In the year of his centennial, Olivier Messiaen (1908–92) is widely acknowledged as not only one of the leading French composers of the twentieth century, but as a voice of timeless significance within Western music. In addition to his love for music with its “colors” and rhythms, he felt passionately about two other areas in which he became an erudite scholar: theology and ornithology. A devout Catholic, he owned and diligently read a large collection of theological books; an avid bird lover, he studied their song so thoroughly that his contributions to the field are now considered invaluable even to specialists. A third field to which Messiaen devoted a cluster of compositions is that of idealized human love. As he knew, all love derives from God’s love for humankind. The human love of God may be but an awkward and flawed response to the divine gift, but even the love of one human for another, provided it is true and strong, must be regarded as a reflection—albeit a pale reflection—of God’s love.¹

Messiaen began reading books on theology already as a teenager. Mystics like John of Ruusbroec, Thomas à Kempis, and Thomas Merton as well as saints like Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Ávila, John
of the Cross, Catherine of Siena, and Thérèse de Lisieux were of crucial importance for his devotion. His reflections, and above all the contemplations on which he was to base specific compositions, were additionally shaped by spiritual authors like Ernest Hello and Columba Marmion and by theologians like Romano Guardini and Hans Urs von Balthasar. The dominating influence on his understanding of Christian doctrine, however, was Thomas Aquinas, whose *Summa Theologica* (*ST*) he owned in a French translation and kept studying all through his life. While he admits that he may not have read every single page of the extensive treatise, he refers regularly and increasingly to passages that address questions of faith he felt impelled to ponder.

This article addresses two aspects of Messiaen’s reception of Thomistic texts: on the one hand, his implicit translation of Thomas’s thoughts on the role of music in the life of a Christian and on music’s possible spiritual content into the components of his musical material; on the other hand, his explicit quotation of Thomistic sentences addressing purely theological subject matter. The first aspect, the modern composer’s appropriation of—or felicitous congruence with—the medieval theologian’s views on music, underlies all his compositions with biblical, liturgical, or mystical titles, many aspects in the six compositions addressing the subject that Messiaen summarized as “love and death,” and even some passages in his birdsong compositions. It is in fact quite astonishing to what degree Messiaen’s practical usage of music as a “language” concurs with Thomas’s theoretical opinions.

The second aspect, Messiaen’s quotations from *ST* and their musical translation, determines only a limited number of works but is rendered all the more interesting by the fact that the musical treatment often complements, rather than only represents, the emphasis found in the Thomistic passage. While three compositions from the composer’s mature period—his oratorio on the Transfiguration, his organ meditations on the Trinity, and his opera on St. Francis of Assisi—constitute the climax of the composer’s integration of spe-
cific statements, references to Thomas can actually be traced to different (including much earlier) times in the composer’s life and to occasions other than the “setting” of a text in the musical work.

• Three times does Messiaen mention Thomas in introductory texts: in the scores for *Trois petites Liturgies de la présence divine* (1943–44), in *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum* (1964), and in *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité* (1969).

• Three works include three Thomistic quotations each, either set for voices or transcribed in Messiaen’s musical alphabet; see Movements IX, XII, and XIII of the oratorio *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ* (1965–69), Movements I, III, and VII of the organ cycle *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité*, and Tableau 5 (two long passages) as well as Tableau 8 (one passage) in the opera *Saint François d’Assise*.

• Three times does Messiaen, in the year 1978 alone, explicitly refer to the Thomistic statement that is theologically central to his opera, where the Angel paraphrases it from the *ST* and the dying Saint Francis later adapts it in his farewell: “God dazzles us through excess of Truth. Music carries us to God through default of Truth.” Messiaen’s references appear in his Notre Dame lecture, his preface to the program book published for the festival on occasion of his seventieth birthday, and in an interview, conducted around the same time, in which he is asked to speak about his faith and the role music plays in a believer’s relationship to God.

*Thomas Aquinas and Music*

While music does not play a dominant role in Thomas’s thinking, a thorough perusal of all his works as undertaken by Francis J. Kovach and Hermann-Josef Burbach reveals that most of his writings touch on one or another aspect of the subject. It is true that, to the great disappointment of an early scholar of Thomistic music appreciation, a treatise titled *De arte musica* is now believed not to stem...
from Thomas’s pen, and the claim that Thomas may have composed music for an Office for the Feast of Corpus Christi has met with widespread doubt among modern Thomistic scholars. Nonetheless, his numerous comments on art and aesthetics add up to a whole that tempts me to fantasize what a Thomistic De musica would have looked like. In parallel to the typical rhetorical layout of Thomas’s treatises, I would imagine such an opusculum to consist of the following four questions: (1) Is the practice of or exposure to music good for humans? (2) Is music proper for Mass and the glorification of God? (3) Is music metaphysically good and beautiful? (4) Is music capable of leading humans to God?

Thomas grants that due harmony, due proportion, and due consonance lead to delectatio, that is, to aesthetic pleasure. Delight thus understood may be both spiritual and sensual, since owing to its intrinsic nature, music calls forth due harmony and clarity in the soul of the musicians and the listeners. Yet while sensual pleasure is an integral part of musical experience, it is a mere extension of spiritual pleasure, whose nature is metaphysical.

With regard to music’s role in divine liturgies earthly and heavenly, Thomas warns that “musical instruments move the soul to pleasure rather than create a good disposition within it” (ST II-II, q. 91, a. 2, ad 4). He goes on to declare that “to arouse men to devotion by teaching and preaching is a more excellent way than by singing” (ST II-II, q. 91, a. 2, ad 3). Distinguishing in interesting ways between vocal and instrumental contributions to the praise of God, he argues,

The praise of the voice is necessary in order to arouse man’s devotion towards God. Wherefore whatever is useful in conducing to this result is becomingly adopted in the divine praises. Now it is evident that the human soul is moved in various ways according to various melodies of sound. . . . Hence the use of music in the divine praises is a salutary institution, that the souls of the faint-hearted may be the more incited to devotion. (ST II-II, q. 91, a. 2)
In the Old Testament instruments of this description were employed, both because the people were more coarse and carnal—so that they needed to be aroused by such instruments as also by earthly promises—and because these material instruments were figures of something else. (*ST II-II*, q. 91, a. 2, ad 4)

Another important issue is raised in a passage addressing the question “whether religion has an external act,” implying deliberations on whether any form of art could possibly be proper for the expression of faith. Against numerous objections that all human offerings are by necessity of inferior value in the eyes of God and therefore not appropriate, Thomas argues,

> We pay God honor and reverence, not for His sake (because He is of Himself full of glory to which no creature can add anything), but for our own sake. . . . Now the human mind, in order to be united to God, needs to be guided by the sensible world. . . . Wherefore in the Divine worship it is necessary to make use of corporeal things, that man’s mind may be aroused thereby, as by signs, to the spiritual acts by means of which he is united to God. Therefore the internal acts of religion take precedence of the others and belong to religion essentially, while its external acts are secondary, and subordinate to the internal acts. (*ST II-II*, q. 81, a. 7)

Such external things, Thomas adds a little later, are offered to God, not as though He stood in need of them, but as signs of the internal and spiritual attitude, which is of itself acceptable to God.

As with all offerings to God so also with music, Thomas stresses that it is more important to know—for both the singers and the listeners—why music is sung in church than what exactly is sung (*ST II-II*, q. 91, a. 2, ad 5). Although we have no explicit record for this, Messiaen almost certainly agrees with this Thomistic dictum. In
fact, he seems to adopt this view in a threefold way. With regard to music sung during church services, Messiaen argues that only one kind is truly appropriate: plainchant, that is, monophonic, unaccompanied sacred singing in the Office during the canonical hours and in the liturgy of the Mass. This music, Messiaen believes, as does Thomas, is pure and without pretense of anything beyond its role as a vehicle for the beautiful articulation of texts that glorify God.

A second way in which Messiaen incorporates the Thomistic view on music’s proper role in the praise of God is reflected in his great love of alleluias, musical utterances that are altogether focused on the why while downplaying the what of verbal expression. From the highly melismatic and thereby practically nonsemantic alleluias, it is but a small step to birdsong, which Messiaen also understood as a kind of music offered purely in glorification of the Creator.

Finally, Thomas considers music’s objective value and goodness, addressing both its physical nature and its metaphysical properties. Since music can be regarded as a manifestation of arithmetic, philosophical speculation about its value is intimately linked to the significance of numbers. In this sense, music exists first and above all in the metaphysical world, long before and independently of whether it is heard as sound. For music to be good and beautiful, it has to meet three conditions: “integrity” or “perfection,” since those things which are impaired are by the very fact ugly; due “proportion” or “harmony”; and lastly, “brightness” or “clarity,” whence things are called beautiful which have a bright color (ST I, q. 39, a. 8). Integrity implies nothing is missing, the expression is complete and in that respect, perfect. Proportion is essential in music as it defines melody (in its individual intervals as well as its overall contours), rhythm (in its individual durations as well as its changing density), harmony (in the degree of consonance achieved by means of arithmetically related vibrations), and overall structure (in its balance, correspondences, symmetries, etc.). Clarity is perhaps most important of all. Thomas uses the term in a dual sense, speaking of physical and metaphysical clarity.
brightness and splendor (which Messiaen celebrates in his Transfiguration), Thomas posits a kind of clarity that is noncorporeal in nature, the quality that makes a thing accessible to the intellect. Music can also speak through numbers of the way in which God’s Creation is supremely ordered; Messiaen has developed very intricate devices of numerical play through which he sought to express religious devotion and awe.

**Integrity, Harmony, and Clarity in the Devices of Messiaen’s Musical Language**

In 1935, when he was twenty-six years old, Messiaen wrote his first composition on the subject of the Christmas story, the organ cycle *La Nativité du Seigneur*. Every time he performed the work in the course of the subsequent four years, he distributed to the audience a sheet with the following text, which has since become known as his first “manifesto”:

The emotion, the sincerity of the musical work.
Which will be at the service of the dogmas of Catholic theology.
Which will be expressed by melodic and harmonic means:  
the progressive growth of intervals, the chord on the dominant, ostinatos, grace notes, and extended appoggiaturas.
Still more by rhythmic means: rhythms immediately preceded or followed by their augmentation and sometimes lengthened by an added value, . . .
and above all through the modes of limited transposition: harmonically employed chromatic modes whose strange color is owed to the limited number of their transpositions. . . .
The theological subject? The best, since it contains all subjects.
And this abundance of technical means allows the heart to overflow freely.  

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One wonders what an average concertgoer may have made of such an esoteric-sounding manifesto. As Messiaen saw it, the text served as a kind of map intended to help listeners find their way in the universe of his language—a universe in which highly idiosyncratic technical means and a very personal religious sensibility function as the coordinates for a musical vocabulary and syntax.

What, then, are the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic means that “will serve the dogmas of Catholic theology”? The musical building blocks Messiaen used and the contents he intended them to embody are clearly defined and have hardly changed in the course of the composer’s long life. Today’s listeners, who are in a position to compare his organ works of 1928 and 1984 or his orchestral compositions of 1930 and 1991, are rightfully stunned by the unity of this musical language.

From a religious point of view, the most important aspect of this language is the fact that each component is employed as a spiritual symbol. The relationship between signifier and signified can vary to a certain degree depending on the composition’s subject matter, but the number of invariables is sufficiently large to provide material for a systematic examination. Messiaen’s preference for patterned modes, numerical play with rhythmic values, and vertical or horizontal symmetries seems intended to grant the metaphysical “goodness” of his music in light of Thomas’s observations. The following is a brief introduction to the five most prominent of these devices—what I consider Messiaen’s implicit translation of Thomistic thoughts into the components of his musical material.14

Messiaen’s Modes and the Sublime Order of the World
As Messiaen expounds in his first treatise of 1944, The Technique of My Musical Language, he is fascinated by the possibility of selecting pitches in such a way that they create an unmistakable color while allowing association with various tonal areas. He realizes this idea through artificial modes based on repeated interval groups. To this
end, he builds scales from a unit whose framing interval is a simple division of the octave ($\frac{1}{2}, \frac{1}{3}, \frac{1}{4}$, and $\frac{1}{6}$), repeating it in a process that scholars of symmetry call “translation.” A transposition up or down the translation interval leads to a pitch aggregate that is identical with the mode’s original. Therefore, the number of different transpositions is limited to the number of semitones in the translation interval. The modes provide the horizontal material of melodies as well as the vertical material of chords. Theologically speaking, they serve Messiaen as a universe. It is a miraculously ordered universe, as complex as it is basically simple, of unlimited dimensions but always identical with itself.

**Vertical Symmetries: Humankind Created in God’s Image**

Messiaen is extraordinarily fond of mirroring processes. F♯ major, one of his favorite tonalities, is a quarry for several kinds of pitch symmetry. Throughout his life, he uses this key in movements about God’s love; he also draws on it at climactic moments of passionate love in the six works devoted to this topic (refer back to note 4). (And here again, the composer may in musical terms be expressing the conviction that as profound truths, passionate love and divine love are identical.)

The F♯ major scale, particularly when extended beyond the higher octave to the major third as is characteristic for Messiaen, shows a perfect symmetry both in its interval structure and in its visual appearance on the piano keyboard. When Messiaen aims to express an intensity of love transcending everyday reality, his preferred signifier is a chord: the major triad with added sixth. Triads with an added sixth actually appear in all tonalities, though distinctly more often in major than in minor keys. The root position appears almost never, the first inversion is the composer’s undisputed favorite, but he also uses the second inversion. A major reason for this pattern of predilection lies in the realm of symmetry: to reach perfect vertical mirroring, the root position requires six-part harmony, whereas the first inversion is “as above, so below” in simple four-part texture.
Not surprisingly, Messiaen’s favorite tonal environment also for the six-five chord is that of F♯ major.

Figure 1: Symmetry in Messiaen’s favorite scale and chord, visually realized on the keyboard.

In *Visions de l’Amen*, a cycle for two pianos composed in 1943, the symbolic connotation of key signatures is detached from the one specific scale. Three of the cycle’s seven movements are marked with the three sharps of A major or F♯ minor. In the *Creation theme*, introduced in the opening theme “Amen de la Création” by the second piano, both tonal centers can claim reasons to recommend them, but none of these reasons truly explains the most astounding feature in these movements. For the accompanying *first* piano touches both A and F♯ only in passing, in a texture that treats all semitones as equal. One wonders therefore why Messiaen marks this player’s staves with the three sharps, but then additionally reiterates the accidental in front of every single F♯, C♯, and G♯—something he never does for the second piano.

Whenever the practical value of a key signature is nil, a symbolic significance must be assumed. The material presented by the first piano is an endlessly repeated little sequence of three chords in each hand, or rather, of one chord and its transposition first one and then another whole-tone down. Stripped of its rhythmic disjuncture, the juxtaposition displays a perfect vertical symmetry. The accompanying piano in “Amen de la Création” thus confirms that God’s Creation is essentially about perfect vertical mirroring—about those who are created in God’s image.
**Horizonal Symmetries: “There Will Be Time No More”**

Vertical symmetries in music regard space—the relative position of a pitch in a given context, mode, chord, or interval. Conversely, horizontal symmetries concern time, particularly the relative duration of a sound in the context of a sonic continuum. The temporal phenomenon generally associated with Messiaen is the “non-retrogradable rhythm.” The term describes a sequence of durations that is identical when read in reverse.

Rhythmic palindromes are interesting above all for their spiritual significance. In the realm of human experience, the irreversibility that defines all acts—be they physical or linguistic, the course of a day or a life, and the expected execution of a plan—are of a quality intrinsically different from reminiscences, regrets, nostalgia, and other acts or feelings turned toward the past. Imagining a point where this distinction no longer applies means leaving the realm of time as humans know it—that time which, together with space, provides the coordinates for life in our universe. On this ground, rhythmic palindromes offer themselves as signifiers of eternity, of the state that the Angel of the Apocalypse circumscribes with the words: “There will be time no more.”

Messiaen employs above all three kinds of palindromes, which he associates with three nuances of signification. A first group comprises rhythmic sequences that represent a single palindrome that is not further divisible. In the spiritual sphere they evoke a reality without teleology, the notion of a state in which the contemplating eye can no longer distinguish the two temporal directions since they appear...
as mirror images of one another. The example Messiaen cites most frequently is the palindrome built from three different values (corresponding to the letters in the English word LEVEL): 3—5—8—5—3. In *Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus*, (from 1944, a piano composition comprising twenty pieces, most of which carry titles that identify them as contemplations of the infant Jesus in the manger), this basic palindrome functions as a bass ostinato for the entire twelfth movement, devoted to the “almighty Word.” In this context, the rhythm that annihilates the unilinear quality of time is an attribute of God. A second type of palindrome encompasses chains of two or more mirror-symmetrical rhythmic sequences. The third category is even more complex. It is Messiaen’s favorite and can therefore be regarded as his “rhythmic signature.” The first four of its five segments are different variants of the shortest conceivable palindrome, which consists of an axis value and two identical “wings.” The fifth component, however, breaks with the time-annihilating model and presents instead a sequence embodying linear growth.\footnote{Figure 3: Messiaen’s “rhythmic signature.”}

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As one might guess from the combination of non-retrogradable and teleological components, Messiaen employs this rhythm when he seeks to represent musically how a being that is of divine essence (and therefore eternal and atemporal) steps into the life of humankind and their temporally determined world. Consequently, the rhythmic signature preferably points to Jesus the man-and-God; this can be observed both in the vision of his agony (“Amen de l’agonie de Jésus” [*Visions de l’Amen*] no. 3) and in the piece depicting the Son of God contemplating the Son of Man (“Regard du Fils sur le Fils” [*Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus*] no. 5).
Growth Processes in Music: Signifiers of Spiritual Transformation

Modes, insofar as they organize tonal material, can be regarded as a kind of inherent attribute of a musical phrase or passage. Growth processes constitute a development of this material in time. Messiaen has devised three ways of modifying size: expansions or compressions of the tonal amplitude, of the horizontal structure, and of individual durations. The theological notion that seems to unite all these alterations in his eyes is that of spiritual transformation. The various aspects of this symbolism refer above all to the divinely inspired Word. Growth processes are found above all when music depicts God’s Creation through the power of his Word or when it represents the exchange of Christ’s divine and human natures as the Word becomes flesh. Thus in the third movement of Vingt Regards, titled “L’échange,” the prominent component begins as a narrow curve of three adjacent octaves. In the course of its transformations, the curve expands by chromatic steps in both directions. The twelfth step in the gradual widening culminates in an immense two-octave leap. Attempting to depict the power of God’s Word as it spreads throughout the world, Messiaen bases the final movement of the same cycle, featuring the “Church of Love” in contemplation of the infant Jesus, on two components engaged in a twofold mirroring process. The first component features in the right-hand part a swift, sharply curved figure. The even rhythm underscores the perfect bilateral symmetry of the pitches and of the dynamic gesture. The left-hand counterpart is equally symmetric on the horizontal axis, but presents a somewhat distorted vertical reflection of the right-hand figure: all intervals are “a little too small” when compared to the treble. In the second component, the bilateral symmetry is one of rhythmic values, not of pitch.

The two components in their original forms thus combine the spiritual aspect of passing on to one’s brothers the message of the Word Incarnate (perfect horizontal symmetry) and the attempt to imitate God’s love (in a vertical symmetry where the imitation of
the model above is “a little too small”), with a many-sided action, guided by the same spirit but different in each situation (a rhythmic palindrome with free pitch allocation). The transformations of the first component are characterized by internal extensions: the climax is surpassed twice so that one believes to see, rising from the figure’s center, an insertion that heightens and deepens the effect. Meanwhile, the second component undergoes external extensions. The palindrome of three double octaves is expanded first by two additional values at both flanks, then by a suspension plus another value.

**Figure 4**: Multiple mirroring processes in the “Church of Love.”

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**Selective Permutation: Time “Out of Order”**

The term “permutation” describes the process of rearranging the order of elements in a finite collection. The permutations of these elements usually refers to the complete exhaustion of all the different possibilities of reordering. A single permutation can be deliberately arbitrary (as when a game of cards is being reshuffled with the aim of an order that is unpredictable for all players) or determined by a desirable outcome (as in anagrams, when the reordering of the letters in a word yields another word that may or may not be surprisingly related, as in the mutation from “listen” to “silent” or in Dan Brown’s encoding of “The Mona Lisa” as “Oh lame saint,” etc.).

In music, permutation is most notably applied to pitches or durations but could also involve different degrees of loudness, articulation, timbres, and perhaps other parameters. Messiaen has explored many of these combinations in his 1950 composition *Mode de valeurs et d’intensités*. The number of possible permutations increases exponentially with every incremental growth of the basic collection:
• 2 elements allow for only 2 permutations (1 2, 2 1)
• 3 elements yield 3 x 2 permutations (1 2 3, 1 3 2, 2 1 3, 2 3 1, 3 1 2, 3 2 1)
• 4 elements admit 4 x 3 x 2 permutations
• 12 elements (such as the pitches in a twelve-tone row) have a total of 12 x 11 x 10 x 9 x 8 x 7 x 6 x 5 x 4 x 3 x 2 or 479,001,600 permutations

To cope with such unwieldiness, composers devise ways to reduce the number of permutations in a logically defensible way. French music theorists refer to an organized selection of permutations as “interversions,” using a term introduced from mathematics into music—albeit in a much more general sense than Messiaen’s—by Rudolph Réti (1885–1957). If twelve-tone composers limit themselves to the twelve transpositions of the four basic transformations of a row, this gives them a manageable selection of 48 interversions out of the almost 480 million available permutations.

In correspondence to his idiosyncratic modes in which repetition of a sequence of intervals reduces the number of different transpositions from the 12 for any of the Western scales to 6, 4, 3, or even only 2, Messiaen fashions his search for selective permutation by means of a “repeated reading order” that restores the initial sequence after only a small number of reshufflings. These reading orders fall into three categories: symmetric, patterned, or arbitrary sequencing. While he frequently explains the first, his theoretical commentaries remain completely silent on the second and third.16

All cases of selective permutation reveal a general characteristic. Technically, they could be described as combining nonidentity of appearance (the sequence of the elements) with identity of material (the collection of the elements); symbolically, they are invariably linked to an event that only seemingly occurs in a definite time and space. In each case, the essence of what is thus musically highlighted occurs in human souls—the souls of those who hope one day to share in the divine filiation made manifest in Jesus’s
Transfiguration, the soul of a leper finding his way to God through the merciful love of St. Francis, the souls of three very different friars facing God’s messenger and answering him as their spiritual preparation allows, and so on.

In Thomas’s view, the ordering of all things by God endows them with consonantia; the three Persons of the Trinity are exemplarily “per consonantiam unum.” In this broadest sense of con-sonare, Thomas can thus be said to regard the Triune God and all Creation “under a musical analogy according to which, at the highest level, all variety is gathered together in perfect unity of sound.”

If integrity, proportion, and clarity account for beauty and goodness in art (“Beauty and goodness in a thing are identical fundamentally; . . . goodness is praised as beauty” [ST I, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1]), and if music is the least physical art form, it follows that beauty as expressed through music has a privileged role in the human ability to know, understand, and discern. Music can thus ideally manifest truths about a higher order; in his opera, Messiaen addresses the question whether music can lead humans to God.

After this survey of what I regard as Messiaen’s adaptation of Thomas’s thoughts on music and its spiritual content, I now turn to his (initially indirect, later very explicit) integration of theological concepts.

**Thomistic References in Works of Messiaen’s Early and Middle Periods**

In the organ cycle Les Corps glorieux (1939), the inspiration from Thomas is unacknowledged but nevertheless quite obvious. The main characteristics the composer attributes to the “glorious bodies” are those discussed in the supplement to part III of ST. In Movement I, Messiaen addresses the glorious bodies’ impassibility and subtlety; in Movement V, he evokes their agility, and in Movement VI, he praises their clarity. Thomas treats these four qualities in consecutive sections; see supplement qq. 82–85.
In his introductory paragraphs to the movements, Messiaen bolsters his reference with additional nuances. Prefacing Movement I, he comments on the glorious bodies’ perfect spirituality and purity; with this he refers to supplement q. 92, a. 2: “When he will be spiritual in the flesh (which is promised to the saints after the resurrection), he will be able even in the flesh to see spiritual things.” Prefacing Movement V, Messiaen marvels at the glorious bodies’ ability to move through walls and across wide spaces, interpreting it as a special vitality; on this, see q. 82, a. 1: “No body will be stronger than the bodies of the saints,” q. 84, a. 2: “Movement in glorified bodies will not be on account of a need, because their happiness will suffice them for all such things,” and q. 84, a. 3: “The glorified soul moves the body instantaneously.”

Four years after composing Les Corps glorieux, in the fall of 1943, Messiaen integrated a small excerpt from ST as he prepared the text for the last of his Trois petites liturgies de la présence divine.

III. Psalmodie de l’ubiquité par amour

(Priere présent en toutes choses…)

(stanzas I + VII)

Tout entier en tous lieux,
Tout entier en chaque lieu,
Donnant l’être à chaque lieu,
A tout ce qui occupe un lieu,
Le successif vous est simultané,
Dans ces espaces et ces temps que vous avez créées,
Satellites de votre Douceur.
Posez-vous comme un sceau sur mon cœur.

Psalmody of the Ubiquity through Love

(God present in all things; translation mine)

Wholly in all places,
Wholly in each place,
Bestowing being on each place,
On all that occupies a place,
The successive for you is simultaneous,
In these spaces and these times
that you have created,
Satellites of your Gentleness.
Place yourself like a seal over my heart.

Asked by Antoine Goléa about the sources on which he had drawn, Messiaen stated,

This description of divine ubiquity, the attribution of [God’s] being to every place, are Thomistic concepts. “To you, the
successive is simultaneous,” these terms, which describe the difference between time and eternity, are my own, but they belong to the flow of ideas of St. Thomas Aquinas. Moreover, they express the same longing for an eternal present that one finds in my *Quartet for the End of Time* and in many other of my works.19

The passages in Thomas to which the composer refers here are from part I of *ST*, which in q. 8 addresses “the existence of God in things,” in the context of reflections on God’s nature: his infinity (7), immutability (9), and eternity (10). Paraphrases of these Thomistic reflections are particularly dense in the initial stanza but echo through the entire poem; they will recur in the *Méditations*.

The beginning of the first stanza in the third *petite liturgie*, “Wholly in all places, wholly in each place,” is a rewording of the argument with which Thomas concludes article 2 of q. 8: “Hence, as the soul is whole in every part of the body, so is God whole in all things and in each one.” The next pair of lines, “Bestowing being on each place, on all that occupies a place,” are a simplified summary of an argument found in q. 9, a. 2: “Thus, as the production of a thing into existence depends on the will of God, so likewise it depends on His will that things should be preserved; for He does not preserve them otherwise than by ever giving them existence; hence if He took away His action from them, all things would be reduced to nothing.”

Line 5 of the same *petite liturgie*, “The successive for you is simultaneous,” expresses Messiaen’s hope that humans may one day step outside the constrictions and divisions of time.20 The choice of words echoes the way in which Thomas defines one of God’s essential attributes, eternity. In q. 10, a. 1, he writes that “eternity has no succession, being simultaneously whole.” This is so even “in these spaces and these times,” that is, under the conditions determining human lives — conditions Messiaen proceeds to interpret as attendant phenomena of the love God feels for his creatures, the “satellites of your gentleness.”
Two other expressions found in the text of this liturgy can probably be traced back to ST. In stanza III, line 6, Messiaen hails God for being “Dans vos Saints par la grâce, présent” (Present in your Saints, by grace). This summarizes an argument Thomas presents in q. 8, a. 3: “God is said to be in a thing in two ways. . . . In this second way God is especially in the rational creature which knows and loves Him actually or habitually. And because the rational creature possesses this prerogative by grace. . . . He is said to be thus in the saints by grace.” Finally for the Trois petites Liturgies de la présence divine, the evocation in the third song’s fourth stanza of God’s presence in the Host, “Frère silencieux dans la Fleur-Eucharistie” (Silent brother in the Eucharist-flower), reflects what Thomas writes about this sacrament in part III of his ST (cf. qq. 73–83).21

In the prefacing paragraphs for Movement II of the instrumental work Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum (And I Await the Resurrection of the Dead), Messiaen writes, “The resurrected Christ lives and will live eternally in his body and soul. He is the ‘first-born of the dead’ (Rv 1:5), he is ‘the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep’ (1 Cor 15:20). As a risen God-Man he is at once the proximate cause and the instrumental cause of our resurrection (Thomas Aquinas).”

Messiaen’s paraphrase refers to the response Thomas offers in q. 76, a. 1 of the supplement to part III of ST:

And therefore as Christ, in respect of His human nature, received the first fruits of grace from above, and His grace is the cause of our grace, . . . so in Christ has our resurrection begun, and His resurrection is the cause of ours. . . . In this way the resurrection of Christ is the cause of our resurrection, because the same thing that wrought the resurrection of Christ, which is the univocal efficient cause of our resurrection, is the active cause of our resurrection, namely the power of Christ’s Godhead which is common to Him and the Father. . . . And this very resurrection of Christ by virtue of His indwelling Godhead is the quasi-instrumental cause of our resurrection.
In the comment preceding Movement III of *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum*, Messiaen writes, “This voice is the symbol of the signal for the resurrection: divine command, the execution of which follows immediately like the manifestation of grace in the sacraments.” The model for this phrase can again be found in the supplement to *ST* part III, where Thomas answers thus to his own rhetorical question, “Whether the sound of the trumpet will be the cause of our resurrection” (q. 76, a. 2): “According to this, the visible presence of the Son of God is called His voice, because as soon as He appears all nature will obey His command in restoring human bodies.”

In the three works just discussed Messiaen seems particularly concerned with fundamental dimensions of time, space, and motion: essentially divine qualities that Thomas acknowledges as being also qualities of the “glorious bodies” of the resurrected.

*Excerpts from the Summa in Messiaen’s Transfiguration*

The subject matter of the oratorio Messiaen composed in 1965–69 is Jesus’s transfiguration on a high mountain in the presence of three apostles—the emanation from his face and body of a dazzling brightness produced by an interior shining of his divinity. As told in the three synoptic gospels, the event constitutes the culminating point of Jesus’s public life. Thomas discusses it in part III q. 45 of *ST*, within the substantial section devoted to “The Life of Christ” (qq. 27–59). As Thomas explains it, Christ unveiled to his three closest disciples, for an instant there on Mount Tabor, the glory of his divine soul shining through his human body. As this brilliance is essentially related to the splendor that will be a permanent quality of the bodies of the saints after the resurrection, the overall theological message of Messiaen’s *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ* may be considered a direct continuation of the contemplations inspiring *Les Corps glorieux* and *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum*. What interests Messiaen here is no longer the quality of the resurrected body but the spiritual relationship of the resurrected being with God.
The Transfiguration event is thus seen in the light of its significance for the human position as adopted children of God.

Movement IX is the first of the oratorio’s fourteen sections to integrate a verbatim quotation from Thomas. In his prefatory comment, Messiaen explains, “Development of the idea of filiation. Our filiation begins with baptism and is completed after the resurrection in the state of glorious bodies. It is but an image of the only filiation, that of the Son of God. That perfect filiation is entirely understood and known only by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

The excerpt Messiaen sets stems from ST III, q. 45, a. 4. I complement what the chorus sings in Latin with the complete passage in an English translation; the segments Messiaen omits appear in brackets:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Adoptio filiorum Dei est per quandam conformitatem imaginis ad Dei Filium naturalem. . . . Primo quidem, per propriam gratiam viae, quae est conformitatis imperfecta; secundo, per gloriem, quae est conformitatis perfecta. . . . Gratiam per baptismum consequimus, in Transfiguratione autem praemonstrata est claritas futurae gloriae, ideo, tam in baptismo quam in Transfiguratione, conveniens fuit manifestare: naturalem Christi filiationem testimonio Patris: quia solus est perfecte conscius illius, perfectae generationis, simul cum Filio et Spiritu Sancto.}
\end{align*}
\]

The adoption of the sons of God is through a certain conformity of image to the natural Son of God. [Now this takes place in two ways]: first, by the grace of the wayfarer, which is imperfect conformity; secondly, by glory, which is perfect conformity [according to 1 John 3:2: “We are now the sons of God, and it hath not yet appeared what we shall be: we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like to Him, because we shall see Him as He is.”] Since, therefore, it is in baptism that we acquire grace, while the clarity of the glory to come was foreshadowed in the transfiguration, therefore both in His baptism and in His transfiguration the natural sonship of Christ was fittingly made known by the testimony of
the Father: because He alone with the Son and Holy Ghost is perfectly conscious of that perfect generation.

As this passage shows, Thomas’s arguments trace a path not only from the event centering in Jesus’s gloriously bright body, in which is revealed his identity as the Son of God, to the promise of a divine adoption of all the faithful but from there to a statement about the Trinity. The passage ends emphasizing that the three Persons of the Trinity alone can truly understand the genesis of the human participation in grace and glory. Messiaen underscores the Trinity even further by initially stressing its essence over God’s involvement with human children. In fact, he achieves a fascinating shift of meaning simply through his unorthodox setting of Thomas’s text. At cue 8, he initially sets only the words *quia solus est*. At cues 23–25 he complements this fragment with the end of the sentence so that we hear: *quia solus est, simul cum Filio et Spiritu Sanctu*. This selective quotation changes the meaning in a significant way. While Thomas’s complete sentence, *quia solus est perfecte conscius illius, perfectae generationis, simul cum Filio et Spiritu Sancto*, must be translated as “because [the Father] alone with the Son and the Holy Ghost is perfectly conscious of that perfect generation,” Messiaen’s excerpt has to be rendered as “because He alone *is*, with the Son and the Holy Ghost.” The first half of the movement thus does not address “perfect consciousness of perfect generation” but rather the Being of the triune God. The portion left out appears, now without any mention of the three Persons of the Trinity, at the corresponding point in the movement’s second half: *perfecte conscius illius* (cf. cue 35), taken up toward the end as *quia solus est perfecte conscius illius, perfectae generationis* (cf. cues 50–52)—“because he alone is perfectly conscious of that perfect generation.” A conspicuous emphasis on the number *three* throughout this movement seems to corroborate the conjecture that when using this *ST* passage, Messiaen was more interested in Jesus’s role in the Trinity than in the promise of God’s possible adoption of humans.23
In Movement XII of the *Transfiguration*, Messiaen interlaces an *ST* excerpt with texts from the Old and New Testaments (Genesis, Psalms, Wisdom, and the Gospel of Luke). The passage from Thomas is the one the composer singles out for comment in his prefacing paragraph: “When looking in clear weather at the Mont Blanc, the Jungfrau, and the three glaciers of the Meije in the Oisans region, I understood the difference between the small splendor of snow and the great splendor of the sun. There, too, was I able to imagine to what degree the site of the Transfiguration was terrible!” The sentences Messiaen has the chorus sing are taken from *ST* III, q. 45, a. 2: “*Claritas vestimentorum ejus designat futuram claritatem sanctorum, quae superabitur a claritate Christi, sicut candor nivis superatur a candore solis.*” (The clarity which was in His garments signified the future clarity of the saints, which will be surpassed by that of Christ, just as the brightness of the snow is surpassed by that of the sun.)

The topic is still the extraordinary brilliance surrounding the transfigured Jesus, here attributed to his “garments.” While the earlier quotation, owing to its accent on filiation, underscores the difference between two kinds of relationship—the natural sonship linking the First and Second Persons of the Trinity on the one hand, the “adoption” of humans as children of God on the other hand—Thomas focuses here on the different degree of radiance pertaining to the two divinely chosen entities. If the future saints in their glorious bodies will shine like pure snow, the brilliance emanating from the transfigured Christ as revealed on Mount Tabor must be likened to the sun.

In Movement XIII, the last of the oratorio’s meditation movements, the *ST* excerpt figures as one of altogether four texts. It emerges only in the last of the movement’s three large sections. Messiaen takes the words from a. 4 of Thomas’s section on the Transfiguration. In the response to the second objection appears this phrase: “*In Transfiguratione, quae est sacramentum secundae regenerationis, tota Trinitas apparuit: Pater in voce, Filius in homine, Spiritus Sanctus in nube clara.*” (In the transfiguration, which is the mystery of
the second regeneration, the whole Trinity appears: the Father in the voice, the Son in the man, the Holy Ghost in the bright cloud.)

One cannot fail to notice that the emphasis is once again on the entire Trinity rather than on Jesus in particular. All the more interesting is the musical link Messiaen establishes between this ST excerpt and the other aspects of the Transfiguration, which are addressed in two of the three other texts set in this movement:

- At cue 40, the fragment “In Transfiguratione” is set to the music heard earlier in the movement to lines from Prudentius’s Hymn for the Feast of the Transfiguration, a text promising that anyone seeking Christ will be allowed to behold Him (Quicumque Christum quaeritis . . . illic licebit visere).

- At cue 41, Thomas’s clause “In Transfiguratione, quae est sacramentum secundae regenerationis” takes up the music heard before to words from the Preface for the Feast of the Transfiguration, announcing that through the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word, a new brightness has shone into our minds’ eye (Quia per incarnati Verbi mysterium, nova mentis nostrae oculis lux tuae claritatis infulsit).

- At cues 43, 45, 47, and 51, Messiaen composes the invocation of the Trinity, “Pater in voce, Filius in homine, Spiritus Sanctus in nube clara,” as a threefold recapitulation of the music that previously set the remaining lines from Prudentius’s hymn verse, lines promising that anybody who lifts his eyes high will see a sign of everlasting glory (oculos in altum tollite . . . signum perennis gloriae).

- Even the initial exclamation “tota Trinitas” at cue 42 is devised as a quotation of the music heard twice before to the word Alleluia.

While the excerpt chosen from Thomas’s reflections thus stresses the Trinitarian aspect of the Transfiguration event, Messiaen’s musical cross-references lay out this interpretive angle before a foundation in which the participatory experience of the human witnesses is explicitly valued.
Thomistic Definitions in Messiaen’s Meditations on the Trinity

The organ cycle, though devoid of human voices able to articulate a text, refers on three different levels to ST: in Messiaen’s deliberations about the language of the angels, which allegedly contributed to his idea of developing a “communicable language”; in three passages quoted in this artificial language; and finally in the implicit references concealed in the composer’s choice of the divine attributes for which he composes musical emblems.

Questions 106 and 107 of part I of ST focus on the why and how of angelic communication. Thomas opines that “one angel enlightens another. To make this clear, we must observe that intellectual light is nothing else than a manifestation of truth,” whereby “to enlighten means nothing else but to communicate to others the manifestation of the known truth” (q. 106, a. 1).

Having thus established that the notion of angelic communication may make sense in general, Thomas proposes the following with regard to the specific mode of their speech:

To understand how one angel speaks to another, we must consider that . . . the will moves the intellect to its operation . . . , the intelligible object passes from the first to the second stage by the command of the will. . . . By the fact that the concept of the angelic mind is ordered to be made known to another by the will of the angel himself, the concept of one angel is made known to another; and in this way one angel speaks to another; for to speak to another only means to make known the mental concept to another. (ST I, q. 107, a. 1)

In the fourth paragraph of his preface to the Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité, Messiaen paraphrases Thomas when he writes,

The angels alone have the privilege of communicating among themselves without language, without conventions, and,
even more marvelously, without having to consider time and space. This is a power that surpasses us completely, an almost terrifying ability of transmission, and Rilke is right in saying: “Every angel is terrible!” One can in fact read in the *Summa theologica* of Thomas Aquinas (in the Book on “The Government of Creatures,” Question 107: “The language of the angels”): “If the angel, by his will, commands his mental concept with a view to manifesting it to another, then immediately the latter takes cognizance of it. In this manner, the angel speaks to another angel.” And further on: “The angelic speech consists in an intellectual operation. Now the angel’s intellectual operation abstracts from time and space. Therefore, neither distinctness of time nor local distance plays any role if one abstracts entirely from time and place.”

Inspired by this unfathomably free and immaterial angelic communication, Messiaen then proceeds to develop his concept of a musical *langage communicable*. Critics reproaching the composer for having failed, insofar as listeners do not report any understanding of what is being thus communicated, seem to miss the point. All they can speak for is human listeners, and these, if we are to believe Thomas, would never understand angelic language either.

The *ST* excerpts Messiaen transcribes in his *langage communicable* all stem from the discussion of the Trinity found in part I, qqs. 27–43. Significantly though, while the choice of quotations in *La Transfiguration* shifts the emphasis from the event exalting the Son toward the Trinity as a whole, the passages the composer selects for the work on the Trinity focus less on the three Persons than specifically on God-Father.

In Movement I of the *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité*, Messiaen transcribes words reflecting on the nature of the Father; the other two Persons of the Trinity are mentioned only with regard to their respective genesis from Him: “As regards the persons proceeding from Himself, the Father is known by paternity and spiration; as principle that has no principle, He is known by not be-
ing from another; and this is precisely the property of innascibility designated by the word ‘unbegotten.’”

Messiaen paraphrases here a statement found in part I of *ST*. Discussing “The person of the Father” in q. 33, Thomas sums up under a. 4 his opinion regarding the way in which the Father’s genesis differs from that of the other two divine Persons: “Thus therefore the Father is known both by paternity and by common spiration, as regards the persons proceeding from Himself. But as the principle not from a principle He is known by the fact that He is not from another; and this belongs to the property of innascibility, signified by the word ‘unbegotten.’”

In its essence, Messiaen’s excerpt refers to the whole of q. 33, which asks whether the Father is the principle or first cause (a. 1), whether the Father is properly signified by this name “Father” (a. 2), whether “Father” in God is said personally before it is said essentially (a. 3), and whether it belongs to the Father alone to be unbegotten (a. 4). Messiaen’s music singles out the crucial word inengendré (unbegotten) by repeating it alone and with utter emphasis in the movement’s coda.

After this first quotation about the nature of the Father and his relation to the other two Persons of the Trinity with regard to their respective genesis, Messiaen turns in Movement III of the *Méditations* to a related aspect, transcribing words that address the nature of the Father with regard to an identity between relation and essence: “La relation réelle en Dieu est réellement identique à l’essence.” The English translation of Thomas’s original wording, the source of this excerpt, found in *ST* I, q. 28, a. 2, reads, “In God, relation is really identical with essence.”

Recalling the explanations Messiaen offered in a series of long conversations turning around this composition, the German organist Almut Rößler fleshes out this all too concise statement.

In God there is no difference between relation (to the other Persons of the Trinity) and essence. We humans may be good
or bad, stupid or wise, we may improve or deteriorate. Not so God: nothing is ever added to Him or subtracted from Him. We humans live in relations with and to one another. God is in Himself and all three Persons of the Trinity are within himself; thus in Him, relation equals essence.\textsuperscript{24}

The last of the three movements containing \textit{ST} transcriptions adds a thought about the nature of the Father and his relation with regard to love. Meditation VII is based on a sentence from the conclusion Thomas offers to a. 2 of q. 37, still within the discussion of the Trinity. Question 37 is explicitly devoted to a deliberation whether the name of the Holy Spirit is “Love”; in a. 2, Thomas asks whether the Father and the Son therefore love each other \textit{by the Holy Spirit}, and he answers essentially: “The Father and the Son love each other and us \textit{by the Holy Spirit}, [which is] Love proceeding.”

It may help to know the context from which this brief sentence is taken. Thomas’s answer to the above-quoted question ends with this distinction:

Since in God “to love” is taken in two ways, essentially and notionally, when it is taken essentially, it means that the Father and the Son love each other not by the Holy Ghost, but by their essence. . . . But when the term Love is taken in a notional sense it means nothing else than “to spirate love”; just as to speak is to produce a word, and to flower is to produce flowers. As therefore we say that a tree flowers by its flower, so do we say that the Father, by the Word or the Son, speaks Himself, and His creatures; and that the Father and the Son love each other and us, by the Holy Ghost, or by Love proceeding. (\textit{ST.} I, q. 37, a. 2)

This last quotation set in Messiaen’s \textit{langage communicable} is the only one in this work to transcend thoughts about the Father in favor of thoughts about the Trinity which gives the cycle its title. As already suggested, the otherwise conspicuous emphasis on the First
Person can be regarded as complementary to the implicit accent on the Trinity (rather than on the exaltation of the Son) discovered in the Thomistic excerpts Messiaen chose for *La Transfiguration*.

The emphasis on the Father within the Trinity continues in the implicit references to *ST* hidden in Messiaen’s carefully labeled musical signifiers. The score contains seven components linked to divine attributes: one each in the second and the second-to-last movements, the other five in the central fifth movement. The labels, considered in the order in which their music emerges, read, “Dieu est saint” (God is holy), “Dieu est immense” (God is immense, a term Messiaen uses to denote a combination of infinite and omnipresent), “Dieu est éternel” (God is eternal), “Dieu est immuable” (God is immutable), “le Père tout puissant–Notre Père” (Father Almighty–Our Father), “Dieu est amour” (God is Love), and “Dieu est simple” (God is simple). Among these seven attributes, one stands out because of its syntactic otherness (as it does not begin with “God is”), because of the different name used for the one being characterized (“Father” instead of “God”), and because of its bipartite structure (rendered all the more striking by the juxtaposition of a presumably awesome and remote almighty being with an intimate relative). Two other attributes are set off by the fact that Messiaen treats them as introduced by the Father but associated most notably with the Son: holiness and love. The remaining four attributes—infinity, eternity, immutability, and simplicity—each have their counterpart in the first part of *ST*.

1. God’s infinity and omnipresence are addressed in qqs. 7 and 8.

   Thomas explains in particular, “To be everywhere primarily and absolutely, is proper to God. . . . For whatever number of places be supposed, even if an infinite number be supposed besides what already exist, it would be necessary that God should be in all of them; for nothing can exist except by Him” (*ST* I, q. 8, a. 4).

2. God’s immutability is next in Thomas’s discussion. “Since God is infinite, comprehending in Himself all the plenitude of
perfection of all being, He cannot acquire anything new, nor extend Himself to anything whereto He was not extended previously. Hence movement in no way belongs to Him” (ST I, q. 9, a. 1).

3. The following topic is God’s eternity: “We reach to the knowledge of eternity by means of time, which is nothing but the numbering of movement by ‘before’ and ‘after’. . . . Now in a thing bereft of movement, which is always the same, there is no before or after. As therefore the idea of time consists in the numbering of before and after in movement; so likewise in the apprehension of the uniformity of what is outside of movement, consists the idea of eternity” (ST I, q. 10, a. 1).

4. God’s simplicity is first discussed already in q. 3 of ST, insofar as it is a central attribute of God. Only what is essentially simple and thus wholly identical with itself is without origin, entirely incorruptible, and thereby divine. Thomas approaches this insight by arguing against all alternatives with the questions: “1. Is God a body?”; “2. Is He composed of matter and form?”; “3. Is there composition of quiddity, essence or nature, and subject in Him?”; “4. Is He composed of essence and existence?”; “5. Is He composed of genus and difference?”; “6. Is He composed of subject and accident?”; “7. Is He in any way composite, or wholly simple?”; and “8. Does He enter into composition with other things?” (Messiaen’s musical response to all these questions, as it were, is a monodic quotation of the Alleluia from the Feast of All Saints.)

Immediately after his discussion of God’s immensity, immutability, and eternity, Thomas returns to the quality of simplicity in the sense of what is undivided: “He is supremely undivided inasmuch as He is divided neither actually nor potentially, by any mode of division; since He is altogether simple” (ST I, q. 11, a. 4).

A final divine quality that is musically signified by means of a development of another attribute could be rephrased as “God is
“triune” (Messiaen labels the motif “Les Trois sont Un”). On this, Thomas quotes Bernard of Clairvaux (De Consideratione V): “Among all things called one, the unity of the Divine Trinity holds the first place.” Even in this purely instrumental composition, Messiaen can thus be shown to integrate very explicit Thomistic thoughts and arguments both verbatim and in musical interpretation.

**Joy, Music, and Truth in Saint François d’Assise**

In his operatic portrayal of his favorite saint, Francis of Assisi, brother of birds and troubadour of Lady Poverty, Messiaen once again includes three different references to texts written by Thomas. Early in Tableau 5, a longer paraphrase excerpted from a liturgical prayer serves the protagonist for his own plea to God. Later in the same scene, a two-line ST quotation is placed in the mouth of God’s Angel, who thereby seems to explain the role of music in the pursuit of (divine) truth. These lines have become particularly famous and are frequently discussed in studies of the opera, and even within the opera, the dying saint later adapts the angelic explanation about the possibility of human access to truth. The third allusion to a Thomistic notion is hidden in the Sermon to the Birds, the climactic piece of Tableau 6, where Francis urges his avian listeners to thank their Creator for the gift of communicating, “like the angels,” without words.

Tableau 5, the central scene of the central act (and, as I argue in detail elsewhere, the very center of the operatic “body” as a whole), 26 finds Francis in prayer, uttering the second of three wishes the audience hears him address to God. The first, “Make me meet a leper, render me capable of loving him,” was uttered at the end of Tableau 2 and fulfilled in Tableau 3; it is the wish for divine assistance with his inner growth as a charitable Christian. The third wish, “Accord me the favor that I may feel in my body that pain which you endured at the moment of your cruel Passion, and in my heart the love that allowed you to accept such a Passion,” is articulated at the very beginning of Act III and fulfilled not long thereafter, still in Tableau 7;
it is the longing to become one with Christ in his love of God and humankind, a love that passes through death on the cross. Here in Tableau 5, having first sung two verses of his Canticle in which he praises God for Brother Sun and Sister Moon, Francis prays, “O eternal God, almighty Father, give me to taste a little of that ineffable feast where, with your Son and the Holy Spirit, you are for your saints the true light, the crown of delights, and perfect happiness.”

As Stefan Keym shows, Messiaen has fashioned this prayer from a text titled “Thanksgiving after Mass,” which Thomas is said to have written in the mid-thirteenth century for the liturgical renewal of the feast of Corpus Christi, instituted by Pope Urban IV. The relevant excerpts from the English version of this thanksgiving prayer read, “Lord, Father all-powerful and ever-living God, I thank You. . . . And I pray that You will lead me, a sinner, to the banquet where You, with your Son and the Holy Spirit, are true and perfect light, total fulfillment, everlasting joy, gladness without end, and perfect happiness to your saints.”

Francis completes his prayer by asking God (in words not stemming from Thomas) to show him “how great is the abundant tenderness that you have reserved for those who fear you.” Primarily by means of this brief addition, Messiaen transforms a prayer of gratitude for the sacrament of the Eucharist into a plea for a foretaste of celestial bliss, thus returning one more time to his favorite topic, the resurrected in their “glorious bodies.”

This central prayer is thus not, like the two others, a plea for assistance with the imitatio Christi but one for a glimpse of the reward promised those who achieve saintliness. It implicitly addresses an issue that is crucial to both Messiaen’s and Thomas’s thinking: the question of the medium in which superhuman messages are communicated. In his organ cycle, Messiaen had developed an answer based on his understanding of what ST teaches about the language of the angels. This led him to the artifice of his langage communicable. In the opera, he has his protagonist return fleetingly to the question but draws a different—and much less intimidating—conclusion. In the
course of his sermon in Tableau 6, Francis reminds the birds of the
grateful properly that you speak without words, like the locution of angels, by
means of music alone.” Here it is music as such that is equated to
angelic speech and, by extension, acknowledged as a means of ac-
cess to celestial bliss.

It helps to regard the answer Francis receives in Tableau 5 in
this light. When the Angel enters onto the scene where Francis has
been praying, he does three things: he cautions that God’s truth is
necessarily inaccessible to humans, explains what role music could
play in mediating this gulf, and then announces that he will now play
some (“celestial”) music: “God dazzles us through excess of Truth.
Music carries us to God through default of Truth. You speak to God
in music: He will answer you in music. Know the joy of the Blessed
by the sweetness of color and melody. And may the secrets of glory
open for you! Hear this music, which suspends life from the ladders
of heaven, hear the music of the invisible.”

The beginning of this passage is a paraphrase of a sentence from
the first part of ST. In q. 1, a. 9, Thomas discusses the function of
imagery in biblical language, asking whether Holy Scripture may
or should use metaphors. His answer prepares the ground for the
explicit statement he offers a little later:

It is befitting Holy Writ to put forward divine and spiritual
truths by means of comparisons with material things. For
God provides for everything according to the capacity of its
nature. Now it is natural to man to attain to intellectual truths
through sensible objects, because all our knowledge originates
from sense. Hence in Holy Writ, spiritual truths are fittingly
taught under the likeness of material things. This is what Dio-
nysius says: “We cannot be enlightened by the divine rays ex-
cept they be hidden within the covering of many sacred veils.”
It is also befitting Holy Writ, which is proposed to all without
distinction of persons . . . , that spiritual truths be expounded
by means of figures taken from corporeal things, in order that
thereby even the simple who are unable by themselves to grasp intellectual things may be able to understand it.

In the first section of part II of *ST*, taking up the issue of figurative and metaphorical approaches to the truth in the context of a discussion of ceremonial precepts, Thomas utters the sentences Messiaen paraphrases:

In the present state of life, we are unable to gaze on the Divine Truth in Itself, and we need the ray of Divine light to shine upon us under the form of certain sensible figures. . . . The things of God are not to be revealed to man except in proportion to his capacity: else he would be in danger of downfall, were he to despise what he cannot grasp. Hence it was more beneficial that the Divine mysteries should be revealed to uncultured people under a veil of figures, that thus they might know them at least implicitly by using those figures to the honor of God. Just as human reason fails to grasp poetical expressions *on account of their being lacking in truth*, so does it fail to grasp Divine things perfectly, *on account of the sublimity of the truth* they contain: and therefore in both cases there is need of signs by means of sensible figures. (*ST* I-II, q. 101, a. 2; emphasis added)

In the *Commentary on the Sentences* (of Peter Lombard), written before *ST*, Thomas expresses the same intention without any explicit reference to ceremonial precepts. In q. 1 a. 5, he reports the objection that poetic artifices may be inappropriate within sacred doctrine because they contain only the minimum of truth. To this objection, Thomas responds, “I say that the poetic science concerns things that cannot be grasped by reason because of a shortage of truth; hence the reason must be seduced by certain likenesses; theology, however, is about things that are above our reason; and so the symbolic mode is common to both, since neither is proportioned to our reason.”

Finally, there is the effect of *éblouissement*—the state of being “dazzled” or “blinded.” The notion is a favorite of Messiaen’s, who uses it
regularly when discussing the spiritual power of stained-glass windows, and so forth, but also to describe more generally anything so overwhelming that it surpasses rational understanding. While the word was in Messiaen's time (and is to this day) an established term in French art-historical discourse, as a figure of speech in religious discourse it has a precursor in Thomistic thought.29

Addressing the question whether God can in fact be known by the human intellect, Thomas compares the effect his unmediated appearance would produce on humans with the state of a bat blinded by the sun: “God, Who is pure act without any admixture of potentiality, is in Himself supremely knowable. But what is supremely knowable in itself, may not be knowable to a particular intellect, on account of the excess of the intelligible object above the intellect; as, for example, the sun, which is supremely visible, cannot be seen by the bat by reason of its excess of light” (ST I, q. 12, a. 1).30

Although it is obvious that in all the passages quoted above, Thomas is referring to figures of (poetic or sacred) speech rather than to modes of expression common in nonverbal media, it certainly befits a composer to interpret the “signs by means of sensible figures” as components contributing to musical signification. For it is Messiaen’s firm conviction that music, even more so than poetry and other art forms, leads to God. In a conversation with Leonardo Pinzauti, he declares, “Music is the art form closest to the expression of faith. . . . It is capable of explaining things, something that so far even mystics and theologians have not been able to do.”31

Correspondingly, the third operatic reference to ST combines Messiaen’s personal interpretation with a recapitulation of central Thomistic nuances. In Tableau 8, Francis lies dying. He has already taken leave of all those he loved (including his favorite birds) and has sung a final verse from his Canticle about those whom the first death finds prepared so that the second death can do them no harm. At this moment, he has a last encounter with the Angel. Having reminded the dying friar of his crucial encounter with the leper (who, thanks to Francis’s love, has died a redeemed man), the An-
gel promises that “in a few moments, you will hear the music of the invisible.” This quotation from the (non-Thomistic) extension of the central declaration in Tableau 5 prompts Francis to a reply suggesting that the explanation heard in the context of the musical “foretaste of heavenly bliss” has become his consolation:

Lord, Lord!—Lord, Lord!—Music and poetry have led me to you:
by image, by symbol, and in default of Truth.
Lord, Lord!—Lord, Lord!—Enlighten me with your presence.
Deliver me, enrapture me, dazzle me forever by your excess of Truth.

Music and poetry have fulfilled their promise by leading the believer, in ways appropriate and accessible to the limited human intellect, as close to God as mortal beings can come. Having reached the point where he is about to shed his bodily self, Francis can exclaim, “Illumine-moi de ta Présence, délivre-moi, enivre-moi, éblouis-moi pour toujours de ton excès de Vérité.” He is now ready for the blinding light, for a deliverance from human limitations, for the overabundance of divine truth that will make him drunk with joy—for the ultimate éblouissement.

Patterns in Messiaen’s Thomistic Adaptations

In all his references to Thomas, Messiaen seems particularly concerned with qualities: he resorts to expressions from ST when he explores God’s qualities (in the last of his Trois petites Liturgies de la présence divine and in three symmetrically placed movements of his organ meditations on the Trinity). He turns to the same source when he ponders the qualities of the resurrected bodies who will one day dwell in God’s presence (in Les Corps glorieux as well as Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum) and on the qualities of the transfigured Jesus (in La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ).
In Messiaen’s opera, two things change in comparison with his earlier works. The focus is for once not on a divine Person, an aspect of Christian teaching, or a bird’s God-praising song, but—at least with regard to the dramatic presentation—on a human being; and the three terms serving as an inner axis of the plot are not, or at least not at first sight, properties of a divine or blessed Person, but “Joy,” “Truth,” and “Music.” All three concepts are initially introduced as forbidding in their intensity and potentially destructive in their demand on human beings’ spiritual resilience. At the moment of first defining what he believes must be his spiritual path, Francis develops an excessively stark and abasing view of “perfect joy” (to be achieved not when seekers accrue merit through good works and spiritual accomplishments, but only when they bear injuries with patience, thinking of the sufferings of the Lord); music, when it is first made explicit among the dramatis personae, causes its sole listener to lose consciousness; and God’s truth, as the Angel warns with a paraphrase from ST, is so abundant that it would overwhelm anyone exposed to it even more than the allegedly mediating music.

In the final tableau, Messiaen finds a way to transform each of these intimidating experiences into their soothing and affirming counterparts. As the dying Francis takes leave of all he has loved, he stresses three comforting aspects of music: the song of his beloved birds, which he had earlier compared to angelic communication; the musical component of his ongoing praise of God (“Sing, little lambs: I will sing, we will sing”); and the fact that music has indeed proven to be his way to God (“Lord! Music and poetry have led me to you”). At the moment of his death, Francis is ready for an unmediated exposure to God’s overwhelming truth. In this way, his last outlook blends the two concepts of “joy” and “truth” in a way that offers a much-needed corrective for the young would-be saint’s overly ascetic definition at the outset of his spiritual path. St. Francis dies, on his lips the word “truth” pronounced in blissful anticipation. A little later, the chorus concludes the opera with the exuberant exclamation: “Joy!!!”
Notes


3. These include musical contemplations on the feasts of the church calendar: *L’Ascension* (The Ascension, for organ or orchestra, 1932/34), *La Nativité du Seigneur* (The Nativity of the Lord, for organ, 1935), *Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus* (Twenty Gazes upon [or Contemplations of] the Infant Jesus, for piano, 1944), *Messe de la Pentecôte* (Pentecostal Mass, for organ, 1950), and *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ* (The Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus Christ, for chorus, orchestra, piano, violoncello, flute, clarinet, and gamelan, 1969); on the Holy Sacrament: *Le banquet céleste* (The Celestial Banquet, for organ, 1928), *Hymne au Saint Sacrement* (Hymn to the Holy Sacrament, for orchestra, 1932), *O sacrum convivium* (O Sacred Banquet, for unaccompanied chorus or soprano and organ, 1937), and *Livre du Saint Sacrement* (Book of the Holy Sacrament, for organ, 1984); on Christ’s Resurrection and the promise of eternal life for his followers: *Les Corps Glorieux* (The Bodies in Glory, for organ, 1939), *Couleurs de la Cité Céleste* (Colors of the Celestial City, for orchestra, piano, and gamelan, 1963), *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum* (And I Await the Resurrection of the Dead, for orchestra, 1964), and *La Ville d’En-haut* (The City on High, for orchestra, piano, and gamelan, 1987); on the end of time: *Apparition de l’Église éternelle* (Vision of the Eternal Church, for organ, 1932), *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* (Quartet for the End of Time, for clarinet, violin, violoncello, and piano, 1941), and *Éclairs sur l’au-delà* (Illuminations of the Beyond, for very large orchestra, 1992); and on the temporal and eternal covenant between the Trinitarian God and His children: *Visions de l’Amen* (Visions of the Amen, for two pianos, 1943) and *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité* (Meditations on the Mystery of the Holy Trinity, for organ, 1969).

4. Cf. *Poèmes pour Mi* (Poems for Mi, for dramatic soprano and piano, 1936), *Chants de terre et de ciel* (Songs of Earth and Heaven, for dramatic soprano and piano, 1938), *Trois petites Liturgies de la présence divine* (Three Little Liturgies of the Divine Presence, for female voices, orchestra, piano, and gamelan, 1944), *Harawi* (for dramatic soprano and piano, 1944), the *Tarantalle Symphony* (for orchestra, piano, and ondes Martenot, 1948), and *Cinq Rechants* (Five Refrain Songs, for twelve mixed voices a cappella, 1948).

5. Compositions exclusively or overwhelmingly devoted to a musical translation of birdsong include *Le Merle noir* (The Blackbird, for flute and piano, 1951), *Réveil des oiseaux* (Awakening of the Birds, for orchestra, piano, and gamelan, 1953), *Oiseaux*
Logos

exotiques (Exotic Birds, for orchestra, piano, and gamelan, 1956), Catalogue d’oiseaux (Catalog of Birds, for piano, 1958), La Fauvette des jardins (The Garden Warbler, for piano, 1970), Des Canyons aux étoiles (From the Canyons to the Stars, for orchestra, piano, French horn, and gamelan, 1974), Petites Esquisses d’oiseaux (Little Bird Sketches, for piano, 1985), and Un Vitrail et des oiseaux (A Stained-glass Window and Birds, for orchestra, piano, and gamelan, 1986).


10. For these claims cf. Guerrino Amelli, D. Thomae Aquinatis de arte musica nunc primum ex codice bibliothecae Universitatis Ticinensis edidit et illustravit (Mediolani, 1886) and San Tommaso d’Aquino poeta e musico eucaristico (Sora, 1924), quoted in Burbach, Studien, 9.

11. The English translation in this and all subsequent quotations from Thomas’s magnum opus is taken from The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas, 2nd and rev. ed., 1920, literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. The text, which has been newly published in 1981 by Christian Classics in a five-volume edition with a total of 3,057 pages, is available online (© 2006 by Kevin Knight) at http://www.newadvent.org/summa/.

12. For a list of references to clarity in the CompleteWorks, see Burbach, Studien 40 n. 4.


15. Messiaen’s discussion of Indian rhythms shows that the “rhythmic signature” can alternatively be explained in a different way. Cf. The Technique of My Musical Language, exx. 28, 62, 311, and 379.

16. More detailed explanations than the ones given by Claude Samuel and in his Erasmus Prize address can be found in his seventy-two-page exposition in the Traité; cf. Volume III, 5–76.

17. The former expression stems from a minor Thomistic treatise, Expositio in Dionysium De divinis nominibus, iv, 5. The statement about the consonance of the “three in one” is taken from Thomas’s Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard, I, 31, q. 3 a. 2.


23. For manifestations of “three-ness” in this movement, cf. the above-mentioned phrase is divided into three segments; its incipit, *quia solus est*, is heard three times with identical melody and rhythm; major portions of the movement are harmonically held together by a B major triad (a three-note chord) ringing through a densely chromatic texture, and so on.


25. When referring to the divine attributes Thomas discusses at the beginning of *ST*, Messiaen inverts the order of “eternity” and “immutability.” For Thomas, eternity is a consequence of God’s immutability (see *ST* I, q. 10, a 3); Messiaen seems to regard it as a precondition.


28. Available online at http://198.62.75.1/wwww1/mcitl/prayers.html (visited in May 2008). Messiaen’s French wording, “Ô Dieu éternel, Père tout puissant, donne-moi de goûter un peu de cet ineffable festin où, avec ton Fils et le Saint Esprit, tu es pour tes Saints la lumière véritable, le comble des délices, et la félicité parfaite,” is even closer to the source, which on p. 108 of Dom Gaspar Lefèbvre’s *Missel vespéral romain* (quotidien) (Lophem lez Bruges: Abbaye de St André, 1923) reads, “Je vous rends grâce, Père Tout-Puissant, Dieu éternel . . . je vous prie enfin de daigner me conduire, tout pécheur que je suis, à cet ineffable festin où, avec votre Fils et le Saint Esprit, vous êtes pour vos Saints la lumière véritable, la pleine satisfaction, la joie éternelle, le comble des délices et la félicité parfaite.” Thomas’s lines in their original Latin, “Gratias tibi ago,” appear as the third portion in a longer prayer in honor of the Eucharist, titled “O quam suavis est, Domine, spiritus tuus,” from which Messiaen also took the text for his 1937 motet *O sacrum convivium*.


30. The composer’s inspiration to refer to St. Francis’s famous contemporary in his opera with lines of this content may stem from a book by Father Louis Antoine
that he mentions as influential for his interpretation of the story (cf. Father Louis Antoine, *Lire François d’Assise* [Paris: Éditions Franciscaines, 1967], 73). In a study on the limits of articulation in religious experience, the German theologian Eugen Biser seems to offer another paraphrase of the attitude Messiaen excerpted from Thomas. Biser affirms that poetry and theology share the metaphorical dimension, but "poetry speaks in pictures owing to the fugacity of its subject matter, theology owing to its abundance" (cf. E. Biser, *Theologische Sprachtheorie und Hermeneutik* [Munich: Kösel, 1970], 77).