Incarnation and Eschaton in Olivier Messiaen’s *Le Verbe*

When asked about the sorts of impressions that French composer Olivier Messiaen (1908–92) wished to communicate in composing, and the impressions he wanted to convey to those who listened to his work, he replied that “the first idea I wanted to express, the most important, is the existence of the truths of the Catholic faith. . . . The illumination of the theological truths of the Catholic faith is the first aspect of my work, the noblest, and no doubt the most useful and most valuable—perhaps the only one I won’t regret at the hour of my death.”¹ One need only view Paul Festa’s independent film, *Apparition of the Eternal Church*, to recognize that Messiaen’s music successfully accomplishes his mission. In the film, Ron Gallman, then director of education for the San Francisco Symphony and a featured voice in Festa’s book, *Oh My God: Messiaen in the Ear of the Unbeliever*,² states, while listening to Messiaen’s composition *Apparition de l’Église Éternelle*, “It evokes, on the one hand, something very earthy, and earthly, yet even as deep as it is, it also in a strange way evokes something celestial.”³ As the film further demonstrates, Gallman is by no means alone in his impressions. In an essay treating Messiaen’s 1969 *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte Trinité*, Ingolf
Dalferth suggests that the “rich musical tapestry full of symbolic meaning” that is present in the music is not immediately accessible to the listener. What we hear is magnificent music, not a musical treatise on (natural) theology. The listener does not hear the elaborate symbolic structures that underlie this music. It is beautiful, it moves the heart and it creates feelings that may be described as religious. But it does not convey the theological information that has gone into its composition, and only those who have studied its “grammar” will actually realize what has gone into the music and what is going on in it.4

Few studies, however, have been directed toward the theological content of Messiaen’s work, and as such, its single-most important element, Messiaen’s theological compositional intent, remains underappreciated by those who hear and perform it.5 The theological study of one of Messiaen’s scores, however, is a rather daunting undertaking, and not necessarily one for which most musicians are readily trained. What follows in this article, therefore, is an attempt to render the theology and music of one work in such a way that on the one hand, musicians might better understand what Messiaen was attempting to accomplish in his composition, and on the other hand, that theologians might better understand how Messiaen accomplished his task.6

That work is *Le Verbe*, a musical essay on the Incarnation, Christology, and eschatology, and which serves as the fourth meditation from Messiaen’s 1935 organ composition, *La Nativité du Seigneur: Neuf Méditations pour Orgue.*

As is the case with the majority of Messiaen’s published organ compositions, *Le Verbe* is introduced by a scripturally based preface: “The Lord said to me: You are my Son. From his bosom, before the dawn existed, he engendered me. I am the Image of the goodness of God, I am the Word of life, from the beginning” (Ps 2, Ps 109, Wis 7, and 1 Jn).7 In general, the prefatory texts are attempts by Messiaen to direct the listener and performer not just through the performance of the piece, but as John Milsom has suggested, “through the music towards a deeper communion with the divine.”8
The preface for *Le Verbe* is no exception. The music attempts to describe the relationship of Christ, the Word, to the Father as well as to the world into which the Word enters. Messiaen articulated this belief well:

Christ appeared in order to lead us from the visible to love of the invisible. Christ the man can be represented, not Christ the God. God is not representable. He is not even expressible. When we say, “God is eternal,” do we think about the significance of these words? “God is eternal” signifies not only that he will never end, but that he never had any beginning. Here is where temporal notions of “before” and “after” encumber us. To conceive of something without a beginning absolutely overwhelms us, we who have begun, first, in our mother’s womb, then in our earthly life. The same goes for other divine attributes. Perhaps the ancient Israelites were right when they forbade the name of Yahweh to be spoken. . . . I’m not a theorist only a believer, a believer dazzled by the infinity of God.9

In spoken word, Messiaen attempts to profess his understanding of the relationship between the members of the Trinity, particularly Father and Son, and the created world. Christ enters the created order from the realm of the inexpressible in order to lead creation back to its creator. The way in which Christ accomplishes this is through rendering God’s love and goodness visible to the created order. The compositional techniques employed in *Le Verbe* illustrate that very same message.

*Le Verbe* is divided into two sections of unequal length and duration. Messiaen’s own recorded performance of the work lasts thirteen minutes and forty-two seconds. The first section of the piece, forty-seven measures long, which displays the greater degree of diversity of structural and compositional technique, lasts four minutes and eleven seconds.10 Structurally, this first section of the piece can be divided into three portions: \((a a b) (a a a' b) (c d b')\).11 The
second section of the piece requires over twice as much time to play as the first section despite its being only twenty measures in length. It was composed in the form of a sequence, “a canticle of a popular style. Each period [or phrase] in it is heard twice, either consecutively or alternately; all end on the same note.” In order to come to an understanding of Messiaen’s intended message, both sections of the piece including the portions within them as well as the individual musical statements must be analyzed.

Deum de Deo, lumen de lumine, Deum verum de Deo vero . . .
Qui propter nos homines et propter nostram salutem
descendit de caelis

The first portion, (a a b) is virtually identical to the second portion (a a' a b). The example below provides a single a and b statement (see Figure 1). Briefly, a consists of a single cluster chord that grounds an enlarged appoggiatura (a series of ornamental notes that

![Figure 1](image-url)
incarnation and eschaton in messiaen’s \textit{Le Verbe} 

Once the appoggiatura has been concluded, the entire chord is first lowered by one whole tone, and then raised by one whole tone twice. This two bar passage is then repeated. Then, in $b$, the final chord from $a$ is inverted three times and sustained to support the lengthy pedal passage.

In the $a a b$ and $a a a' b$ portions the first musical element that demands attention is harmony. For Messiaen, harmony, provided in \textit{Le Verbe} through the various chords, was essential, because chords very literally provided color. Messiaen possessed colored-hearing synaesthesia; consequently, “chords are expressed in terms of colours for me. . . . I’m convinced that one can convey this to the listening public.”\textsuperscript{15} Color is significant as it indicates the divine presence:

\begin{quote}
God is beyond words, thoughts, concepts, beyond our earth and our sun, beyond the thousands of stars which circle around us, above and beyond time and space, beyond all these things which are somehow linked to him. He alone knows Himself by His Word, incarnate in Jesus Christ. And when musical painting, colored music, sound-color magnify it by bedazzlement, they participate in this fine praise of the \textit{Gloria} which speaks to God and to Christ: “Only Thou art Holy, Thou alone art the Most-High!”\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

Messiaen described the chords in $a$ and $b$ as being “white with gold reflections;”\textsuperscript{17} harmonically, these are all chords on the dominant (fifth of the scale), and the ones used here contain all the notes of the major scale. The chord is only completed with the concluding note of the “melodic” material. For traditional Western musical sensibilities, a chord consisting of all the notes of a scale is hardly standard, and it calls into question the entire notion of harmony and dissonance. Messiaen insists, however, in \textit{The Technique of My Musical Language}, that they do indicate a coherent harmony, should one have ears to hear it. More substantially, however, chords on the dominant are, by their nature, intended to have a resolution.\textsuperscript{18} In \textit{Le Verbe}, how-
ever, they do not. Rather, when a chord on the dominant does move, it is transposed (in the second measure of \(a\)) and inverted (in the first two measures of \(b\)). Thus, simply through a sort of kaleidoscopic treatment of a single chord, Messiaen has composed a “multicolor work, bringing forth an effect of a stained-glass window”:  

Stained glass is one of the most wonderful creations of man. You are overwhelmed. And I think this is the beginning of Paradise, because in Paradise we are overwhelmed. We won’t understand God, but we will begin to see Him a little... Real music, beautiful music—you can listen to it without understanding it: you don’t need to have studied harmony or orchestration. You must feel it. And here, also, one is overwhelmed by the shock of the sound.

The melodic content of \(a\) \(a\) \(b\) consists of a series of two enlarged appoggiaturas, which complement and ultimately complete the accompanying chords on the dominant: the first in the upper voice, consisting of sixteen notes; the second in the pedal voice, consisting of fourteen notes. In general, ornaments, such as appoggiaturas, function for Messiaen as vital dissonance in his tonal system. Though the notes of the appoggiatura do not belong, properly, to the tonal system established by the chord, “they are indispensable to the expressive and contrapuntal life of music; let us preserve them by enlarging them.” The first melodic appoggiatura resolves to the sixth (E) of the chord on the dominant (G). This resolution of the foreign notes, however, is no real resolution for Messiaen, since the sixth is yet another foreign note of the chord. Messiaen described the added note, and particularly the added sixth, as having “a character of intrusion, of supplement: the bee in the flower!” The musical effect of \(a\), then, is of unresolved chords supporting a highlighted foreign ornament that ultimately resolves to another highlighted foreign note. Thus \(a\) rests upon a foundation that is intrinsically unstable. Indeed, this is the crux of Paul Griffiths’s argument, when he suggests that the musical function of \(a\) is simply
to prepare for $b$: it “precipitates a fortissimo descent in the pedals, and that is all.” According to Messiaen, however, $b$ is yet another appoggiatura leading to the final tone of the pedal passage, the foundational note of the chord on the dominant, G. As such, it therefore is clear that only in the final note of this series of two appoggiaturas that any resolution occurs; the final G of the pedal line is the single note toward which all of the music in the previous eleven measures has been directed, if one may indeed call the intentional indirection of the unresolved chords on the dominant and the appoggiaturas “direction.” In sum, in the first portion of Le Verbe, which Messiaen performs in fifty-nine seconds, the only note that properly belongs to the tonal system that is being established is first heard fifty-three seconds into the work—all the rest are preparatory in one fashion or another; they are both native and alien to the harmonic structure of the work. Does this not describe the very essence of the relationship between the heavenly and created orders? Just as with the note that properly belongs to the harmonic structure, the limited capacities of humanity can recognize only a tiny portion of the infinite grandeur and workings of God, and this can occur only when God chooses to reveal himself to the world as the fully human Word. Pope Pius XII would emphatically endorse such a position in Humani generis:

The truths that concern the relations between God and man wholly transcend the visible order of things. . . . The human mind, in its turn, is hampered in the attaining of such truths, not only by the impact of the senses and the imagination, but also by disordered appetites which are the consequences of original sin. So it happens that men in such matters easily persuade themselves that what they would not like to be true is false or at least doubtful.

Indeed, much activity occurs beyond the limitations of human vision. The decorative appoggiaturas, named as ornamental and unstable within the human realm represented by the tonal system,
represent the heart of the true substance of the divine life, which finds tangible expression in the descent of the Word into the world, symbolized through the pedal line. Even here, the Word, which becomes flesh, does so out of a response to the divine life. But furthermore, the arrival of the Word in the world is not the purpose of the Incarnation. Rather, the musical descent of the Word, which Messiaen described as suggesting “the terrible fortissimo of the long trumpets of Michelangelo’s Last Judgment,” \(^{29}\) is intended to draw the created world back to its creator in the eschaton.\(^{30}\) The desire of the Trinitarian Godhead for unity with humanity is ably expressed in the threefold usage of \(b\) in the first section of \(Le Verbe\).

\(Et ex Patre natum ante omnia saecula . . . Genitum, non factum, consubstantialem Patri: per quem omnia facta sunt . . . Et iterum venturas est cum Gloria, iudicare vivos et mortuos: cuius regni non erit finis\)

While the first two \(b\) statements occur within the \(a\ a\ b\) pattern, the final statement of \(b\) is preceded by two new statements, \(c\) and \(d\). Statement \(c\) consists of five measures (see Figure 2). In the first three measures Messiaen has composed his “first rhythmic canon in his new rhythmic style.”\(^{31}\) A descending succession of chords in the right hand establishes the rhythmic pattern; the rhythm is repeated in the ascending succession of chords in the left hand, following a quarter beat rest. Only the rhythm is canonic; the notes that are played by one hand are independent of the notes played by the other. What is thus created is a pattern in which the voices are clearly distinguishable in terms of their pitches and the sound space that they occupy. And yet, because of their precise rhythmic equality, they can be said to present a sort of mirror image of each other. In the second half of \(c\), Messiaen employs the overlay of a rhythm with its retrograde; and then he shortens those rhythms. The basic rhythm of the upper voice is a sixteenth followed by a quarter—this rhythm is played twice in succession. The rhythm of the retro-
grade, or “reading from right to left what normally ought to be read from left to right,” is two eighth notes (the rhythmic equivalent to a quarter note) followed by a sixteenth. These rhythms are shortened by the elimination of the final sixteenth beat in each voice: the upper rhythm is a sixteenth followed by a dotted eighth; the lower rhythm is two eighth notes. This pattern is repeated a total of five times. In five brief measures, Messiaen has composed a work that underscores a sort of Logos Christology. First, in the rhythmic canon, the incarnate Word (the repeated rhythm) is the clearly distinguishable mirror image of the Father (the original rhythm). In order to depict this, the patterns are distinctly separable. Clearly, however, the theological difficulty embedded in the music here is that the representation of the Word is not truly separable from the representation of the Father. The second half of c addresses this issue by eliminating the separation necessary for a canon. The differentiation between Father and Word is no longer separation in time, but instead, the retrograde rhythm makes the latter a literal reflection of the former.

The nine measures comprising d represent another first in Mes-

![Figure 2.](image-url)
siaen’s composition: the superimposition of two rhythms of unequal length (see Figure 3). The upper voice (U), playing single notes at a time, repeats a four note pattern of two dotted eighth notes followed by two eighth notes, for a total duration equal to ten sixteenth beats. The lower voice (L) repeats a series of six chords that lasts a total of nine sixteenth beats. Since each pattern begins again immediately upon its completion (i.e., U$_2$, L$_2$, L$_3$), the distance between the beginning of each pattern must gradually increase: “It will require nine repetitions of the upper rhythm and ten repetitions of the lower rhythm to find again the combination of departure.” The pattern ends immediately before the point at which the beginning of the rhythmic cycles would reconnect, thus rendering it incomplete.

Michael Linton credits Messiaen with the rediscovery of the “medieval device called ‘isorhythm’ . . . except for medievalists, few musicians knew of the device until the 1950s. By avoiding metrically defined phrases and patterns of stressed and unstressed beats, these isorhythmic ‘wheels within wheels’ destroyed any sense of meter, and thus created a piece of music outside of ‘time.’” Thus, the bar lines that are written into the score are merely visual aids to the performer, for the actual pulse transcends a straightforward conception of time. Despite the clear compositional order here, the music sounds chaotic.

Furthermore, beyond the use of the isorhythm in portion $d$ as a whole, both upper and lower voices use very structured Hindu rhythms, deci-tâlas—turangalîla (no. 33) as the upper rhythm and sârasa (no. 103) as the lower—with substantial theological consequence. In the discovery of a table of 120 deci-tâlas codified in the thirteenth century, Messiaen encountered “the summit of Hindu and human rhythmic creation,” containing, as they did, “religious, philosophical, and cosmic symbols.” By means of illustration, Messiaen saw in this turangalîla pattern the principle of rhythmic “diminution by withdrawal of the dot” (in the U pattern, compare the first two notes with the last two notes). The underlying formula involves two notes of equal value (dotted eighth notes); by
diminishing those values in the repetition of the formula, the pattern suggests the human composer’s necessary distortion of divine perfection. The Incarnation of the Word, where divine and human become one person, is thus heard in d: the superimposition of the rhythmic patterns indicates the divine, while the rhythmic patterns themselves represent the human. It is in the Word that the two have become inextricably linked. Siglind Bruhn, in an extensive semiological study of Messiaen’s music, concludes that “rhythmic organizations based on—or emphasizing the departure from—symmetry embody exemplars of closed circuitry that have their root in Messiaen’s faith: there is only one eternal God and only one, infinitely continuous reality with, ultimately, no preferred direction: eternity.” The weaving of asymmetrical material into a symmetrical whole in *Le Verbe* represents a clear demonstration of Bruhn’s claim. Furthermore, it contributes to a coherent theological narrative in the music.

Concluding the first section of *Le Verbe* is a final, expanded, b statement, in which the melodic appoggiatura is extended by the addition of one measure at the beginning of the pattern: the descending pattern begins one full octave higher than usual, and concludes as it usually does. The insertion of the c and d in between a’ and b’ might be understood in a manner similar to a biblical *inclusio*: the Incarnation of the Word, rendered present in c and d, is vitally linked to the Word’s invitation to humanity to respond to God just as he himself has done.

Figure 3.
Et unam sanctam catholicam et apostolicam Ecclesiam . . .

The second section of *Le Verbe*, while considerably lengthier, is formally and technically less complex. According to Messiaen’s own description, it comprises “a long cornet solo—which at the same time has its origins in the sequences of plainchant through its divisions, in Hindu rāgas through its character, in ornamented chorales of Bach through the arabesques which dominate the solemn melody—which mixes together, rather strangely, the ‘second mode of limited transposition,’ chromatic or tonal harmonies, and the seventh mode of plainchant.”

Messiaen’s claim to have based this section on a plainchant form can be made more precise. Elsewhere Messiaen indicated that he composed this section in the style of a sequence: “In *Le Verbe* I used a very special form which . . . holds to the sequence through its divisions.” Historically, the sequence has largely been understood as a textual and musical addition to an Alleluia. Might not the use of the sequence form in *Le Verbe* be appropriately understood as representing in some measure the Church’s hymnic response to the Incarnation of the Word? The structure lends itself to some degree of accessibility, namely through the reliance on a familiar musical form.

More significantly, perhaps, Robert Sherlaw Johnson provided the intriguing and compelling suggestion that the second section of *Le Verbe* is not simply a sequence in formal construction, but that “both the form and the melodic contour of his melody are derived from *Victimae paschali laudes*—the Sequence for the Mass of Easter Sunday” (see Figure 4). Few scholars, however, have embraced Johnson’s hypothesis. Griffiths, for example, hesitatingly concurs that the second section “touches on” the Easter sequence, but indicates that if it is indeed present, it is “so altered that the model is barely recognizable.” This point deserves much more examination, both from a musicological and theological perspective.
Messiaen described the melodic line in this section of *Le Verbe* as being based on “the ornamented chorales of J. S. Bach through its expressive and austere arabesques which overload the solemn, long, slow melody.” If Messiaen is, indeed, using the Easter sequence as the basis for his melodic line, it would seem that some comparison between *Le Verbe* and an ornamental Bach chorale setting is warranted. The first three phrases (nine measures) of *Victimae paschali laudes* in *Le Verbe* contain fifty-three added notes: three added notes in the first phrase, as seen above; fifteen added notes in the second phrase, as seen above; and thirty-five added notes in the third phrase, which is musical a restatement of the second phrase. Alternatively, the J. S. Bach chorale, *O Mensch, bewein’ dein’ Sünde groß*, BWV 622, commonly regarded as the most popular of Bach’s organ chorales, contains fifty-three added notes directly written into the first three phrases, as well as two mordents (two added notes each) and eight trills (which vary in the number of notes played according to the performer). Since Messiaen wrote out all ornamentation explicitly, rather than marking trills, executed at the performer’s liberty, it is clear that, at least in the first three phrases of each piece, the Bach composition is far more elaborately ornamented than is *Le Verbe*. In-
deed, further examination of *Le Verbe* does not prohibit locating the *Victimae paschali laudes* chant base amidst the added notes.

Part of the difficulty in locating the *cantus firmus*, however, is that as the section continues the number of added notes increases, thereby “overloading” the chant rather substantially. This move is entirely consistent with Bach’s method of treating the melody in ornamental chorales. As Russell Stinson has noted, “in the ornamental chorale [the melody] is sometimes decorated almost beyond recognition. The appeal of the ornamental chorale, then, lies not in the straightforward audibility of the chorale but in its extreme elaboration.”

Contributing further to the difficulty of locating the chant melody is the transposition of the chant melody into Messiaen’s second mode of “limited transposition.” These modes of limited transposition are symmetrical scales of notes, which could only be transposed chromatically a certain number of times before the pattern is repeated. These structured modes, which could replace standard Western major and minor scales in Messiaen’s work, “resonated differently than the traditional scales . . . [and] were not bound by the same relationships.” Nevertheless, they were indeed bound by a relationship that suggests a high degree of serialization.

The familiar melody of the model, even at the clear level of “quotation” provided in the first two measures of the second section is thus presented in a fundamentally unfamiliar way. And even further, while the ornamentation of the melody that has been transposed into a new mode represents two of the principal ways in which the original melody is changed into something new, Messiaen uses at least three other compositional techniques described in *Technique* to alter the melodic line. First, he uses added-value rhythms to transform original rhythms with the occasional addition of extra time, typically by means of an additional half-value—the dot (marked “+” in Figure 4 above). Second, Messiaen alters the melodic line through the elimination of melodic notes (marked “–” in Figure 4 above). While this technique is far more difficult to identify, particularly in such an elaborately ornamented setting, it appears to have been used
at least once in a readily observable place. The additional presence of a D at the beginning of the fourth measure of the second section might be expected, in order to correspond to the first syllable of the first word in the phrase “Christus innocens Patri reconciliavit peccatores.” This note, however, is missing in all three statements of the phrase within *Le Verbe*. Third, Messiaen adds the “perfect interval” of the tritone, to the melodic line, in order to emphasize the note following the added tone (marked “*” in Figure 4 above). When all of this data is put together, it seems rather likely that Messiaen intentionally used the Easter sequence in this composition. But given the general hesitation of musicologists to affirm such a claim, it will be fruitful to turn towards a theological argument.

Johnson, whose original suggestion surrounding the presence of *Victimae paschali laudes* in *Le Verbe* appears to be correct, regards Messiaen’s use of this sequence as merely functional: “The Sequence which Messiaen has taken as his model for *Le Verbe* is an early example of the form and has nothing to do with the Nativity.” Yet given Messiaen’s decided theological intentionality in the first section of this piece, Johnson’s assertion might be questioned. Certainly, in looking at the more contemporary scholarship of Raymond Brown surrounding the Christmas stories, it is reasonable to think that there is a theological relationship between the stories of the Incarnation and the passion and Resurrection: “The story of Jesus’ conception is . . . the vehicle of the good news of salvation; in short, it is gospel . . . the process was literally an interpretative one of reading back later insights into the birth stories, and those later insights involved an adult Christ who had died and risen.” Brown elsewhere summarizes that “the Christmas crib lies under the shadow of the cross.”

Can one, however, be sure that Messiaen recognized this relationship, explicated so convincingly over forty years after the composition of *La Nativité*? For such an answer one should look to writings with which Messiaen was known to be familiar. Messiaen acknowledged being influenced by one particular book by Dom Columba
Marmion, the 1919 *Le Christ dans ses mystères*: "I have discovered a magnificent book . . . each mystery of Christ is analysed with regard to the services of the liturgical year. . . . Each mystery has its individual beauty, its particular splendor, like its own grace." Jean Rodolphe Kars indicates that this text, “recommended to him by his confessor,” made its influence felt in Messiaen’s liturgical ministry early in his career, and it is within that text that Marmion makes a claim foreshadowing that of Brown: “It is from the Crib that He inaugurates this life of suffering such as He willed to live for our salvation, this life of which the term is at Golgotha, and that, in destroying sin, is to restore to us the friendship of His Father. The Crib is certainly only the first stage, but it radically contains all the others.” Marmion’s argument concerning the significance of the cross for the Incarnation is substantial, constituting the fourth of five points in the chapter; Messiaen could not have missed it. Perhaps it should not be so surprising, then, that Messiaen’s musical essay on the salvation offered by the Incarnation of the Word and the relationship between heaven and earth should explicitly turn to the expression, par excellence, of redemption by the Resurrection. For both Marmion and Messiaen, Easter has everything to do with Christmas, and vice versa. It should come as no surprise, then, that *Victimae paschali laudes* would find its way into Messiaen’s musical essay on the Incarnation of the Word. Far from being an event about a little baby, the manger is used to proclaim the whole Gospel of life.

This having been said, the listener’s recognition of the chant melody is further challenged by Messiaen’s accompanying harmonies. While one might expect Messiaen’s typical, glistening chords to appear, the composer instead uses harmonies that are individually rather conventional. Their “progression,” however, is far more unique—the first phrase is played over the following succession: C major, E minor, F minor with an added sixth, A-flat minor with an added sixth, and E minor. The result is twofold. First, the “progression” of chords ceases functioning as if directed toward a harmonic conclusion—it ceases to be linear, like the vast majority of West-
ern music.\textsuperscript{64} Instead, the harmonic progression is constructed to “remain tonally ambiguous,” that is, lacking a harmonic center.\textsuperscript{65} In doing so, Messiaen’s use of harmony thereby creates a sense of unease in the listener who is accustomed to the harmonic structure and directionality of the Western musical tradition. Building on the first, the second result is that the ornamented chant melody is permitted to sing clearly and uniquely, unrivalled by the harmonic world that surrounds it. While the harmonies do not establish a tonal center, the melody does, returning time and time again at the end of individual phrases to the root note of the melody’s key, G. As Luchese has argued, “The tonal center, G, is never in question because it is strongly established within the melody. The various harmonies at the ends of each phrase serve as changing coloration for each melodic G. It is only the final G at the conclusion of the movement that is ‘harmonized’ by a G major triad.”\textsuperscript{66} Ultimately, the relationship between harmony and melody points to a thoroughly appropriate treatment of the messianic role of the Word in the world: the salvation offered by Christ at once conflicts with the standards imposed by the world;\textsuperscript{67} and yet, at the same time, the community of faith seeks to sing its hymn of praise to God for this gift, despite the perception of harmonic clash. Ultimately, what the second section of \textit{Le Verbe} suggests is that the Word calls the world to conversion in accordance with the irresistible love song of the divine. The Incarnation foreshadows the paschal mystery, and the proper human response to the divine offer of salvation is participation in the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and return of Christ.

The entirety of \textit{Le Verbe} can be considered, therefore, to have as its theological and musical focus the marrying of the largely intangible divine with the tangible human in the person of the Word, Jesus Christ, for the purpose of redeeming humanity through death and resurrection, and restoring the created order to communion with the creator in the eschaton. Messiaen skillfully uses elements of musical language such as chord color, the enlargement of foreign
notes, the resolution and unresolution of phrases, rhythm, patterns, melodic development, and thematic juxtaposition to communicate his theological vision. Highlighting once again Dalferth’s insight, when one listens to Messiaen, one does not hear “the theological information that has gone into its composition, and only those who have studied its ‘grammar’ will actually realize what has gone into the music and what is going on in it.”68 Rather, when one listens to Messiaen, one hears the music that has the power to communicate something beyond itself. The challenge that lies at the hands and feet of the performer is to mediate such musical communication effectively, which itself requires understanding something of the composer’s intent in writing the piece. By doing so, the performer furthers Messiaen’s evangelical intent, by allying themselves not only to the literally written score, but also to the spirit of the composition. And by furthering Messiaen’s evangelical intent, which springs from the evangelical mission of the Church itself, the performer becomes an inspired interpreter of the incarnate and eschatological Word.

Notes

5. Attention to Messiaen’s work from a theological perspective has certainly increased in the recent past; the October 2007 conference at Boston University, Messiaen the Theologian, the September 2008 conference at Southern Methodist University, Olivier Messiaen: The Musician as Theologian are foremost in this regard. The web catalog entry for the forthcoming book based on the Boston University conference, Messiaen the Theologian (Ashgate, 2010), notes that “the theological component of his music has so far been neglected and continues to provide a serious impediment for some of his audience” (http://www.ashgate.com/default.aspx?page=637&calctitle=1

7. Psalm 2:7: “I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you’” (NRSV); Psalm 109(110):3: “Yours is princely power from the day of your birth. In holy splendor before the daystar, like the dew I begot you” (NAB); Wisdom 7:26: “For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness” (NRSV); 1 John 1:1: “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life” (NRSV). The specific citations are noted in Clyde Barrington Holloway, “The Organ Works of Olivier Messiaen and Their Importance in his Total Oeuvre,” (SMD diss., Union Theological Seminary, 1974), 495.


10. Olivier Messiaen, Messiaen: Par lui-même, Olivier Messiaen, EMI Classics compact disc CDZD 7 67401 2. This reissued collection was originally recorded in 1957.


18. Messiaen, Technique, 50.


23. Ibid., 47.


   The final G is highlighted in two ways. First, Messiaen inserted a C#, harmonically a tritone, or an interval consisting of three whole tones, which, he notes in *Technique*, is perceived “in the resonance” of the original tone by “a very fine ear” (47). The tritone “has been regarded as a dissonance since the Middle Ages, when it was nicknamed the *diabolus in musica*, and was the object of prohibitions by theorists” (“Tritone,” *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music*, ed. Don Michael Randel [Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986]). Messiaen was particularly fond of it because it divided the octave equally in half, and was, therefore, neutral. In fact, he described it as being “the loveliest, calmest, and mildest interval.” Messiaen, cited in Siglund Bruhn, “Religious Symbolism in the Music of Olivier Messiaen,” *American Journal of Semiotics* 13 (1997), 287. Wilfrid Mellers has argued that Messiaen’s later use of the tritone in his *Cinq rechants* song cycle “hints at Messiaen’s crucial position in the story of Europe. The tritones from which Wagner’s Tristan had yearned to be released have become, monodically, a positive, as the Flesh becomes Word, to complement the Word’s becoming Flesh. . . . Tristan no longer needs to die in order to attain the metamorphosis of flesh into spirit.” Wilfred Mellers, “Mysticism and Theology,” in Peter Hill, ed., *The Messiaen Companion* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1995), 227–28.

   Second, Messiaen utilizes rhythmic preparation to accent the final G. Messiaen indicates that the proper length of the C# should have been a sixteenth note (cf. Olivier Messiaen, *Technique de mon Langage Musical: Exemples Musicaux*, vol. 2 [Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1944], example 19), but instead he tripled the value of the note, rendering it a dotted eighth note. Had it not been altered, he argued, “it would thus have lost force, grandeur, and serenity” (Messiaen, *Technique*, 17).

27. The relationship of the final G to the appoggiaturas is seen in greater clarity when the entirety of the first part of the piece is considered: the first part of the piece, as previously noted, lasts four minutes and eleven seconds in Messiaen’s performance—the only essential note is played for only twenty-one seconds.
44. One worthy exception to this claim is Diane Luchese. In her doctoral dissertation, “Olivier Messiaen’s Slow Music: Glimpses of Eternity in Time” (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1998), she notes that both “the melodic contour and the form of the slow section . . . are derived from *Victimae paschali*” (101), and she provides a helpful table that presents the degree to which each of the phrases of the chant original has been expanded.
47. Russell Stinson, *Bach: The Orgelbüchlein* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), 89: “This Passiontide chorale, which Bach set in the *Orgelbüchlein* as an ornamental chorale, is probably the most beloved piece in the collection—and one of Bach’s most acclaimed organ chorales altogether. Widor is said to have found it ‘the finest piece of instrumental music written.’”
48. Ibid., 73.
50. Ibid., 58:

Based on our present chromatic system, a tempered system of twelve sounds, these modes are formed of several symmetrical groups, the last note of each group always being common with the first of the following group. At the end of a certain number of chromatic transpositions which varies with each mode, they are no longer transposable, the fourth transposition giving exactly the same
notes as the first, for example, the fifth giving exactly the same notes as the
second, etc. (When I say ‘the same notes’ I speak enharmonically and always ac-
cording to our tempered system, C-sharp being equal to D-flat.) There are three
modes of this type. There are four other modes, transposable six times, and
presenting less interest, for the very reason of their too great number of trans-
positions. All the modes of limited transpositions can be used melodically, and
especially harmonically, melody and harmonies never leaving the notes of the
mode. We spoke in Chapter I of the charm of impossibilities; their impossibility
of transposition makes their strange charm. They are at once in the atmosphere
of several tonalities, without polytonality, the composer being free to give pre-
dominance to one of the tonalities or to leave the tonal impression unsettled.
Their series is closed. It is mathematically impossible to find others of them, at
least in our tempered system of twelve semitones.

Music: Music constructed according to permutations of a group of elements placed
in a certain order or series. . . . It is usually characterized by a high degree of pre-
compositional planning and thus also of compositional determinancy” (741–42).
53. Messiaen, Technique, 18–19.
54. Ibid., 35.
55. Cf. note 26, above. Cf. also Messiaen, Technique, 47.
57. Raymond E. Brown, An Adult Christ at Christmas: Essays on the Three Biblical Christ-
mas Stories (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1978), 8. Cf. also Raymond
E. Brown, The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gosp
Library, Doubleday, 1993): “It is my sincere hope that in this commentary I can
effectively share with the reader my own discovery that the first two chapters of
Matthew and Luke are just as profoundly Christian and as dramatically persuasive as
the last two chapters, the story of the passion and resurrection” (38).
58. Raymond E. Brown, Reading the Gospels with the Church From Christmas Through Easter
59. Dom Columba Marmion, Le Christ dans ses mystères (Namur, Belgium: Abbeye de
Maredsous, 1919). Messiaen also names Marmion as an influence in the Preface to
Technique (8).
60. Messiaen, in Jean-Rodolphe Kars, “The works of Olivier Messiaen and the Catholic
Liturgy” in Olivier Messiaen: Music, Art and Literature, ed. Christopher Dingle and Ni-
61. Ibid., 325.
62. Dom Columba Marmion, Christ in his mysteries, 7th ed., trans. Mother M. St. Thom-
as of Tyburn Convent (London: Sands, 1939), 127.
63. This same point is underscored rather clearly by the presence of two other move-

64. Luchese helpfully summarizes the linear nature characteristic of Western music (“Olivier Messiaen’s Slow Music: Glimpses of Eternity in Time” [PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1998], 66–67): “The Judaeo-Christian conception of time as linear—beginning with the act of creation and moving toward a final apocalyptic event—is reflected in the goal-oriented tonal structures of the Western common practice tradition. This tradition assumes that music is an art of directed motion and is teleological... a chain of events progresses continuously and irreversibly toward some future goal.”

65. Ibid., 117–18: “With tonal ambiguity, the notion of tonal distance is irrelevant. For example, the harmonic progression [evidenced in *Le Verbe*] illustrates a wide variety of chords in a context that is ambiguous in tonal orientation. Ten of twelve possible roots are employed. Among the two omitted roots is G, the tonic.”

66. Ibid., 119.


68. Dalferth, 252.