usage and quotations from scripture, it is notable for a number

⁴⁷ St Francis of Assisi, *The writings of St. Francis of Assisi*, trans. Fr. Pascal Robinson (Philadelphia: The Dolphin Press, 1906) pp.137–142.

of references to the book of Revelation, to which we return below in considering eschatology. In the opera, these praises are sung, or rather intoned, by the brothers on a monotone C₃, and contrast with the character of St Francis himself who sings excerpts from the canticle of the creatures. This canticle is on a melody sounding in a slightly higher register, arching upwards from F₃, and pointedly avoiding C₃, the pitch class on which the praises are given by the brothers (example 5.13).



Example 5.13. Melody of verse from the canticle of the creatures in Olivier Messiaen, *Saint François d'Assise*, 2e tableau, 'Les Laudes', beginning at figure 11.

The pointed contrast between the two styles of praise illustrated must have been a conscious decision, and clearly indicate the obvious implication that St Francis's prayers operate in a greater spiritual dimension than those of the brothers. That Messiaen should choose to illustrate this spirituality by using more varied and elevated musical means is congruent with what we might expect. Is it possible, though, to read into this any message regarding the prayer life of the church, or is it simply a comment on the sanctity of the titular Saint of the opera?

Other than brother Elie, who is depicted as impatient and self-important in the fourth *tableau* 'L'Ange voyageur', Messiaen does not seek to denigrate the spirituality of the brothers. They are neither as secure nor as enraptured in their faith as St Francis, but their prayers are honest and correct. There is not a suggestion, therefore, that the monotonous

intonation of their prayers is inadequate; indeed, it is possible to hear in it something akin to a psalm tone, a normal part of the office. That said, the way Messiaen spoke about chant, and indeed, the way he rendered quotations from plainchant in the recorded improvisation discussed in chapter three, all suggest that he heard such chants as inherently melodic, and specifically as opposed to the general impression that they are monotonous.⁴⁸ Moreover, the opera operates more at the level of spiritual allegory than that of simple illustration. Hearing the distinction between the prayers of the brother and those of the Saint as musical allegory, then, rather than as illustration, the brothers' stand not for irreligious pseudo-believers, but for 'ordinary' faithful followers as distinct from the holy Saints. As such, their prayers may stand for the regular attendance at services as a duty on believers. It is the saintly title character, however, who succeeds in inhabiting the spirit of the liturgy to such an extent that his participation is lively and unaffected. This difference might, then, constitute another analogous illustration of the variance between the sort of liturgical-musical piety that Messiaen felt was predominant in the church in the second half of the twentieth century and the theological-musical poetics of his own self-understanding as a Catholic musician.

The other important aspect of liturgical theology, as outlined in chapter four, is the relevance of a sense of realised eschatology, especially as regards the relationship between time and the eternal, one of Messiaen's preoccupations across his musical output. His selection of prayers from those St Francis and his brothers would have said, focus on those composed by the Saint himself rather than the office as set out by the church, but in so doing he brought in a depiction of the heavenly worship around the throne of the lamb from the book of Revelation. From a wider perspective, the theme of heavenly worship is depicted in all acts of the opera, whether from St Francis's meditation on 'perfect joy' in the first *tableau*, via the 'music of the invisible' revealed in the fifth *tableau* 'L'Ange musicien', to the well-

⁴⁸ Messiaen, *Conférence de Notre-Dame*, pp.3–4.

noted parallels between the seventh *tableau* ‘Les Stigmates’ and a Passion setting,⁴⁹ not to mention the dazzling excess of truth for which St Francis prays on his deathbed in the final *tableau*:

Lord, lord,
Music and poetry have led me towards you:
By image, by symbol and by default of truth.
Lord, lord,
Enlighten me with your presence!
Deliver me, enrapture me, dazzle me forever by your excess of truth.⁵⁰

The parallelism of this prayer takes up Thomistic themes of truth, and appears to draw a contrast between the limitations of earthly knowledge – even that vouchsafed to a Saint – and the fullness of eschatological truth. That they are closely linked, however, is an indication of the Catholic understanding that ‘truth’ is singular and continuous, and therefore that the difference is of degree not of kind. What this entails is that the participation of earthly worship with heavenly may be imperfect but is nevertheless real, and therefore that theological music within the living tradition of the church is a part of the heavenly song of praise. Within the opera, it is worth noting that this prayer follows, rather than precedes, the angel’s revelation of the music of the invisible: that proleptic sample, sufficient to knock St Francis out with rapture, does not obviate the desire for eternal dazzlement – the same term that Messiaen had used in describing the power of religious music in his *Conférence de Notre-Dame*⁵¹ – but forms part of the experience of sanctity which leads towards the divine while still falling short of the completeness of revelation at the last. Such a claim does not need to entail a diminishment of the power of the angel’s music, but returns to one of

⁴⁹ Christopher Dingle, ‘Frescoes and legends: the sources and background of *Saint François d’Assise*’, in Christopher Dingle and Nigel Simeone (eds), *Olivier Messiaen: Music, Art and Literature* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007), p.315. c.f. Samuel, *Permanences*, p.355.

⁵⁰ Messiaen, *Saint François*, p.53.

⁵¹ Messiaen, *Conférence de Notre-Dame*, pp.12–13.

Messiaen's recurrent preoccupations, in so far as the glimpse provided remains temporal, and temporary, in contrast to the new life of the resurrection.

Such an observation seems to fit with Messiaen's stated faith, and his advocacy for a 'living' tradition of religious music which is able to express the received truths of Catholicism in fresh ways. Drawing specific connections between the opera and his liturgical improvisations, which is the main aim of this research, is less directly possible: one can consider certain aspects of a shared aesthetic, but at a technical level demonstrating musical commonalities is more tenuous. The non-identical repetition illustrated by the treatment of the Canticle of the Creatures, for example, which occurs in *tableaux* two, five and eight, and might have been related to improvisational development, seems to be led more by adjusting to set the text of each verse with appropriate prosody more than by specifically musical meditation on the different possibilities of the phrase. That said, responding with improvised music to the progression of the liturgy had been so much a part of Messiaen's *lex orandi* for half a century, that the fact alone must inform the sense in which the whole opera is a kind of sung prayer as well as a reflection on a Holy life.

Messiaen's biographers note that the composition of the opera was hard for the composer, and that the time and effort he put into completing it exhausted him; indeed after completing it he would tell people that he would compose no more.⁵² The opera is also often depicted as a work which consciously draws on all his technical advancements to that date. Both observations distance it from the improvisational approach, but the connection between the opera and the *Livre du Saint Sacrement* may indicate a closer connection. Dingle goes so far as to suggest that the organ cycle and the opera 'are borne of the same wellspring of creativity'.⁵³ Part of Dingle's argument on this point is that having moved from composition

⁵² Hill, 'Interview with Lloriod', p.301.

⁵³ Dingle, *Final Works*, p.45.

to orchestration and the logistics of staging the opera, there was a period in which organ improvisation was Messiaen's only creative output. Such improvisations, however, not only continued alongside those elements but were a constant throughout the compositional work itself. Just as it is possible to complicate the received narrative in which the *Livre* was based directly on improvisations, it is conversely apposite to let the connection between liturgical organ music and Messiaen's approach to reflecting sanctity in music inform the way in which the opera was undergirded by his ongoing fidelity to his ecclesial role. Direct musical influence may not be demonstrable, but the habits of thought and of meditation entailed by the provision of theologically informed liturgical music must have been embedded within Messiaen's approach to reflecting the spirituality of his titular Saint in the operatic medium.

5.3.3 Organ cycles of the 1930s

The final case studies in this chapter represent an earlier stage in the composer's development: in this section we will consider the organ cycles *La Nativité du Seigneur* (1935) and *Les Corps glorieux* (published 1942, though said by the composer to have been composed shortly before his mobilisation in 1939).⁵⁴ Already strikingly original and recognisable as representing Messiaen's personal musical language, they are nevertheless in certain respects youthful works. The following section considers the piano cycles *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* and *Visions de l'Amen*, both composed during the war after the composer's return from his time of internment as a prisoner of war. All of these works constitute musical illustrations of religious themes, stories and doctrines, and therefore demonstrate Messiaen's developing sense that his music could communicate such things. All contain some elements which might be thought to be improvisatory and others which are more cerebral; *La Nativité* also constitutes an example of Messiaen's own composition that

⁵⁴ This timeline is further complicated by a letter he wrote after mobilisation in which he wondered whether the work would ever be completed, indicating that there was at least some work on it still to be done at that point. Hill & Simeone, *Messiaen*, p.92.

he was permitted to play in his role at Ste Trinité even in the earlier stages of his employment there. In these works, links between composed and improvised music are inevitably more speculative, given the temporal distance of these compositions from the direct evidence of Messiaen's improvisations in the form of recordings.

It is also necessary to be aware that although each cycle is conceived as a unified whole, they are multi-movement works, and it is often useful to consider individual movements within the wider cycle. Indeed, there is an inherent tension between identifying any musical characteristic of a particular moment in a larger work and generalising that observation to encompass the whole. The approach taken here, in which two organ cycles are treated together, followed by two piano cycles also taken together, expands the risks of such generalisation, and is justified only by the avoidance of repetition which would be likely if otherwise similar pieces are considered *seriatim* as individual examples.

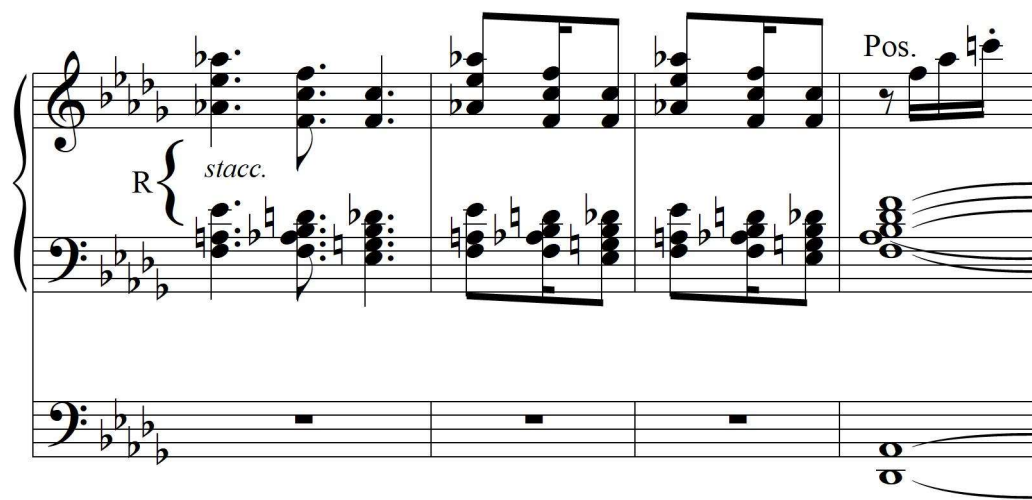
La Nativité du Seigneur consists of nine 'meditations' of which some illustrate familiar images from the Christmas story: the virgin and child, shepherds, angels, and magi; others rather more abstract theological ideas on the incarnation: divine salvation as conceived from eternity, the divine Word, filiation, *kenosis* and the tabernacling of God among humanity. *Les Corps glorieux* consists of seven movements – the number of completion. Three movements illustrate the characteristics attributed to the bodies of the resurrection, while two movements reflect images from the book of Revelation. Additionally, the finale is a meditation on the Trinity and the central movement a diptych contrasting death and life. In both cycles the balance between essentially illustrative movements relating to narrative elements with more abstract theological ideas is striking, and this balance itself reflects a similar sense in which Messiaen's liturgical function led him to consider both narrative and doctrinal elements in his response to the services which he accompanied.

These cycles both contain not only concrete and abstract illustration, but also musical elements which may well have arisen in improvisation, from which the composer could have drawn various elements of both material and technique, with ideas and procedures that are inherently more cerebral and calculated. As observed above in relation to other works, it is often possible to generalise – though it should not be understood as a universal rule – that the latter techniques are more likely to be in the area of rhythm, where the former may be found in harmony. That said, additional evidence regarding the possibilities Messiaen may have explored in his improvisations at this point in his career is less available; these cycles pre-date the permission he had after the war to dedicate one Mass each Sunday to modernist music, so it is to be assumed that his liturgical playing at that time was more conventional than the composed music of the same period.

In terms of relating these composed pieces to the practice of liturgical improvisation, there are two broad categories of observation to be made, the first concerning gesture and the second being, again, the use of material drawn from plainchant. Regarding gesture, it is necessary to engage with Benitez' article on Messiaen as improviser, which uses the movement *Joie et clarté des Corps glorieux* to illustrate the use of a short Greek rhythm – the cretic – as a principal motif of that movement, transformed by diminution and inexact augmentation.⁵⁵ In this case we have an example of a rhythmic element which is reasonably attributed to the improvisational and playful side of the perceived division between inspiration and cerebral treatments, but the rhythm in question is a relatively simple cell rather than an extended and complex conception. That the rhythm in question is also tied to a repetition of a harmonic idea supports the suggestion that although the rhythm is the element developed, the unity of the germinating idea is one of a gesture of three chords. These chords, furthermore, do not function entirely alone, serving to lead the ear to the D-flat added sixth

⁵⁵ Benitez, 'Messiaen as improviser', p.137.

chord which is the resting point of the harmony – on the occasions when the cretic cell is repeated rather than leading directly to that resting point the ear detects primarily a retardation of the resolution rather than the independence of the cell (example 5.14). That being the case, it is less a matter of a rhythmic cell being the generating point of the movement than of an entire gesture developed rhythmically. The repetition of a gesture treated in a unitary way by non-exact repetition seems to relate more directly to the practice of improvisation than an independent rhythmic idea imposed otherwise independently of other musical parameters.



Example 5.14 Olivier Messiaen, *Les Corps glorieux*, ‘Joie et clarté des Corps glorieux’, bb.7–10a.

The two cycles considered here contain a number of occasions on which material drawn from plainchant has been noted by previous researchers: the melody at the beginning of *La Vierge et l’Enfant* is based on *Puer Natus*;⁵⁶ that of the second half of *Le Verbe* is the Easter sequence *Victimae paschali*;⁵⁷ and the decorative arabesques which float above the

⁵⁶ Messiaen, *Technique*, p.34.

⁵⁷ Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen*, p.48.

resting D-flat chord in *Joie et clarté des Corps glorieux* are based on the *Alleluia* for All Saints Day.⁵⁸ That this is the case is not a novel observation, but it is worth noting as there is a significant contrast between these treatments and those evidenced from the recordings of Messiaen's liturgical improvisations, and indeed from his later quotations of plainchant in organ works evidenced in the *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte-Trinité* and in the *Livre du Saint Sacrement*. That contrast is that in these earlier cycles the allusions are more-or-less disguised, in comparison with the later cycles in which they are simply quoted, and labelled as quotations in the score. Later in his career it seems, therefore, that Messiaen was less concerned to hide at least this aspect of his 'borrowing' technique – or perhaps that thought is better expressed in inverted form as an observation that earlier in his career he may have been more anxious that his sources of material be hidden. It is possible that there is a theological, rather than a psychological, reason for the difference, in the rebalancing of the ideas of transcendence and immanence exemplified in the reflections which led to, and followed from, the Second Vatican Council. Whatever the cause, there is no direct evidence to determine whether his liturgical improvisations at the earlier stage would have disguised his plainchant sources in the way these composed cycles do, but it seems unlikely given that the context required a form of commentary on the liturgical action, in which case clear and perceptible reference to liturgical material makes sense. That being so, the compositional use of this material is likely to be different from his improvisational treatment of the same themes, but this distancing of the material in its compositional use from its source does not nullify the contention that much of the composer's thinking about the musical potential and theological resonances of the chants was grounded in his use of them in his ecclesiastical role.

⁵⁸ Balmer et al, *Le Modèle et l'Invention*, p.325.

5.3.4 Piano cycles of the 1940s

Turning to the piano cycles *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* and *Visions de l'Amen* introduces a further distance between Messiaen's liturgical improvisations and his compositions in two principal ways: most obviously that there is a change of instrument, where organ compositions have sonorities in direct continuity with organ improvisations; secondly that a significant stimulus in these compositions was the pianistic virtuosity of Yvonne Loriod, meaning that Messiaen was not conceiving of the music in relation to his own performance ability. That latter point, of course, cannot be pushed too far, both in that he did not generally create the premieres of his own composed works for organ – though he did record most of them – and conversely that he did play the second piano part of *Visions de l'Amen* at the premiere. Nevertheless, there is a relevant distinction to be made.

As with the organ cycles discussed in section 5.3.3 it is worth noting that there is at least one example of a somewhat disguised use of material drawn from plainchant, in which a melody drawn from the Easter gradual, *Haec Dies*, is described as an 'oriental and plainchantesque dance' in *Regard de l'Esprit de Joie*.⁵⁹ It is not necessary, however, to repeat here similar observations to those made above. There are additional comments that can be made concerning the music in these piano cycles. Their conception is not thought to have been led by improvisation as such, but a liturgical piety is nevertheless discernible in them, which may assist in understanding the sense in which Messiaen's role as a church musician stands behind his other musical activities.

The first point is that there is something revealing in the division of labour between the two pianos in the duet cycle *Visions de l'Amen*. This division consists of a contrast between the second piano which leads in introducing and declaiming thematic material and

⁵⁹ Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen*, p.21. c.f. Messiaen, *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* (Paris: Durand, 1947) p.58.

the first piano which is both more technically challenging and strikingly affective, but also rather more decorative than substantial in its use of the governing musical themes. The composer's preface to the score explains:

The 'Visions de l'Amen' have been conceived and written for 2 pianos, asking from these instruments the maximum of strength and different sonorities. I entrusted the 1st piano with the rhythmic difficulties, the clusters of chords, and all that is speed, charm and quality of sound. I entrusted the 2nd piano with the principal melody, the thematic elements, and all that claims emotion and power.

Concerning the final movement, *Amen de la Consommation*, to give a concrete example, he specifically indicates that:

The 2nd piano retakes the theme of creation and draws from it a long hymn of glory. The 1st piano encompasses the second (using the low and high extremes of the register together) in an incessant carillon of chords and brilliant, scintillating, rhythms, in rhythmical canons becoming tighter: sapphire, emerald, topaz, jacinth, amethyst, sardonyx, the whole rainbow of precious stones from the Book of Revelation which sound, shock, dance, colour and perfume the light of life.⁶⁰

The apocalyptic imagery aside, what this reveals is a mental and musical distinction between the thematic material which provides the form of the piece, and the colour and excitement of the decorative part.

Such a distinction is recognisable from chorale-based organ improvisation, in which thematic material is stated in one division while other manual or pedal divisions are engaged in elaboration and harmonisation, leaving the thematic material audible in a form of *cantus firmus* technique. Such a texture is not, of course, unique to the organ, but it is reasonable to suppose that Messiaen's most common reason to engage with the style would have been at the organ console of Ste Trinité. This in turn may be relatable to the idea that liturgical music can consist of themes given meaning by context, and commentary, broadly understood, in

⁶⁰ Messiaen, *Visions de l'Amen*, (Paris: Durand, 1950).

which such themes are made more relevant to the congregation by a musical form of meditation and illustration.

The second cycle, this time for solo piano, consists of twenty *Regards*. It is commonplace to indicate that the most literal translation of *regard*, ‘a look’ does not quite do justice to the idea embodied in the music, and that no single English term quite works to translate the title, carrying both the action of contemplating and the aspect or perspective from which the gaze falls. In any case it is inherently striking that a work in an auditory medium carries a title referring to the visual; that the project began as an idea for radio broadcast only strengthens that dissonance.⁶¹ It is not necessary for the present purpose to determine an English title, so much as to consider how each movement functions to make these pieces a coherent set of meditations on the infant Jesus, and whether this can be related to the liturgical piety of the composer not only as a practicing Catholic, but specifically as a Catholic liturgical musician.

As was observed above concerning the organ cycles, there is an admixture of movements, some giving a relatively uncomplicated image pertaining to the Christmas Story, some similarly direct but widening the valence, as the inclusion of the Cross from another part of the Gospel and the liturgical year. Others again explore more abstract theological ideas, such as the ‘exchange’ between divinity and humanity. This sort of treatment is itself characteristic of Christian liturgy, in which concrete narratives and symbols are used to draw the people gathered into the mysteries of the faith. A couple of the movements are also explicitly, if obliquely, eucharistic: the eleventh movement is entitled ‘Première communion de la Vierge’ and is a reflection on the deep antenatal communion between mother and

⁶¹ Forman, ‘L’Harmonie de l’Univers’, pp.13–22; Lucie Kayas, ‘From Music for the Radio to a Piano Cycle: Sources for the *Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant Jésus*’, in Christopher Dingle and Robert Fallon (eds), *Messiaen Perspectives 1: Sources and Influences* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), pp.85–100.

child;⁶² the notes to ‘Le baiser de l’Enfant-Jésus’ refer to the presence of Christ ‘at each communion’. Can it be argued, therefore, that these cycles themselves participate in a liturgical piety, which, underpinned by the liturgical theology discussed in chapter four, provides the way in which it is coherent to consider Messiaen’s music as theological?

The connection may in this instance be less direct than in some of the previous examples where specifically musical elements have been proposed as linking liturgical improvisations with composed works. The contemplative effect of the cumulation of perspectival meditations which constitute the *Vingt Regards* is powerful and compelling. There is a sense in which the music, though much of it is carefully worked out from relatively short themes, gives the impression of a natural outpouring; that is, it can be heard as improvisatory. It is relevant to recall again the anecdote in which Honegger, hearing the *Vingt Regards* commented that a particular movement was ‘limpid’, only to be advised by Alfred Désenclos, who was following the score, that it was rather complex.⁶³ More to the point, however, is the extent to which the music is prayerful – the sonorities are strikingly unusual but, approached sympathetically, need not be found unsettling. They can, therefore, draw the listener into the composer’s religious reflections, which can be described once again using the categories Guardini uses to explicate the spirit of the liturgy.

The scale of the piano cycles considered in this section is not that of music that could have been intended for liturgical use – though individual movements might be so used – but the sensibility with which they are imbued does seem at least susceptible to an interpretation in which the nature, form, and spirit of liturgical reflection stands behind the whole conception of music that is designed to comment on religious images and ideas. Although

⁶² While clearly relating to Catholic Marian devotion, this connection would also have recalled to Messiaen the poems which his own mother wrote for him when he was himself *in utero*.

⁶³ Balmer *et al.*, *Le Modèle*, p.255, n.24.

clearly concert works, there is an homiletic aspect to the consideration of doctrine from multiple angles in a way that is at once engaging and intriguing.

5.4 Messiaen composing in the light of his practice of liturgical improvisation

The present chapter considers a number of Messiaen's composed works in order to demonstrate both the confluences and divergences between improvisations and compositions. These considerations enable a more refined approach to the question of how closely linked the two related but distinct activities were within Messiaen musical praxis. That term is used in the Aristotelian sense in which *praxis* (activity) is distinguished both from *poiesis* (making or producing) and *theoria* (thinking). Expressing it in this way aligns with criticisms of musical composition as productive of works given an ontological standing separate from performances;⁶⁴ arguably Messiaen himself conceived composition as poietic, and indeed this is likely to be precisely the way in which he distinguished composition from improvisation. Nevertheless, to consider music-making rather as *praxis* dissolves aspects of the distinction between the two activities in ways which enable relevant connections to be made.

The first part of the chapter looks at the three organ works which Messiaen himself identified as having been germinated in his activity of improvisation. In these sections the argument tends to complicate the narrative that any of the published works consists of a direct transcription of improvised music, without invalidating the relevance of the assertion that an initial idea was formed in that context. That argument is counterposed to the suggestion when other organ, and indeed piano, works are considered in the later part of the chapter, that although showing evidence of more careful working out of theorised ideas, there is a sense in which improvisation nevertheless stands behind the works in an unacknowledged way. These two suggestions, while seeming to contradict one another, in

⁶⁴ Goehr, *Imaginary Museum*, pp.2–3.

fact meet together in the understanding that the specific *locus* for the improvisations considered was the liturgical context. That situation is held to be the grounding of Messiaen's conviction that his music could express theological truth, and it is in so doing that his music in and out of church most closely align.

In section 5.2 the same nexus is approached from a different direction in the consideration of those concert works which Messiaen had identified as attempts to transpose liturgy to the concert hall. The earlier of these two works, *Trois petites liturgies de la Présence Divine*, is shown both to have musical approaches with some similarity to Messiaen's liturgical music, and also to include textual connections between liturgical prayers and the original libretto, via the mediation of personal prayer written by the composer. The later work, *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ*, has previously been interpreted as encoding a comment on the liturgical upheaval in the Catholic church after the Second Vatican Council. The suggestion made in this chapter is that it might rather be seen as a hopeful contribution to the possibilities afforded by the council, much of the composition having occurred between the publication of the conciliar documents themselves and the more detailed instructions which closed down what many had thought might be a more productive opportunity. It is commonplace to distinguish the intentions (in so far as they are discernible) and precise wording of the Council from the way it was subsequently interpreted and implemented. In so far as such a distinction is fair, it is suggested that Messiaen would have been enthusiastic about the former, despite his having found the latter to be challenging.

These observations link Messiaen's conception of liturgy to his compositional activity, although less directly to his liturgical improvisations. *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum* and the opera *Saint François d'Assise* are engaged as further examples in which there seem to be relevant points of contact between Messiaen's role as an ecclesiastical

musician and his persona as a composer of major concert works. It is acknowledged that further compositions could have been used to add texture to the argument made, although there is a sense in which additional examples would be subject to a diminishing return in terms of the sorts of observations that might be adduced.

This chapter as a whole addresses the question of the relevance both of chapters two and three explicating Messiaen's role as an improvising liturgical musician, and of chapter four which adumbrates a theology of liturgy, to understanding Messiaen's musicianship in a wider sense. His most prominent and intentional persona as a composer of large-scale works in an individual but recognisably modernist style is shown not to be divorced from the more humble and restrained manner in which his liturgical function is more commonly portrayed. By considering the various case studies, and the implications these might have to interpreting the works not selected for study here, it is possible to arrive at a sense that Messiaen's *habitus* in his musicianship is, indeed, bound up with the related tasks of providing theological commentary on the offices in his role as organist at Ste Trinité and of expressing the truths of his faith in his concert music.

6. Conclusions

In chapter two the definition of liturgical improvisation was considered in order to refine the sort of activities and responses to the setting that are of interest, and also to consider what it could mean to describe an extensive practice. It is acknowledged that any such description is necessarily an abstraction, and, significantly, that the various actors involved in retaining and retelling the various accounts of Messiaen's improvising must be understood to have brought their own agenda to the emphases and there is an inevitably subjective dimension to the various presentations now available. Following this, Messiaen's training in organ improvisation was expounded, using both the recollections of some of his contemporaries, and also the materials he is likely to have used, especially the improvisation and counterpoint textbooks written by his organ teacher, Marcel Dupré.

The next element considered is the formal elements of the duties required of him by his post at Ste Trinité. In that section it is demonstrated that the received outline of three Masses plus Vespers each Sunday with different musical styles corresponding to different congregations, while a reasonable summary, is not the whole story. The details of his duties changed over time, both relative to his own age – his increasing stature and fame, balanced towards the end with his diminishing health – and to the requirements of the parish and of successive parish priests, as well as changes in the governing requirements of the Catholic church.

The longest section of chapter two considers in turn a number of descriptions given by people who heard Messiaen improvising in his church and the impressions they had of his contributions. Taken individually, many of these are no more than anecdotes, but taken together, and subjected to some probing as to the reasons for the emphases and biases that those retelling them may have had, they provide some indication of the range of effects that Messiaen's ecclesiastical music had on those who heard it. The final section of that chapter,

still considering documentary evidence of Messiaen's practice as an improviser turns from verbal accounts to musical notes and sketches, considering a selection of those notes that are available in his archive. Most of those date from the preparation of his *Messe de la Pentecôte*, although the curation notes on the file admit that it has been reconstituted from diverse locations, and few of the individual sheets are dated. Among the more notable observations is that even very short ideas sketched on manuscript paper are accompanied by specific thoughts on registration, confirming that timbre is a significant element of the conception of the material. It is also not always clear which of these notes are preparatory to improvisations, and which were notated after the event to capture an idea that he was pleased to have come up with in the moment; there are even a handful of examples in which it is not clear that Messiaen himself was to improvise on the ideas, but that he might have provided prompts to other organists for particular purposes. A number of instances are identified in which specific material within these sketches relates to Messiaen's compositions for organ.

Chapter three continues the account of Messiaen's practice as a liturgical improviser but turns to recordings of his improvisations as a different type of source for evidence of how that role was carried out. The range and extent of recordings that are known to exist is established, and some comments are made on previous scholarship that engages with those recordings. Given the nature of the mediation through both the original recording media and subsequent digitisation, and the still ephemeral and temporal nature of sound reconstituted in this way, further methodological considerations apply in rendering the sound thus preserved into a form in which analysis is possible. The bulk of that chapter consists of the first substantial analysis of music on a two-disc set of improvisations which had been recorded between 1984 and 1987; the discs having been released to mark a decade after Messiaen's decease, had been withdrawn from sale after objections from the composer's estate, a fact which does prompt some ethical consideration.

The music analysed from that set of recordings has certain limitations, in that certain celebrations in the church's year seem to be overrepresented and others not at all – in so far as the plainchant quoted, which gives the strongest clues as to specific occasion, enables us to identify the occasion. The quality of sound is also observed to be somewhat sub-optimal. Nevertheless, it has been possible in some cases to posit a function for given improvisations within the liturgical action, to identify musical material used as sources, including particular elements of plainchant, birdsong, and allusion to other musics. Music theoretical categories of rhythm, timbre, tessitura and harmony – modality as well as tonality, and both of these linked to Messiaen's strong associations between sound complexes and colour – are also considered and analysed. It is also possible to suggest certain elements that might have been sought in liturgical improvisation, or more generally in Messiaen's music, that do not seem to be represented on the discs. It is not possible to conclude from the absence of evidence that Messiaen did not use such elements in his improvising practice overall, as the recordings are not comprehensive, but it is reasonable to assume that the available recordings do represent an overview of his recurrent techniques at least within the time period covered.

Chapter four approaches the thesis topic from a more theoretical angle, establishing first Messiaen's close connection to the liturgy in his musical thinking and the formation of his thought more generally. Having done so, the discipline of liturgical theology is defined and discussed, situated within wider theological discourse, but nevertheless distinct as an idea. The main claim of liturgical theology, that Christian liturgy is constitutive of Christian discourse as much as, if not more so than, dogmatic argument, provides a grounding for theology within a multi-valent and multi-sensory activity. Such a discourse may be distinguished from, though it need not be contradictory to, metaphysical first principles or specific sources of revealed authority. These ideas provide a rationale for the idea that music which participates in, and forms an essential part of, liturgical activity can itself be described

as theological. The liturgical *locus* is the situation in which it makes most sense to talk of theological music, and this in turn enables a novel way of seeing Messiaen's idea that his concert works could transpose a sort of liturgical act to the concert hall. It is argued that this conception may be a foundation for his more general claim that his compositions could illuminate theological truths.

The acknowledged influence on Messiaen's thought of Romano Guardini, a proponent of liturgical reform deeply influenced by a theological conception of the power of the liturgy is drawn out. The elements that Guardini identifies as defining the spirit of the liturgy can be discerned within Messiaen's music. Guardini's argument for the necessity of cultural forms to give a tangible shape to theological ideas, and the role that his conception of liturgy plays in bringing the two together provide a crucial link between the more abstractly theoretical argument and the concrete instances of music considered.

Chapter five turns to consider a selection of Messiaen's published compositions, suggesting in some cases evidence that elements of the music might have developed in improvisation, and in other cases enquiring more about how the works can be conceptualised as liturgical in a sense which furthers the composer's hope to produce music that is theological. The *Messe de la Pentecôte*, the earliest of the works which Messiaen explicitly stated had developed from improvisation, is compared with sketch material held in the composer's archive; the outline case is that timbre and pitch content seems to relate to improvisation sketches more directly than the rhythmic innovations which dominate Messiaen's own analytical comments on the work. The *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte-Trinité* is compared to a recording held in the archive of two rehearsals in advance of the event that gave rise to the work. In this case substantial elements of the music are identifiable in the recording, albeit not in the order and configuration of the final composition; the recording reveals however only one *leitmotif* from what became Messiaen's

langage communicable, the most significant technical innovation apparent from the score.

The *Livre du Saint Sacrement* is in certain respects more closely tied to the style of Messiaen's liturgical improvisations, although some of its movements are arguably more calculated than others, itself a hint as to the cooperation of free improvisation and worked out craft in the constitution of a large-scale work. Later in the chapter Messiaen's earlier organ cycles are similarly shown to have some elements that may well have been influenced by improvisation, but also other elements that seem to be more theoretically constructed.

Leaving the organ and thinking about composed works for other contexts which have elements that are relatable either to liturgy or to improvisation, the *Trois petites liturgies de la Présence Divine* shows such connections in both text and music, as well as title. The text of a prayer that can be considered intermediary between the texts of liturgical prayers and formulations and the libretto of the *Trois petites liturgies* is added to some observations on the treatment of musical material which has some similarities with Messiaen's treatment of given themes in his improvisations. *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ* is considered in relation to the Second Vatican Council, as has been previously proposed, but that relationship is refined by the suggestion that much of the composition fell between the publication of the conciliar text and implementation of resulting reforms which imposed a particular interpretation of the council's intentions. It is argued that Messiaen, again inspired by Guardini, may have been enthusiastic about the former, and this could be as relevant to *La Transfiguration* as any disappointment he might have felt regarding the latter.

In *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum* the important role that eschatology plays in the theological conception of liturgy is brought to the fore, as are certain thoughts on the overlap between state ceremonial, military commemoration, and religious ritual. Messiaen's opera *Saint François d'Assise*, the end result of significant and exhausting travail for the composer, and a summation of many if not all of the techniques he developed, is also

considered in relation to his liturgical role. An implied critique is uncovered in the difference between the valid but uninspired prayers exemplified by the brothers, whose monotone is interpreted as allegory rather than illustration, such that the more individual prayers of the titular Saint are representative of a greater spirituality. Although there are some traditions of Christian thought that might identify the monotonous with the liturgical, this interpretation would not do justice to the Catholic conception of liturgy, let alone to the spirit of liturgical celebration described by Guardini and embodied by Messiaen's organ improvisations. If this interpretation is correct, there is a possibility that the monotony rather tilts obliquely at some modern worship songs which Messiaen considered unimaginative and lacking in musicality.

The cumulative argument of these various elements proposes that Messiaen's engagement with liturgy through his response to liturgical action in his organ improvisations stands behind both many of his musical techniques, especially his conception of modality and harmony, and also his hope that his music could bring theological expression into the public arena. These two areas are the centres around which the next two sections of conclusions are gathered; following that, the research questions defined in the introduction are considered in relation to the outcomes. Possible resonances of this project in wider discourses and some of the ways in which it might be extended and built upon in future work are suggested to bring the thesis to a close.

6.1 Improvisation and Composition

'Messiaen did not regard improvisations as being compositions'.¹ Nevertheless, the development of musical ideas to form a coherent piece of music is the task of both activities, and there are contexts in which it is hard to determine where the boundary between the two might lie. For any musician who is both an improviser and a composer the two inevitably

¹ Dingle, *Life*, p.154.

inform one another; for a musician with the highly acute ear, extensive training and professional practice of Messiaen this must be even more the case. Although the recordings of his improvisations do not necessarily witness to the same degree of innovative modernism in his ecclesiastical role as is evident in most of his compositions, his colour associations clearly inform both – his treatment of modes, both those of Gregorian plainchant and his own modes of limited transposition, seems bound up with this – and his training in improvisation and composition both had a strong element of formal rigour. It may be more satisfactory to think not that his improvisations do not constitute compositions, but rather that they are compositions for a different purpose than his concert works. The main difference, perhaps, being that they were intended to support a religious service in a particular building at a particular time, and not for posterity, to glorify God and not their composer. It is this sense in which his activities do fit the picture of restrained and humble service projected by his church and those who wish to curate his reputation in that way.

Conversely, several aspects of Messiaen's compositions seem to reveal a level of complex processing that would not be realistic in an *ex tempore* exposition, even allowing for his formidable aural, manual, pedal, and theoretical technique. This seems to be borne out by the observation that many of his prized rhythmic ideas are not so evident in his improvisations as in his compositions, and indeed that specifically rhythmic complexity appears to have been added between improvisation-related sketches and the finished form of composed works that draw on them.

Nevertheless, in both cases Messiaen's instinct seems often to have related to the provision of a form of musical commentary on a textual stimulus. It is suggested that this notable characteristic of his published compositions relates to his *habitus* as a church organist, in which a significant element of the role is precisely to respond immediately to verbal and non-verbal stimuli arising within the context. His approach, therefore,

notwithstanding that taking more time in written composition he was able to include more thoroughly worked-out transformations – both modal and rhythmic – of his material, can be seen to have certain things in common across the two activities.

There are other senses in which his composed music reveals ways of thinking that derive from the organ, and even though these may not necessarily relate specifically to improvisation on that instrument, they suggest that some of his wider musical approach was indeed influenced by his constant grounding in his role at Ste Trinité. Some of these connections he acknowledged himself, explaining that his approach to orchestration included recreation of the effects of mutation stops, as well as the use of groups of timbres as distinct families on analogy with the division between foundations and reeds on the organ.²

Extending this thought, Dingle has suggested that

the mosaic structures and superficially fragmentary nature of his music in the latter half of his career are reminiscent of an experienced organist in a large church allowing the acoustic to clear while changing registration.³

These discernible connections between standard techniques of organists and the peculiarities of Messiaen's compositional technique support the supposition that the improvisations which constituted the majority of the organ music he produced had an effect indirectly as well as directly on his work as a composer.

It is necessary at this point also to return to the suggestion raised in the introduction that the extent of Messiaen's use of musical material 'borrowed' from other sources, as identified by Balmer, Lacôte and Brent Murray, may also relate to his habitual use of given material in the form of plainchant in his improvisations. It is clear, and unsurprising, that this did constitute a significant element in his improvisational practice, but in that context there was no reason for him to disguise or dissemble of the fact – indeed, the direct quotation of

² Samuel, *Permanences*, pp.84–5.

³ Dingle, *Life*, p.183.

plainchant is what most directly enables his improvisations to coincide with the wider liturgical activity. His use of borrowed material in composed works is often less explicit, and appears to have been a factor he preferred to direct attention away from. Indeed, many such uses, especially in his earlier works, are transformed sometimes to the point of unrecognisability. Nevertheless, among the elements of his ‘transforming prism’ are his personal modes, developed in organ improvisation, as well as his rhythmic techniques. In this sense improvisation and composition are not only indistinct from one another in the formal creation of a piece of music, but also in that each involves transformation and development of the material from which the piece germinates. The video of the improvisations on *Puer Natus* shows Messiaen had a *Liber Usualis* open on the console, but it does not show his eyes making much use of it; the source was as much in his head as on a page. This may serve as a slight qualifier to Balmer *et al.*’s suggestion that Messiaen’s use of scores in borrowing his material in other contexts was calculated and dependent rather than creative and inspired.⁴ His memory for music is known to have been extensive – his students recall his ability to play major works not only from orchestral scores on the piano but also from memory – and the derivation of some of his ideas from the store of music in his head need not have required direct access to the written source.

Improvisation, and specifically liturgical improvisation, can therefore in certain respects, be shown to have had an influence on Messiaen’s compositional activity. Neither this impact nor its inverse, the impact of his compositional theorising on the activity of improvisation, exhausts an explanation of his approach to either activity, but examining them together has been fruitful in adding to existing considerations of his thought and technique.

⁴ Balmer *et al.*, *Le Modèle*, p.10.

6.2 Liturgical music and theological music

Chapter four situates the thinking about liturgical music within a tradition of theological argument that takes the liturgy as a specific, indeed privileged, source for reflection. Although many contributors to that line of thinking acknowledge in general terms the relevance of multi-sensory stimuli and movement alongside the verbal aspect of the *lex orandi* described, it is the latter aspect which receives more attention in the literature. The use of Messiaen's liturgical music as a case study in detailed attention to the aural aspect of liturgy is here proposed as a possible starting point for an expansion of this discourse to encompass the musical alongside the textual in understanding this *prima theologia*. Similar expansion could be developed using other liturgical musics, and indeed other multi-sensory contributions to liturgy, such as visual art, architecture, movement and scent.

Messiaen is not unique, of course, in straddling the worlds of liturgical music and concert composition, but his particular attention to the possibility that music can express theology, rather than merely a vague religious sentiment in the form of spiritual mysticism, makes his music especially apt for this approach. Messiaen's particular admiration for the theological writings of von Balthasar, which highlight the theological relevance of beauty, and of Guardini who held a reformist but well-grounded theology of liturgy also help to link his thoughts, however obliquely, with other writers on liturgical theology with whom he cannot be shown to have engaged.

Messiaen's own *Conférence de Notre Dame* could be read as a contraindication of the case, in that he distanced everything that was not plainchant from the label of liturgical music properly so called. This claim seems polemically hyperbolic from a composer whose liturgical improvisations, and indeed performances of composed music within the liturgy, seem to have been so thoughtful and engaged with the activity passing in the rest of the church. If those contributions cannot be divorced from their context – which appears to be the

reason that the CDs of recorded improvisations were withdrawn – it follows that they are, in at least some sense, truly liturgical. They are, then, not to be relegated to his second category of religious music, which simply encompasses anything with a religious inspiration. Such inspiration implies that nothing is demanded of the listener in terms of religious rather than aesthetic response. While it is true that many audiences for Messiaen's music may not share his faith, the sincerity of his expression, which Richard Taruskin perceives is what rescues his music from being dismissed as merely kitsch,⁵ does aim to draw a response. Messiaen's music in service of a congregation gathered at worship draws them in, and in turn participates with them, as an essential part of the total experience of the liturgy.

Messiaen's third category of religious music is generally seen as his most original, and indeed forms the focus of van Maas's exploration of breakthrough through dazzlement. It is undeniable that Messiaen's music can seem overwhelming at points, and that through this it may be possible to perceive something of the sublime; this is true of some of his improvised toccatas as well as the climactic points in his orchestral writing. His admiration for von Balthasar, however, suggests an interpretation of that sublimity which moves away from the Kantian – in which the sublime's formless greatness demonstrates an inadequacy of sensibility – to a more classical concern with the dignity of expression in styling sublimely great conceptions.⁶ Even at his most dazzling, Messiaen's music does retain dignity, and that tension between seriousness and playfulness that Guardini also ascribes to liturgy. Many of his improvisations are also at the other end of dynamic, tempo and dramatic spectra, and come across as tender and reflective, if not virtually static. This latter style is, perhaps, closer to the general perception of prayerfulness in music, and clearly has its place alongside the dazzling in the expression of religious themes in musical form.

⁵ Richard Taruskin, 'Sacred entertainments', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, vol. 15, no. 2 (July 2003), 109–126.

⁶ Cassius Longinus, *On the Sublime*, trans. H. L. Havell (London: MacMillan, 1890).

In addition to seeing Messiaen's liturgical music as theological, it is also argued that this conception gives greater substance to the claim that concert music, by transposing something liturgical to the new context of the concert hall, can express theological ideas. If the case for hearing Messiaen's liturgical music as a contribution to liturgical theology is sound, then the relevance of this transposition for interpreting his theological expression can be strengthened. It seems that doing so can provide a more theological account of the connection than commentaries which simply rehearse the content of the theological ideas expressed in the para-texts to his music and link them to examples of musical symbolism; both elements of that approach are necessary, but surrounding them with a contextual understanding of the way both theological ideas and music function within the shared activity of liturgy can serve to make the employment of such symbolism more than merely elaborate examples of 'word-painting'.

6.3 Answering the Research Questions

In the introduction, three subsidiary questions were framed, each supporting a different element of the overall research question that drives this project: how did Messiaen's role as improviser at the organ in the liturgical context affect his compositional practice? In this conclusion each element can receive a response from the arguments and evidence presented, enabling the overarching question to be addressed.

What was Messiaen's role and practice as improviser at the organ, in both formal and musical terms? His role, as has been shown, changed over time, although it can be largely characterised as providing music for three Masses and Vespers on Sundays for much of the time; he would also provide music for weddings and funerals and other such offices of occasion as required, or arrange deputies for any of these services. As the church has a chancel or choir organ as well as the main gallery organ, the smaller instrument is likely to have done more accompaniment, leaving Messiaen to provide his commentary in improvised

and composed works at points of particular significance. He played at the beginning and end of services, improvised responses to the readings, covering the function of the gradual, and also offertories and communions.

In musical terms the range of his liturgical improvisations is assessed on the basis of those that were recorded and are available. From those recordings it has been possible in some cases to make a reasonable proposition for the position and function of the improvisation, although with a greater or lesser degree of certainty in each specific case. His use of plainchant and of birdsong have been accounted part of his practice of liturgical improvisation, as have instances of his personal modes. Some of his rhythmic ideas are identifiable, although it is also argued that the improvisations include less rhythmic complexity than his worked-through compositions. Similarly in the harmonic area, some of his preferred chords appear, often driven by his use of modality, but these are often heard in a context in which common practice harmonic functions are at least as recognisable, and it is often the latter that seem to give more sense of direction to the music. The overall impression is of a French organist in the tradition of Franck and Tournemire as well as Widor, Guilmant and Dupré. Messiaen's distinctive voice is there, but it is in some ways understated in comparison to his composed works for organ, let alone his orchestral works.

In so far as the role was, for Messiaen, not merely functional but also vocational, what can be discovered about his theological conception of the role, and how might the wider discourse of liturgical theology illuminate it? It is clear that Messiaen took the responsibilities of the role seriously, and applied himself to an understanding of liturgy as advised by his confessor shortly after his appointment. He was, however, comfortable with allowing his music to express the whole range of theological and biblical drama, and resisted attempts to reduce the import of the label 'religious' to mere saccharine sentimentality. A theological conception of the liturgy as a whole, conversely, enables us to see Messiaen's *habitus*, as

developed in his liturgical role, as itself significant, indeed as constitutive of his theological commitment as expressed not only through his liturgical music but through his whole musical output, and arguably his whole life as a person of acknowledged and confident faith.

What links can be established between Messiaen's improvisational and compositional practices, and is it possible to infer specific influence from improvisation to composition or *vice versa*? A number of points of contact between the two activities have been identified, both as considered from the allusions and connections implied in the improvisations, and as argued from the final form of composed works to similarities in the approach to improvisation. In some ways the two are not entirely distinct activities at all, although the level of privacy Messiaen maintained in his lifetime about works in progress make it all the more intriguing to consider his more immediate treatment of material in the improvisations. It is suggested that even those compositions which are understood to have originated in improvisation in a relatively direct sense were nevertheless subject to very significant re-working before reaching their published final form. Conversely it is also possible to find elements in compositions that do not draw directly on improvisation but which nevertheless do reflect certain techniques that he developed and used in improvisation, and to an even greater extent reflect the liturgical sensibility that formed his approach to theological music.

Taken together these elements show an influence of Messiaen's role as an improviser on his compositional activities, and indeed on his wider thought and musicianship, which can be identified at several levels. There are connections between musical techniques used in both activities, and between the way music interacts with texts in both. Perhaps more importantly, though slightly less concretely, there are commonalities of conception and the importance of particular ideas, including the relationship between time and eternity which has long been recognised as important in his music but can now be seen as a natural extension of a liturgically grounded theology of realised eschatology.

6.4 Wider resonances of this project

There are a number of ways in which the case built in this thesis might be extended. Although analysis of the principal characteristics of Messiaen's recorded improvisations as exemplified by the La Praye discs is offered, there exist a significant number of additional recordings held in the Messiaen archive, a thorough examination of which will no doubt reveal further interesting material. Similarly, there are documents in the archive which are not yet available, pending conservation and digitisation work: some of these, such as the preparatory materials for the *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, could substantiate or revise some of the assumptions made about the changes effected between a seed event of improvisation and the realisation of the through-composed cycle. The availability of further evidence will always nuance and might entirely re-write conclusions reached on the basis of what is known at any given moment.

With that caveat, the case made has demonstrated that Messiaen's liturgical music was delivered and developed with a properly theological conception of the task. Indeed, it has been argued that the relationship between his music and the theology of the Second Vatican Council was closer than has generally been recognised, and more considered than many of the more popular attempts to make music supposedly in the spirit of those reforms. Messiaen could even be considered almost archetypical of the sort of theologically engaged lay ministry of ecclesiastical musician that should arise naturally from the council's framing of the issues. Notwithstanding, therefore, that there are clergy and congregations who as a matter of taste or personal preference may not be enamoured of his musical style, the implications of the argument do include advocacy for liturgical use of Messiaen's music. Messiaen's own statement that only plainchant could be truly liturgical music is a claim belied by his own demonstration of the possibilities available to a fully engaged, theologically informed and prayerful musician. Conversely there is an implied challenge here for other liturgical musics: such music may include styles very different from Messiaen's –

and less to my own taste – but should aim to be as engaged with theological considerations at every level as Messiaen’s evidently was.

Although based on the specificities of one particular liturgical musician, this thesis also raises a wider set of questions of the wider discourse of liturgical theology. In arguing that a theology of liturgy is relevant to understanding Messiaen’s attempt to express theology through music, there is a suggestion that liturgical theology might also engage more deeply with liturgical music as being of more than merely decorative import. In developing such an argument it is suggested that specificity in terms of musical praxis may be more useful than generalities about music as whole considered in an abstract sense. Such specificity must, of course, account for many more styles and examples of music, but the case made here with respect to Messiaen might be a start. Similarly, those aiming to account for meaningful import of music might also be recalled to specificity, as meaning is transmitted in intimate relation to context. Especially where the hope is to demonstrate a theological meaning in a piece of music, it is hoped that liturgy – broadly defined and theologically grounded – might be used more widely as a relevant category in imputing such import.

Turning from theological to more purely musicological considerations, the ideas concerning links between improvisation and composition within the scope of an individual’s musical praxis can certainly be applied more widely. Some of the considerations and methods applied to Messiaen in this project might well be applicable to other composers, especially other composers for whom improvisation is known to have played a significant role in their wider music making. That said, many historical improvising composers pre-dated the possibility of recording, let alone the relative affordability and portability of recording technologies, which indeed developed appreciably through Messiaen’s lifetime as well as since. The relatively easy availability of recording has drastically changed the economics of music, meaning that just as recorded evidence is lacking for the improvisational practice of

older composers than Messiaen, more recent improvising musicians are more likely to compile, curate and release entire outputs in recorded rather than written forms leaving the composed side of such connections less well evidenced.

Not only musicologists considering either Messiaen individually or improvisation generally – or ‘liturgical improvisation’ specifically – might be interested in the argument presented, but composers seeking to understand Messiaen’s approach with a view to how they could apply some of his ideas in their own practice may find the case made here to be of interest. This may be especially true if the aim is to compose music inspired by Christian theology, whether or not the composer in question shares Messiaen’s beliefs. Ecclesiastical musicians, and clergy, may also find a useful musical as well as theological example in Messiaen, opening up possibilities for their own creativity in service of the Church.

Messiaen’s music is striking in many ways, and the sound of his works is unmistakable and personal, regardless of the dependencies that have recently been uncovered in his technical process. For musicians and audiences who do not share the composer’s religious conviction it may still be of interest to relate the theological claims he made for his music not only to abstract truth claims but to liturgy as a culturally specific activity in which Messiaen participated both regularly and frequently. In approaching his works as a listener, as an organist and as a pianist, I have found that conceiving of them as a musical form of prayer is a most useful portal to inhabiting the music. Grounding that instinct in a rigorous theology of the prayer not just of individuals but of the church gathered, that is in a theology of liturgy, enables such an approach to be founded not on mere sentiment, but on the inherited traditions of the church.

Appendices

Appendix 1: A summary of the structure of the Catholic Mass

	Pre Vatican II	Since Vatican II	Principal Organ Music
Preparation/Introductory Rites	Sign of the Cross Psalm 42 Confiteor Introit Kyrie Gloria in Excelsis Collect	Antiphon Greeting Confession Kyrie Gloria in Excelsis Collect	Introit
Liturgy of the Word/Instruction	Epistle Gradual Gospel Sermon Creed	First reading Psalm Second Reading Gospel Sermon Creed Intercession	Gradual
Offertory	Offertory Prayer Offering of Elements Lavabo Prayer to the Holy Trinity Orate fratres Secret	Invitation prayer Prayer over the offerings Lavabo Pray brethren	Offertory
Eucharistic Prayer/Canon	Preface Sanctus Prayers before Consecration Consecration and Elevation Prayers after Consecration Final Doxology and Elevation	Preface Sanctus Eucharistic Prayer Memorial Acclamation Doxology	Consecration/ Elevation (pre Vatican II)
Communion	Pater Noster Prayer of Peace Fraction Agnus Dei Communion Prayers after Communion	Lord's Prayer Sign of Peace Lamb of God Fraction Invitation Communion Prayer after Communion	Communion
Conclusion	Dismissal Blessing Final Gospel	Solemn Blessing Dismissal	Sortie

Appendix 2: Textual bases for improvisations by Messiaen December 1975–June 1976

This table reproduces the textual inspirations for improvisations at Ste Trinité on the dates concerned, according to handwritten notes held in the archive: Olivier Messiaen, *Notes textuelles pour improvisation à l'orgue de la Trinité, entre le 7 décembre 1975 et le 20 juin 1976*, BnF, FM, RES VMC MS-178.

The texts are given in translation from Messiaen's French; many of the texts are paraphrases rather than direct quotations, they do not correspond directly to any French language Bible. Latin is retained where Messiaen himself quoted it, in relation to plainchant. Messiaen identifies only the relevant book; chapter and verse have been added.

1975–6 corresponds to year B of the three-year lectionary.

Date	Occasion	Bible reference	Text
7 Dec. 1975	Advent II	Isa. 40.3–4	Prepare: clear in the desert a way for the Lord. Every valley will be filled, every mountain and hill will be lowered.
		2 Pet. 3.10–13	So the heavens will disappear with a loud noise, the Earth and all that we have done revealed. We await a new heaven and a new earth where justice lives.
14 Dec. 1975	Advent III	Isa. 61.1	The Lord sent me to heal the broken-hearted.
		Thess. 5.19	Do not extinguish the Spirit.
21 Dec. 1975	Advent IV	2 Sam. 7.11	The Lord himself will build you a house.
		Rom. 16.25	The mystery, having remained in silence for centuries, is now revealed.
25 Dec. 1975	Christmas	Isa. 52.7	How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces good news.
		Heb. 1.1–2	In the past God spoke to our fathers by the prophets. Now he speaks to us by his son.
		[Isa. 9.6]	Introit “ <i>Puer natus est nobis, et filius datus est nobis</i> ” (A boy is born for us, a son is given to us).
28 Dec. 1975	Holy Family	Ecclesiasticus 3.4	The one who glorifies the mother is like the one who gathers a treasure.
		Col. 3.13	Act like the Lord: he has pardoned you, do the same.
		[Ps. 84.4]	Gradual: <i>Beati qui habitant in domo tua Domine</i> (Happy the one who lives in your house, Lord)
4 Jan. 1976	Epiphany	Isa. 60.3	Jerusalem: The nations walk towards your light, and the kings towards the brightness of your dawn.

		Eph. 3.5–6	The mystery which God had not made known to past generations, is that the gentiles are associated with the same inheritance, in Christ.
18 Jan. 1976	2 nd Sunday in Ordinary Time	1 Sam. 3.10	Speak, Lord, your servant is listening
		1 Cor. 6.19	Our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit.
15 Feb. 1976	6 th Sunday in Ordinary Time	Lev. 13.45	The leper must shout ‘Impure! Impure!’
		1 Cor. 11.1	My model, it is Christ.
22 Feb. 1976	7 th Sunday in Ordinary Time	Isa. 43.19	I am going to make a road in the dessert, rivers in the dry places.
		2 Cor. 1.20	All the promises of God find their ‘yes’ in the Passion of Christ Jesus
7 March 1976	1 st Sunday in Lent	Gen. 9.13	I place my rainbow in the middle of the clouds, so that it be the sign of my covenant between me and the Earth.
		1 Pet. 3.21	To be baptised is to participate in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.
14 March 1976	2 nd Sunday in Lent	Gen. 22.2	Your only son, the one whom you love: you will offer him as a sacrifice on the mountain.
		Rom. 8.34	Jesus Christ is risen: he is the divinity of God, who intercedes for us.
21 March 1976	3 rd Sunday in Lent	Ex. 20.3	You will have no other God.
		1 Cor. 1.23	We proclaim a crucified Messiah.
11 April 1976	Palm Sunday	Isa. 50.6	I offered my back to those who hit me, I didn’t protect my face from spitting.
		Phil. 2.6	Christ made himself obedient until death and to death on the cross.
18 April 1976	Easter Day	Acts 10.40	And behold God raised him on the third day.
		Col 3.2	Look for the realities of the height, and not those of the Earth.
25 April 1976	Divine Mercy Sunday	Acts 4.32	The crowd of those who had come to faith only had one heart and one soul.
		1 John 5.6	Jesus Christ came by water and by blood: not by water only, but by water and blood.
2 May 1976	3 rd Sunday of Easter	Acts 3.15	God raised Jesus Christ from among the dead, we are witnesses of this.
		1 John 2.1	We have a defender before the Father: Jesus Christ the just.
9 May 1976	4 th Sunday of Easter	Acts 4.11	Jesus (the stone discarded by the builders) became the keystone.
		1 John 3.2	When the son of God appears we will resemble him, because we will see him as he is.
16 May 1976	5 th Sunday of Easter	Acts 9.31	The church increased with the animation of the Holy Spirit.

		1 John 3.20	Our heart accuses us, but God is greater than our hearts.
23 May 1976	6 th Sunday of Easter	Acts 10.34–5	God does not make distinction between men: he accepts those who love him.
		1 John 4.7	All who love are children of God and they know God: because God is love.
27 May 1976	Ascension	Acts 1.10	They see him disappear from their eyes in a cloud.
		Eph. 1.19–20	It is the power that the Father deploys for us, it is the same force, and for you, that he put it to work in the Christ, when he raised him from among the dead and made the Christ ascend in the heavens.
30 May 1976	7 th Sunday of Easter	Acts 1.20	That his charge should pass to another.
		1 John 4.12	If we love one another, God dwells in us, and his love attains its perfection in us.
13 June 1976	Trinity Sunday	Deut. 4.33	Is it a people who have heard the voice of God, like you?
		Rom. 8.15	For, by the Spirit we had seen God by calling ‘Abba, Father’.
20 June 1976	Corpus Christi	Ex. 24.8	Moses took the blood and sprinkled the people, and said ‘behold: the blood of the covenant’.
		Heb. 9.12	Christ entered once for all in the sanctuary of Heaven, taking not the blood of animals, but his own blood.

Appendix 3: Repertoire played by Messiaen at Masses c.1933–1943

This list is based upon a document entitled ‘*Notes pour la compositions des offices à la Trinité*’ in the *Fonds Messiaen*, RES VMB MS-128. Some of the handwritten notes are illegible, and not every Sunday in the period is represented, so the list should be taken as indicative rather than exhaustive. It may usefully be compared with similar lists provided by Carolyn Shuster Fournier on the basis of parish records.¹

Bach, Johann Sebastian, Adagio in A minor
Bach, Johann Sebastian, Andante in B major (violin)
Bach, Johann Sebastian, Andante in D major (violin)
Bach, Johann Sebastian, Canon in F# (violin)
Bach, Johann Sebastian, Chorale prelude *An Wasserflüssen Babylon*
Bach, Johann Sebastian, Chorale prelude *Aus tiefer Not schei ich zu dir*
Bach, Johann Sebastian, Chorale prelude *Da Jesu an dem Kreuze stund*
Bach, Johann Sebastian, Chorale Prelude *Der Tag, der ist so freudenreich*
Bach, Johann Sebastian, Chorale prelude *Durch Adams fall*
Bach, Johann Sebastian, Chorale prelude *Erscheinen ist der herrliche Tag*
Bach, Johann Sebastian, Chorale prelude *Jesu meine Freude*
Bach, Johann Sebastian, Chorale prelude *Komm, Gott, Schöpfer, heiliger Geist*
Bach, Johann Sebastian, Chorale prelude *Mit fried und Freud ich fahr dahin*
Bach, Johann Sebastian, Chorale prelude *Nun komm der Heiden Heiland*
Bach, Johann Sebastian, Chorale Prelude *O Mesch, beweine dein Sünde gross*
Bach, Johann Sebastian, Chorale prelude *Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele*
Bach, Johann Sebastian, Chorale prelude *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*
Bach, Johann Sebastian, Chorale prelude *Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten*
Bach, Johann Sebastian, Fantasia in C minor
Bach, Johann Sebastian, Prelude in G major
Bach, Johann Sebastian, Prelude in G minor
Bach, Johann Sebastian, Toccata in E
Boëlmann, Leon, Menuet Gothique, from *Suite Gothique*
Boëlmann, Leon, *Pièce Gothique*
Daquin, Louis-Claude, 2nd Noël in G, from *Nouveau Livre de Noëls*
Daquin, Louis-Claude, Noël en trio, no. 7, from *Nouveau Livre de Noëls*
Delbos, Claire, *L’homme né de la femme*
Delbos, Claire, *La vierge berce l’enfant*
Dupré, Marcel, Jésus tombe pour la 3^e fois, from *Chemin de la Croix*
Dupré, Marcel, 1st Magnificat from *15 Versets sur les Vêpres du commun des fêtes de la Sainte Vierge*
Dupré, Marcel, 4th Magnificat from *15 Versets sur les Vêpres du commun des fêtes de la Sainte Vierge*
Dupré, Marcel, 1st Variation from *Variations sur un vieux Noël*
Dupré, Marcel, 3rd Variation from *Variations sur un vieux Noël*
Franck, César, 3rd Chorale
Franck, César, Allegretto in A (violin)
Frescobaldi, Girolamo, *Canzona* in G minor
Frescobaldi, Girolamo, *Ricercar Chromaticho*
Frescobaldi, Girolamo, *Toccata per l’elevatione*
Grigny, Nicholas de, *Récit de Tierce en Taille*

¹ Shuster Fournier, *Siècle de vie musicale à la Trinité*, pp.171–195.

Guilmant, Alexandre Pastorale, from *Sonate no. 1*
 Handel, George Friedrich, *Te Deum* (Violin)
 Haydn, Adagio from 8th Sonata (violin)
 Haydn, Largo in C minor (violin)
 Langlais, Jean, L'Annonciation, from *Poèmes évangéliques*
 Langlais, Jean, La Nativité, from *Poèmes évangéliques*
 Langlais, Jean, Les Rameaux, from *Poèmes évangéliques*
 Messiaen, Olivier, *Diptyque*
 Messiaen, Olivier, La vierge et l'enfant, from *La Nativité du Seigneur*
 Messiaen, Olivier, Les anges, from *La Nativité du Seigneur*
 Messiaen, Olivier, Les Bergers, from *La Nativité du Seigneur*
 Messiaen, Olivier, Les enfants de Dieu, from *La Nativité du Seigneur*
 Messiaen, Olivier, Les mages, from *La Nativité du Seigneur*
 Tournemire, Charles, *Alleluia no. 4*
 Widor, Charles-Marie, *Final* in D Major
 Widor, Charles-Marie, *Symphonie No. 9*
 Widor, Charles-Marie, Toccata, from *Symphonie No. 5*

Appendix 4: Recorded improvisations held in the *Fonds Messiaen*

This table lists the recordings in the catalogue of the archive, showing the catalogue description and the associated dates. In some cases additional dates may be represented, indicated in the catalogue only by month; column three of the table shows only specific dates.

In a number of instances, indicated in footnotes, the catalogue comments suggest that among the improvisations are performances of works by other composers; this raises a question as to whether all the remaining material consists only of improvisations.

Library identifier	Description	Date
DONAUD0501_000004_V1_1	Service at Ste Trinité. Concerto by Jolivet (Organ). Birdsongs.	18 June 1967; 6, 7, 14, 17 July 1967
DONAUD0501_000085_V1_1	Service at Ste Trinité: sermon and organ improvisations	13 Nov. 1966; 4 May 1967
DONAUD0501_000086_V1_1	Church of Ste Trinité: Organ improvisations	14, 21 May 1967
DONAUD0501_000087_V1_1	Church of Ste Trinité: Organ music (attempts (<i>essais</i>) and rehearsals)	21–2 Nov. 1967 ²
DONAUD0501_000088_V1_1	Church of Ste Trinité: Organ improvisations	10 Mar. 1969 ³
DONAUD0501_000089_V1_2	Service at Ste Trinité: Organ improvisation ⁴ and sermon	26 Apr. 1969
DONAUD0501_000089_V2_2	Church of Ste Trinité: Organ improvisations	31 May 1970 ; 7, 21, 23 June 1970
DONAUD0501_000091_V1_1	Service at Ste Trinité: Organ improvisation and sermons	19, 30 Nov. 1972 ; 3, 8, 17 Dec. 1972
DONAUD0501_000092_V1_1	Services at the Sacré-Cœur and at Ste Trinité: Organ improvisations and sermons	17, 25, 31 Dec, 1972 ; 8, 14 Jan 1973
DONAUD0501_000093_V1_1	Church of Ste Trinité: Organ improvisations	13, 20, 27, 31 May 1973
DONAUD0501_000094_V1_1	Service at Ste Trinité: sermon and organ improvisation ⁵	22 April 1973
DONAUD0501_000095_V1_1	Service at Ste Trinité: Organ improvisations. Birdsongs	21, 28 Jan. 1973; 4, 11, 25 Feb. 1973; 4, 7, 44, 25 March 1973

² This recording constitutes rehearsal for the event which led to the *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte-Trinité*; see section 5.1.2.

³ It is noted that themes from Berlioz were taken as inspiration, to mark his centenary.

⁴ It is noted that among improvisations are included works by Tournemire.

⁵ It is noted that among improvisations are included works by Tournemire.

DONAUD0501_000096_V1_1	Birdsongs. Service at Ste Trinité: sermon, Gospel reading and organ improvisations	6 May 1973
DONAUD0501_000097_V1_1	Birdsongs. Service at Ste Trinité: sermon and organ improvisations	25 March 1973 ; 1, 15 April 1973
DONAUD0501_000098_V1_1	Service at Ste Trinité: sermon and organ improvisations ⁶	23, 25, 30 Dec. 1973 ; 6, 13, 20 June 1974
DONAUD0501_000099_V1_1	Service at Ste Trinité: organ improvisations and sermon ⁷	27 Jan. 1974
DONAUD0501_000100_V1_1	Church of Ste Trinité. Organ improvisation. Sermon. Birdsongs ⁸	3, 10, 17, 24, 31 March 1974
DONAUD0501_000101_V1_1	Church of Ste Trinité. Organ Improvisations. Birdsongs. Speech	7, 13, 14, 21, 28 April 1974
DONAUD0501_000101_V2_2	Service at Ste Trinité: Mass, sermon and organ improvisations	19, 23, 26 May 1974 ; 9 June 1974
DONAUD0501_000102_V1_1	Church of Ste Trinité. Organ improvisations. Announcement by Olivier Messiaen	7, 20 Oct. 1974; 8, 12, 22, 24, 25 Dec. 1974
DONAUD0501_000103_V1_2	Church of Ste Trinité: organ improvisations ⁹	3 June 1973; 7 Oct. 1973; 18 Nov. 1973; 9, 16 Dec. 1973
DONAUD0501_000103_V2_2	Church of Ste Trinité: organ improvisations ¹⁰	3 June 1973; 7 Oct. 1973; 18 Nov. 1973; 9, 16 Dec. 1973
DONAUD0501_000104_V1_1	Church of Ste Trinité: organ improvisations	21, 25, 28 Dec. 1975; 4, 18 Jan. ; 8, 15, 22 Feb. 1976
DONAUD0501_000105_V1_1	Church of Ste Trinité. Organ improvisations. Sermon	14, 21 March 1976; 12, 17, 18, 25 April 1976
DONAUD0501_000106_V1_1	Service at Ste Trinité: organ improvisations and sermon	2, 9, 16, 23 May 1976
DONAUD0501_000107_V1_1	Church of Ste Trinité: Organ improvisations	24, 27, 30 May 1976; 13, 20 June 1976

⁶ It is noted that among improvisations are included works by Dupré.

⁷ It is noted that among improvisations are included works by Tournemire.

⁸ It is noted that among improvisations are included works by Alain.

⁹ It is noted that among improvisations are included works by Tournemire.

¹⁰ It is noted that among improvisations are included works by Tournemire.

DONAUD0501_000109_V1_3	Church of Ste Trinité: Organ improvisations	1, 7, 21 Nov. 1976; 5, 12, 19 Dec. 1976
DONAUD0501_000109_V2_3	Church of Ste Trinité: Organ improvisations	19, 25, 26 Dec. 1976 ; 2, 9, 30 Jan. 1977 ; 6 Feb. 1977
DONAUD0501_000109_V3_3	Church of Ste Trinité: Organ improvisations	6, 13, 20, 23 Feb. 1977; 27 March 1977; 10 April 1977; 1 May 1977
DONAUD0501_000110_V1_1	Church of Ste Trinité: Organ improvisations	8, 15 May 1977; 5, 12 June 1977
DONAUD0501_000111_V1_2	Church of Ste Trinité. Organ improvisation. Birdsongs	15 May 1977
DONAUD0501_000111_V2_2	Church of Ste Trinité. Organ improvisations. Plainchant. Birdsongs	20 June 1977; 10, 17, 24 Oct. 1977
DONAUD0501_000112_V1_3	Church of Ste Trinité: Organ improvisations	9, 16, 30 Oct. 1977; 6, 13 Nov. 1977
DONAUD0501_000112_V2_3	Service at Ste Trinité: organ improvisations and sermon	13, 20, 27 Nov. 1977; 4, 11, 18 Dec. 1977
DONAUD0501_000112_V3_3	Church of Ste Trinité: Organ improvisations	18, 24, 25 Dec. 1977; 1, 8, 14, 15 Jan. 1978
DONAUD0501_000113_V1_1	Church of Ste Trinité: Organ improvisations	22, 29 Jan. 1978; 5, 12, 26 Feb. 1978
DONAUD0501_000114_V1_1	Church of Ste Trinité: Organ improvisations	24, 26, 27 March 1978; 2, 9, 30 April 1978; 4, 7, 21 May 1978
DONAUD0501_000115_V1_1	Church of Ste Trinité: Organ improvisations	5 April 1978
DONAUD0501_000116_V1_2	Church of Ste Trinité: Organ improvisations	7, 14, 21, 28 Oct.1979; 4 Nov. 1979
DONAUD0501_000116_V2_2	Church of Ste Trinité: Organ improvisations. Sermon	4, 14, 18 Nov. 1979
DONAUD0501_000117_V1_1	Church of Ste Trinité: Organ improvisations. Birdsongs	4, 18 June 1978
DONAUD0501_000118_V1_1	Church of Ste Trinité: Organ improvisations	25 Nov. 1979; 9, 16, 23, 24, 25, 31 Dec. 1979
DONAUD0501_000119_V1_1	Service at Ste Trinité: organ improvisations and sermon	29 March 1987; 5, 18, 19 April 1987

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