MÉDITATIONS SUR LE MYSTÈRE DE LA SAINTE TRINITÉ—
MESSIAEN’S COSMIC MUSIKDRAMA

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Introduction and Premise

*Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte Trinité* (hereafter *Méditations*) represents a unique place not only amidst the compositional output of Olivier Messiaen but amidst the entirety of the organ repertoire as well. This nine-movement suite was written at the beginning of the final period of Messiaen’s career as a composer, and it utilizes a blend of prose, improvisation-inspired elements, plainsong, birdsong, and traditional symphonic organ techniques wholly unique to this work. It is also the work for which Messiaen invented his *langage communicable*, a musical alphabet used in this piece to quote passages of St. Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*. The first word of the title, meditations, shines an important light on what Messiaen was doing with *Méditations*. The suite is not only programmatic as most of his works are, but a reflection on the very nature of God. This reflection is achieved through all of the above elements that combine in a reflective manner as Messiaen alternates between them. Simultaneously, the birdsong, improvisatory elements, prose, and traditional organ techniques create a program about God’s love and all of creation.

When Messiaen published *Méditations* in 1973, the foreword of the score marked the first time in an organ work that he went into that level of detail describing his methodology. To be sure, the foreword of *La Nativité* contains discussion of modes of limited transposition and nonretrogradeable rhythms, but the foreword of *Méditations* contains several leitmotifs used throughout the entire suite, a detailed description of Messiaen’s musical alphabet, and before each movement, there is lengthy prose describing the theological mystery on which Messiaen is musically meditating. On account of those leitmotifs and the quasi-narrative structure of the prose, I will analyze the entire work as a cosmic *Musikdrama*, tracing the Wagnerian influences on the work as a whole, as can be partially seen in those leitmotifs and in the unity of music and
prose for each movement. Additionally, the leitmotifs provide short motives for an improvisatory style of writing, thus reflecting the origin of the Méditations as a series of improvisations. This origin will also inform my analysis of Messiaen’s marriage of music, theology, and text in this suite.

The combination of these two influences (Wagner and improvisation) led to an organ work that occupies a unique place in Messiaen’s œuvre, a sort of halfway point between the earlier organ suites such as La Nativité and Les Corps Glorieux and his final two-hour organ suite Livre du Saint Sacrement. What I mean by “half way point” is that Méditations uses leitmotifs and textual influences while still having one foot firmly in the symphonic organ world of Widor and Vierne, of which La Nativité and Les Corps Glorieux were continuations. While those earlier suites have theological influences and motifs to musically represent those influences, they are composed in a more traditional style of French organ writing. Méditations freely floats from motif to motif, and there is unquestionably an improvisatory influence following in the footsteps of Tournemire in that regard. Méditations, having a collection of pieces driven by theological ideas instead of more traditional forms, makes for a new type of programmatic work.

The program of Méditations, from the opening movement when God the Father sets the stars in order out of nothing to the final pages of birdsong that end the ninth movement, tells a story of creation and redemption all born out of love. Messiaen deeply believed in the notion that God is Love, which was a large part of his admiration for Tristan und Isolde and its expression of unrequitable love that can only be fulfilled in death, which Wagner’s motifs beautifully convey. Like Wagner’s musical portrayal of Tristan and Isolde’s love, Messiaen’s attempt to musically convey the mystery of the Holy Trinity utilizes music to represent something sacred
and supernatural. A potent link between these two pieces is formed, and it is one I will explore in depth.
Chapter I: Messiaen, Wagner, and Death

The premiere of Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* in 1865 marked an unprecedented approach in its handling of music and subject matter. This *Musikdrama* represented a marriage of sacred and secular, an intertwining of emotional and physical love. According to Eric Chafe, “More than any other work in in the Western musical canon, *Tristan* embodies a vision of human existence in which the tragic and ecstatic are interwoven, a vision encompassing much that had formerly been the province of religion and that its author now proclaimed the domain of art.”1 The merging of religion and art is something that Messiaen did throughout his entire career as a composer and organist. From his first work for organ, *Le Banquet Céleste*, to *Livre du Saint Sacrament*—the two-hour final suite for organ—religion played an integral part in Messiaen’s art. Even in Messiaen’s “secular” middle period of serialism, religion still played an integral role as is demonstrated in the Biblical quotes that precede movements in the *Livre d’Orgue*.

Focusing specifically on *Tristan und Isolde*, the marriage of secular and sacred love is something that Messiaen explored in *Poèmes pour mi*, the *Harawi* song cycle, *Turangalîla-Symphonie*, and *Cinq rechants*. The last three of these works, all from the 1940s, form a trilogy that Messiaen referred to as the “Tristan trilogy,” not only for their focus on love, but also their preoccupation with death as the fulfillment of love.

Messiaen’s theological interest in the connection between love and death began with his fascination with the Tristan myth, as exemplified in Wagner’s *Musikdrama* and in Debussy’s opera *Péleas et Mélisande*.2 In writing notes for the first recording of *Turangalîla*, which occurred in 1968, well after the last piece of the “Tristan trilogy” had been composed and around

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the same time he was composing the *Méditations*, Messiaen referred to the three pieces as a trilogy focusing on different aspects of the Tristan myth.³

Whereas Messiaen’s attraction to *Tristan und Isolde* was for the allegorical nature of the story, Wagner’s was for the mythical elements of it. However, these two focuses have more in common than might appear. In the words of Roger Scruton, “A myth, for Wagner, is not a fable or religious doctrine but a vehicle for human knowledge. The myth acquaints us with ourselves and our condition, using symbols and characters that give objective form to our inner compulsions. Myths are set in the hazy past…It [pastness] lifts the story out of the stream of human life and endows it with a meaning that is timeless.”⁴

Timelessness is important in regard to *Méditations*, since God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist outside of time. Simultaneously, timelessness is also important in the way that Messiaen viewed the Tristan myth as an allegory. Messiaen saw Wagner’s music as the expression of the supernatural, seeing the lovers as symbolic of all men and women. Therefore, the experiences that inspired the three pieces comprising the “Tristan trilogy” are the experiences of everyone.⁵ We all journey toward the love of God in heaven, we all suffer, we all love, and we all die. In placing this drama on a cosmic scale, Messiaen takes the myth outside of earthly time and suggests that true sacrificial love transcends time and place. These juxtapositions of love and death and of human desire and divine love create a raw emotional vitality in the music, which causes these three works to embrace the surreal. In abandoning the traditional conventions of song cycles, symphonies, and choral music in terms of form, harmony, and developmental

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⁵ Johnson, 78.
techniques, Messiaen crafted three works that suggest a greater allegorical symbolism regarding
human sexual love and death.  

This embracing of the surreal and abandonment of traditional forms is a technique
Messiaen used again in Méditations. This sort of symbolism is present in the leitmotifs, musical
alphabet, and organization of the suite as a whole. Messiaen’s first foray into the concept of
death and the sacrificial nature of love occurred in the ’40s, and two decades later he returned to
composing a musical reflection on the source of that love.

The central aspect which interested Messiaen for his “Tristan trilogy” was the concept
that true love is characterized by a sense of an all-consuming sacrifice, the idea of dying to
oneself for the good of the beloved, a union which will result in new life.  
The ultimate such
sacrifice was Jesus’ death on the cross, which gives all of humanity new life in heaven. In the
seventh meditation, Messiaen draws from St. Thomas Aquinas’ Summa Theologica, using the
following text to inspire the music: “The Father and the Son love, through the Holy Spirit (the
love which proceeds), themselves and us.”  
The Holy Spirit proceeds from the love of the Father
and the Son in a perfect tripartite union of the giving of each Person to the others.

While the sacrificial nature of love applies to all types of love, for the three works of the
“Tristan trilogy” Messiaen was specifically interested in romantic love. He described such love
as, “a fatal, irresistible love, transcending everything outside itself, a love such as is symbolized
by the love potion of Tristan and Isolde.”  
His view is not dissimilar from paragraph 1643 in
Catechism of the Catholic Church which states, “Conjugal love involves a totality, in which all
the elements of the person enter – appeal of the body and instinct, power of feeling and

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7 Johnson, 77.
8 Jon Gillock, Performing Messiaen’s Organ Music, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 228.
9 Johnson, 77.
affectivity, aspiration of the spirit and of will. It aims at a deep personal unity, a unity that beyond union in one flesh, leads to forming one heart and soul.”

How does this “deep personal unity” that “transcends everything outside itself” relate to death? First of all, the phrase “deep personal unity” acknowledges a bond that lasts beyond itself. As can probably be imagined, Jesus’ Passion and Death is the ultimate example of a love that fulfills those qualities. This notion is directly from the Gospel. Jesus said in John 12:32, “When I am lifted up, I will draw all the world to myself.” In other words, Jesus’ death will transcend everything and bring everyone into union with Him. Also from the Last Supper discourses in the Gospel of John, Jesus says there is “No greater love than to lay down one’s life for a friend.” (John 15:13) In the words of St. John of the Cross, “At the evening of life, we shall be judged on our love.” Finally, the Catechism of the Catholic Church further states that the story of creation begins with man and woman being made in the image and likeness of God and concludes with them at the wedding feast of the Lamb. The imagery and inseparable quality between love and death abounds throughout much of Christian tradition, and it is this tradition that Messiaen drew upon in writing his “Tristan trilogy” and would do so again for Méditations. Messiaen crafted an organ suite that plays out like a Musikdrama as it traces a story of love from the beginning of creation to its culmination, much like the Catechism’s summary of the story of creation.

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11 Ibid., para. 1602.
Chapter II: God Is Love

If all human love is a reflection, albeit an imperfect one, of the Divine Love found among all three persons of the Holy Trinity, this begins to shed light on Méditations, on Messiaen’s musical treatment of the Holy Trinity, and on his deep appreciation of Tristan und Isolde. If death is viewed as the fulfilment of love, then this also lends a religious interpretation to Wagner’s opera—an interpretation that Messiaen most certainly held.

Roger Scruton draws a comparison between the love potion and the Passion of Christ. He writes, “…the potion enables Wagner to give dramatic reality to a profound religious idea, namely that the thing which enslaves us—the mortal body and its inexorable laws—also frees us, since it is the occasion for redeeming sacrifice…By accepting death through an act of sacrifice we transcend death and raise ourselves above the mortal condition that imposed this fate upon us. This thought underlies the mystery of Christ’s Passion; and also that of the passion (another kind of passion, but in a sense also the same kind) of Tristan and Isolde. Hence the description of the drink—a Sühnetrank, a drink of atonement, the same drink that is offered in the Eucharist and which there symbolizes the death that atoned for the sins of the world.”¹²

Atoning for the sins of the world is the ultimate act of love. It is an act of love that influenced countless works of Messiaen’s from his early years to Méditations to Livre du Saint Sacrament. In La Nativité, before Jesus descends from heaven and becomes incarnate, he first must accept the suffering through which he will redeem the world, which Messiaen portrays in the seventh movement. In the ninth and final movement, in the middle of a fiery fanfare and toccata, Messiaen brings in a tender theme to represent that God is Love, and then closes his toccata with chords that recall the chords of Jesus accepting his suffering.

¹² Scruton, 48-49.
Méditations has a love theme as well. This theme appears in the seventh movement, when Messiaen meditates on the passage of the Summa that I quoted in section one. However, it is important to remember that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the love of the Father and the Son. The first meditation begins with a theme and two variations, presumably three sections for the three Persons of the Trinity. Near the end of the second variation, four chords are played above the theme in the pedal. These chords are four transpositions of the same chord—a major triad placed above a seventh chord sonority (with a missing third, making it unclear whether the implied seventh chord is minor or major-minor). The root of the seventh chord is a major third below the root of the major triad. This creates a mode three polychord, as can be seen in example 1.

Example 1, recurring mode three polychord
The chord from the above example reappears in various transpositions in the toccata that forms the centerpiece of the fifth meditation. This toccata erupts from the theme of wind of the Holy Spirit, and that same chord brings the toccata to a close. What was subtle as God the Father set the stars in motion becomes apparent as the Holy Spirit proceeds from Him and the Son: all of creation is an act borne out of the love of God. The reappearance of this chord in the eighth meditation, God is simple, reinforces the nature of God, and that nature is love.

Transformation of a motive is not unique to Messiaen or Wagner. However, there is something uniquely Wagnerian about taking the same musical material and presenting it in an entirely new context. For example, the bells in Parsifal take on entirely new significance when Wagner changes the key in which the leitmotif is presented. While the chord that Messiaen uses is hardly a motif unto itself, the way it emerges from completely different harmonies and textures with drastically different registrations is a type of Wagnerian transformation. Not only does the chord appear in sparse star-like textures (1st meditation), ebullient toccatas (5th meditation), and celestial embraces of God’s love (8th meditation), it also appears in the middle of the motif to suggest “God is unchanging” again in the 5th meditation—yet another reminder that God is omnipresent, and His nature pervades and is the inspiration for this entire suite.

There is one other place where this chord appears, and that is for the motif Dieu est amour (God is love), which ends the fifth meditation. The chord appears several times underneath the lent melody, and that melody, in a very different rhythm, forms the theme marked “to love” in the seventh meditation. Siglind Bruhn highlights this connection, pointing out that the parallel is Messiaen’s means of musically conveying that any and all love is derived from the love of God.13

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Given that Messiaen wrote a theme for the love of God and another one for the verb to love, he most likely did not intend the aforementioned chord by itself to be symbolic of God’s love, and I am not suggesting that is what he meant. By highlighting the frequent uses of this chord, I intended to demonstrate one way in which Méditations functions similarly to a Musikdrama—a character (in this case, God) remains unchanged yet our perception of Him changes. This change is orchestrated by the progression of the piece, and of course, the most fundamental aspect of God, which serves to undergird the change in our perception, is that He is Love and is the source of all love. Naturally, that love is present in various manifestations, and the recurrence of that chord creates a musical parallel.

Scruton’s observation that the passion of Tristan and Isolde is simultaneously another kind of passion and yet the same kind as Christ’s passion is hardly original. Comparing the love of God for us to passionate sexual lovers is as old as the Song of Songs, and both St. Augustine and St. Teresa of Ávila used similar analogies in their writings.\textsuperscript{14} Returning to Messiaen, in the words of Siglind Bruhn, he believed “The greatest bliss, however, is in the union of the faithful with his or her God, imagined as a blending in love. Messiaen believes that the soul of every Christian is drawn by an unspeakable love to the union with God in the Holy Spirit. This love can be metaphorically couched in the language of eroticism, because Eros is the most intense form of desire and fulfillment experienced by humans. Eros can therefore be understood as a foretaste of what awaits the soul at the end of time in its union with God.”\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{14} Siglind Bruhn, *Messiaen’s Explorations of Love and Death: Musico-Poetic Signification In the “Tristan Trilogy” and Three Related Song Cycles*, (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2008), 16.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 17.
Chapter III: Wagner and the Organ Symphony

The symphony was a Germanic musical invention, and considering the intense rivalry between France and Germany for much of the nineteenth century, it may seem strange that the French were the ones who originated, championed, and perfected the genre of the organ symphony. This phenomenon can partially be explained by the efforts of Vincent d’Indy, who championed the German form and by the dawn of the twentieth century was largely successful at integrating it into the forms taught by the Paris Conservatoire.\(^\text{16}\) Teaching the symphony as part of the coursework in the Paris Conservatoire led to its prominence in French musical culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The three models that d’Indy championed for symphonic writing were Beethoven, Wagner, and Franck—Beethoven for tradition and form, Wagner for mood and temperament, and Franck the synthesis of German and French. In the words of Brian Hart, “While Beethoven taught symphonists proper technique and respect for tradition, Wagner demonstrated the temperament they should cultivate. His commitment to an exalted vision that precluded easy success provided a model of artistic disinterestedness that French composers—whom d’Indy regarded as deeply compromised by the lust for popularity and wealth—needed to emulate. In short, Wagner reminded French artists of their obligation to give rather than get. His lofty example gave them the courage and means to renounce selfish ambition and devote themselves to the higher pursuits of symphony and music drama. Therefore, while not a symphonist himself in his maturity, Wagner contributed significantly to its development in France.

“If Beethoven and Wagner—the epitomes of *musique pure* and *musique appliquée aux paroles* respectively—represented a quasi-Hegelian dichotomy, Franck became the agent of synthesis. As Wagner applied Beethovenian procedures to drama, Franck brought the leitmotif into *musique pure* through the medium of the cyclic symphony, a work founded upon a ludic tonal plan (Beethoven’s legacy). By uniting Beethovenian and Wagnerian procedures in this way, Franck ‘restored to life the mummified art of the symphony.’”

At the same time which d’Indy was encouraging his French colleagues and students to write symphonies, Widor had begun to do so for organ, exploiting the symphonic organ sounds designed by Cavaillé-Coll. Much like d’Indy’s view of the Belgian Franck as a synthesist between German tradition and French novelty, Franck and Widor’s (Belgian) teacher Jacques Lemmens was responsible for merging German and French practices in the organ world.

The organ symphony unofficially began with Franck’s *Grand Pièce Symphonique, op.17* in 1862. Widor would publish his first set of organ symphonies ten years later. However, at that time, the emergence of the organ symphony as genre is still hazy; e.g., Guilmant’s similarly large-scaled organ works were called sonatas. Returning to Franck, his half-hour, cyclic themed work acknowledges its debt to the orchestral symphony in its title, and the transformation of themes is explicitly Beethovenian. The overarching key-structure of the *Grand Pièce Symphonique* showcases a triumphant modulation from minor to major, capturing the grandiose Romantic notion of music taking the listener from darkness into light.

Cyclic themes were important in the development of the organ symphony. While Widor’s early symphonies could be considered suites or sonatas, his later works start to have more thematic unity. The fifth symphony uses the same descending trichord in the adagio and toccata.

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The *Romane* uses “Haec dies” in three of its four movements. Vierne’s 2\textsuperscript{nd} symphony, written shortly after his appointment to the post of titular organist at Notre Dame, is his first organ symphony to be in distinctly his voice, and it is cyclic. Vierne would return to cyclic writing with his last three symphonies, stretching the genre to the limits of tonality, scope, and technique in his fifth and sixth symphonies.

During the time Widor and Vierne were composing organ symphonies, Wagner was a crucially important influence on both of them. One of the most explicit examples is Widor using the Tristan chord in the second movement of the *Romane*. The slow movements of both their symphonies often utilize Wagner’s idea of endless melody, such as the lengthy pedal melody in the adagio of Widor’s fifth symphony, the seemingly phraseless melodies from the aria and adagio in Vierne’s sixth symphony, and the elision of melodic cadences in the adagio from Vierne’s third symphony.

Messiaen’s two earliest organ suites, *L’Ascension* and *La Nativité*, are both a continuation of the symphonic organ writing of Widor and Vierne, even as they both start to break with that tradition. It is necessary to note that Messiaen did not consider *L’Ascension* an organ work since it was a transcription of an orchestral suite of the same title, except for the third movement which was replaced with a new toccata in the organ version.\footnote{Claude Samuel, 118.} Nevertheless, transcribing an orchestral work for organ is an example of symphonic organ writing, of which *L’Ascension* is a continuation whether it originated for orchestra or organ. The organ version of this four-movement suite follows the typical pattern of a Vierne or Widor symphony, with one notable exception. There is a slow introduction, not dissimilar from Vierne’s fourth and fifth symphonies or Widor’s second symphony. A cantabile-like second movement, *Alleluias sereins*, has textures
that almost sound as if they could have been inspired by the second movement of Widor’s *Symphonie Romane*. Then comes Messiaen’s break with tradition. Instead of a scherzo and toccata, he breaks from his own orchestral version to write a fiery, *tour de force* toccata and then transcribes the closing peaceful adagio that almost stops time.

The reversal of toccata and adagio from the order normally found in the French symphonic organ tradition serves two purposes. Firstly, it enables Messiaen to compose a calm after the storm, a serene peace that conveys longing for something supernatural. This is a hallmark of many of Messiaen’s works, from *Les Corps Glorieux* and *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* to *Méditations*. Secondly, these extremely slow movements are an attempt to musically stop time and simply exist in the present moment. This is also something that Messiaen did in nearly all of his works from *Le Banquet Céleste* to *Livre du Saint Sacrement*. Ending a suite with a slow movement, or slow section of a movement in the case of *Méditations*, conveys time ceasing as the listeners dissolve into the eternity which has been depicted musically. It’s especially fitting for a suite on the Ascension of Jesus or on the nature of God Himself.

With *La Nativité*, Messiaen began what he viewed as a renewal in organ writing.19 This nine movement suite came only one year after *L’Ascension*, but in the words of Messiaen *La Nativité* “with its Hindu rhythms, modes of limited transpositions, and unusual timbres, constituted a great change in organ music at a time when Franck represented the summit of modernism.”20 In the years following Widor’s *Symphonie Romane* and Vierne’s fifth and sixth symphonies, it is definitely a stretch to claim that Franck was the “summit of modernism” in organ music. However, with *La Nativité* Messiaen was starting to break from this tradition, even as he still adhered to it.

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19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
While the length of *La Nativité* may appear to be a break with the traditional form of the French organ symphony, at one hour long, it is not that much longer than the forty-five-minute eighth symphony of Widor or the equally lengthy fifth symphony of Vierne. These two symphonies had already stretched the organ symphony to new lengths, and Messiaen was taking that one step further with *La Nativité*. Another way in which Messiaen followed tradition was ending *La Nativité* with a powerful, jubilant toccata—which is fitting considering the suite ends with God descending to earth and taking on human flesh; it is a seismic sound for a seismic event.

*La Nativité* was the first organ work of Messiaen’s to use plainsong-like motifs, which would give way to explicit chant quotations in the *Méditations* and other later works. However, merging chant and symphonic organ writing was something Widor had done three and a half decades earlier with his last two symphonies, *Gothique* and *Romane*. Messiaen’s plainsong-like motifs were original in that they are written in modes of limited transposition as nonretrogradeable rhythms, but once again, he is simply taking the tradition of Franck, Widor, and Vierne and extending it one step further.

One innovation of Messiaen’s in *La Nativité* is the movement titles. Each movement takes its name from a character in the nativity account or from a theological concept related to Jesus’ birth. While religious themed titles are not original to Messiaen—Dupré’s *Passion Symphony* and Tournemire’s *The Seven Last Words of Christ* both have movements titled after religious events—theologically themed titles are. However, theological titles are only a small step further than religious ones. The two aforementioned works by Dupré and Tournemire create an explicit link between religion and the French symphonic organ school. This link connects
Messiaen’s religious scope in *La Nativité* to the world of the organ symphony, which he drew on extensively in this suite and his following one for organ, *Les Corps Glorieux*.

*Méditations* continues and further develops the religious and theological elements that were present in Messiaen’s earlier suites. At the same time, the musical presentation of religious and theological concepts is less oriented by movement and more oriented around the themes themselves. This is one way that each movement functions as a scene in a *Musikdrama*, in which the motifs are presented like characters coming forward. In other words, while *La Nativité* has movements titled *la vierge et l’enfant* (the virgin and child), *les anges* (the angels), and *Jésus accepte la souffrance* (Jesus accepts the suffering), the movements of *Méditations* do not have proper titles, but paragraphs in front of each movement explaining the mysteries and the scenes in which those mysteries are presented. This is unique among any of Messiaen’s organ works, even his final organ work has titled movements once again. *Méditations* is still programmatic like *La Nativité* and *Les Corps Glorieux* are, but the program tells an overarching story through recurring and interacting motifs and not movement by movement.

While it would be possible to consider all of Messiaen’s music a meditation of some sort (*Le Banquet Céleste* on the eucharist, *Diptyque* on earthly and heavenly life, etc.), most of Messiaen’s works have a specific scene, object, character, or idea that they represent or dramatize. The movements of *Méditations* do not have one specific thing that they depict. At the same time, the musical representations of theology in *Méditations* can certainly be traced back to Messiaen’s earliest suites and even his ostensibly more secular *Livre d’orgue*. The musical-theological link that Messiaen exploited in *La Nativité* enriched that link within the French symphonic organ school. It was a link that had already begun in the writing of Widor, Tournemire, and Dupré in the decades leading up to Messiaen’s first organ works. Nonetheless,
Messiaen’s enrichment of the connection between organ symphonic writing and theology is one way in which *La Nativité* did function as a renewal in organ writing, or at least a new development. When Messiaen composed *Méditations* three decades later, it would be a similar renewal in his own organ writing due to his innovations then.

Thus, *Méditations* has two Wagnerian influences. The first is its building on the French symphonic organ tradition that Wagner through d’Indy helped establish. This is one Wagnerian influence that overshadowed most of Messiaen’s career as an organist and composer, as he would have been steeped in that tradition from his studies with Dupré and listening to Tournemire play (see chapter V). The second Wagnerian influence is the abundance of leitmotifs that organize the score and serve as the overarching impetus throughout the entire suite.
Chapter IV: *Méditations* and Messiaen’s organ summa, *Livre du Saint Sacrament*

*Méditations* paved the way for Messiaen’s final and most colossal organ work, *Livre du Saint Sacrament*. This eighteen-movement suite has three distinct sections: adoration, the life of Christ, and the Holy Eucharist. “As [Messiaen] explains in the preface to the score, the first four movements are ‘acts of adoration before Christ, invisible, but really present in the Blessed Sacrament’…Messiaen then presents the mysterious gifts of the Eucharist through their association with seven episodes of Christ’s life. The remaining seven movements switch to the Mass, from the moment of transubstantiation, at which point the sacrament comes into being, onwards.”

This organization of *Livre du Saint Sacrament* creates a three-act structure—a preamble of adoration, a brief narrative of Christ’s life, and then the liturgy of the Mass. While *Messe de la Pentecôte* followed the liturgical format of a low Mass with movements to be played during offertory and communion, *Livre du Saint Sacrament’s* final section musically depicts parts of the Mass itself. It is a musical dramatization that merges sacred and secular by taking the prayers and actions of the Mass and bringing them into a concert work. That concert work, in turn, meditates on each prayer of the Mass through its music, creating a narrative structure to the work.

Narrative structure is something that is inherent to opera, especially *Musikdrama*. It is also something that Messiaen utilized in later works more so than earlier ones. On the one hand, the religious programmatic nature of nearly all Messiaen’s music gives it some narrative-like

structure. However, a work such as *La Nativité* has movements that simply shift the focus from one character to another in the nativity story. It does not tell the nativity story. *Livre du Saint Sacrament* tells a story of Christ’s life in relation to His greatest gift to us: Himself in the Eucharist. It then dramatizes the way we receive that gift through its musical meditations.

Once again, it is possible to view nearly all of Messiaen’s music as a meditation of some sort, given its overtly religious nature. And once again, there is a shift from the early works to the later ones, as traditional programmatic music gives way to musical meditations. For example, a work such as *Combat de la mort et de la vie*, the fourth movement of *Les Corps Glorieux*, has a religious themed program about the combat of life and death, as the title states. This movement follows and precedes other movements about qualities of the final resurrection at the end of time, but there is no narrative depicting the end of time through music. Each movement paints a musical picture of a specific event or character; the movements are symbolizing abstract theology. A work such as *les deux murailles d’eau*, from *Livre du Saint Sacrament*, again has a religious program—the Israelites passing through the two walls of water to salvation on the opposite side of the Red Sea—but instead of only being about that, it also draws a connection to the two pieces of the broken, consecrated host offering its recipients salvation. Consequently, this later work becomes a meditation, being about more than just its religious program.

This shift from programmatic music to musical meditations probably occurred gradually throughout Messiaen’s career. The first time it is most noticeable; however, is with the fittingly titled *Méditations*. None of the movements are titled, so none of them are about a specific person, event, or one theological idea. Nonetheless, the various motifs are associated with specific persons, events, or ideas. Multiple motifs appear in the movements, giving a larger scale to the movements and the entire suite. This importance of motifs to the structure, the program,
and the theology is how *Méditations* functions as a *Musikdrama* for organ, and it is how it paved the way for Messiaen’s magnum opus of *Livre du Saint Sacrament*.
Chapter V: Improvisation and Meditation

1967 marked the one-hundredth anniversary of La Trinité. One year prior to this, a rebuild of the church’s organ was completed, during which a crescendo pedal, six general pistons, and seven stops were added to the organ. To celebrate both these occasions, Messiaen organized a concert around the Holy Trinity. He improvised four pieces, while the famous preacher Monseigneur Charles preached three sermons—one on God the Father, the second on God the Son, and the third on God the Holy Spirit. Messiaen’s four improvisations would bookend the recital and be interspersed between the sermons.\textsuperscript{22}

Historically, there has always been a rich legacy of concert improvisation in the French organ world. Tournemire took the art form to its zenith; Vierne died right before starting an improvisation that was to conclude a concert. As a student at the Paris Conservatory, Messiaen attended Mass at St. Clotilde, not Notre Dame or St. Sulpice which had the two largest church organs in Paris, but the church where Tournemire worked so he could hear the improvisations. While Messiaen’s earlier organ works continued the symphonic tradition of Widor, Vierne, and his teacher Dupré, in \textit{Méditations} the improvisational origin and influences of Tournemire built on the French symphonic organ tradition in new ways.

This 1967 concert was the first time that Messiaen improvised in public in almost twenty years. It was a momentous occasion, and it required coordination on the part of Messiaen and Monseigneur Charles. In order for there to be no question about when each improvisation ended, so Monseigneur Charles would know when to being preaching, Messiaen ended each improvisation with the call of the \textit{Bruant jaune} (yellowhammer). That call is seven repeated

\textsuperscript{22} Gillock, 199.
notes and then a sustained note a whole step higher. As a result of this information, several important aspects of Messiaen’s improvisations and the final published suite of Méditations are revealed.

First, Messiaen clearly used silence in his improvisations. That silence is apparent in several of the written meditations—the first as God the Father sets the stars in the empty (silent) firmament, the silence of the woods at night from which each bird spontaneously sings in the fourth meditation, the silence into which the dove flies away and rests at the end of the eighth meditation. Secondly, in the tradition of Tournemire, Messiaen must have floated freely among motifs, and thus it wouldn’t have been clear when an improvisation ended without an agreed upon motif. This describes the structure and form of the second, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, and ninth meditations. The organization of these movements is characterized by leitmotifs that enter for specific birds, Persons of the Holy Trinity, or attributes of God. The form is made clear by the recurrence of certain leitmotifs. The techniques are both Tournemiresque and Wagnerian. Finally, the call of the Bruant jaune is still present in four meditations: II, V, VIII, and IX, blatantly preserving the improvisatory origins of the work.

Messiaen had previously borrowed musical ideas from Tournemire. Quatuor pour la fin du Temps and Vingt Regards both use a progression that Tournemire originated in the Paraphrase-Carillon from the Assumption cycle (No. 35) of L’Orgue Mystique. In addition to borrowing a progression in his earlier works, in Méditations Messiaen borrowed a compositional technique from Tournemire. Organizing a musical composition through presentation of motifs, while a hallmark of Tournemire improvisations and his writing in L’Orgue Mystique, is

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23 Ibid.
simultaneously a Wagnerian practice, and this merging of influences is one way that Méditations draws influences from two apparently different musical worlds. However, as Messiaen’s music makes clear, the worlds are not as dissimilar as they may initially appear.

The marriage of sacred and secular not only characterizes Méditations as a cosmic Musikdrama, but also recasts it as a story of creation and love. Messiaen depicts that love through various manifestations, represented by leitmotifs that create the form of the work. Since God is Love, we should hear that present not only in the “to love” leitmotif, but also in the very nature of the three Persons on whom Messiaen is musically meditating. In the words of John Paul II, “With loving regard, the divine Artist passes on to the human artist a spark of his own surpassing wisdom, calling him to share in his creative power.”25 The Méditations are not only Messiaen’s spark as a human artist, but also his depiction of the birds singing of God’s goodness and God Himself imparting His surpassing wisdom and love through His very nature.

Chapter VI: Trinitarian Leitmotifs and the *Langage Communicable*

In addition to the leitmotifs included in the foreward of the score for *Méditations*, Messiaen included other material from which he derived motifs. This second source was a musical alphabet that he called the *langage communicable*. Unlike musical alphabets used by Bach, Schumann, or Duruflé, Messiaen’s alphabet did not merely assign letters to pitches. Messiaen assigned specific durations and registers in addition to pitches. The alphabet can be seen below.

![Example 2, Messiaen's musical alphabet](image)

In addition to the musical representation of the alphabet, the *langage communicable* has other essential elements as well. First among these is the musical representation of Latin declensions. In order to save space and time, Messiaen decided not to spell out articles, pronouns, adverbs, and prepositions; instead, he focused on the spelling of nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Therefore, to indicate parts of speech, he used various musical formulae to represent the different Latin declensions, even though he was spelling French words. Drawing from various languages gives a catholic approach to the *langage communicable* that represents its all-embracing and otherworldly qualities. The declensions can be seen below.
Example 3, *langage communicable* declensions

The next elements are the two auxiliary verbs that are the most common in the French language—to be and to have. Their motifs are as follows.

Example 4, *langage communicable* auxiliary verbs

The similarity of these motifs to one another shows the relationship between being and having. The reason the two motifs are constructed as they are is explained by Messiaen. “To be:
descending movement because all that is comes from God (the Being *par excellence*, The One Who Is). To have: ascending movement because we can always have more by elevating ourselves toward God.”

These two motifs, “to be” and “to have,” relate to the motifs for God the Father and God the Son respectively. I will discuss those motifs presently, and for now I will state that this relationship is not a coincidence on the part of Messiaen. Since God the Father is unbegotten and all creation stems from Him, and since humanity was created in His image and likeness, it is fitting that the motif for our being shares its first three pitches with the motif for God the Father. The motif for “to have” shares its first three pitches with the motif for God the Son. The Son proceeds from the Father, and the Son more perfectly elevated himself toward the Father than any other person, which is the action Messiaen associates with having. In the words of Bruhn, “The concept of having is directly connected with receiving.”27 We receive grace through the ultimate sacrifice of the Son on the cross, and therefore, the motif for “to have” is similar to the motif for God the Son.

The motifs for the Persons of the Holy Trinity appear throughout all of *Méditations* in a cyclic fashion. Cyclic themes in an organ work are a continuation of Widor and Vierne’s late symphonic techniques. They are also a Wagnerian technique, since leitmotifs recur throughout a Musikdrama in a cyclic fashion. Messiaen only lists one motif for the Divine being in the preface to the score of *Méditations*—the theme of God and its retrograde. Jon Gillock highlights three more,28 and Bruhn highlights three more beyond that.29 Very importantly, Messiaen does label

26 Gillock, 204.
28 Gillock, 205.
these additional motifs when they appear in the score. All of Messiaen’s motifs can be seen in example 5 on the following page.
Example 5, themes of the Holy Trinity
The first theme is the theme of God. The long whole note that begins this motif almost makes it feel like it is existing outside of time. This feeling is intensified by the sweeping two-octave descent and ascent in much faster rhythmic values. If ascent and descent represent having and being respectively, then the theme of God containing both gestures reminds the listener that all that is comes from God. The similarity of the motifs for the Persons of the Holy Trinity to the motif of God Himself likewise reminds the listener that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist outside of time and place and while the Father is unbegotten, the Son and Spirit proceed from Him. The descending tritone that concludes the theme of God is a cadential gesture for Messiaen, which can be found throughout his works, from as early as L’Ascension, Les Corps Glorieux, and Quatuor pour la fin du temps. Using the tritone here is a compositional choice that indicates God’s perfection and completion. Nothing can change Him, nor can He change. Likewise, the tritone cannot change when inverted, making it unique from all other intervals.

The motif for God the Father follows the contour of the theme of God. As God the Father is the manifestation of God, whom, St. Thomas Aquinas argues, one can deduce exists through reason alone, it is fitting that Messiaen composed a motif for Him that so clearly reflects the theme of God. The similarities and differences between God the Father’s motif and the theme of God are helpfully laid out by Siglind Bruhn in the following tables.30

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30 Ibid., 108.
As can be seen, even when the direction of the intervals changes between these two themes, the quality does not, except when Messiaen replaces an interval (the tritone) with a larger interval in which a tritone is embedded (the major seventh—a tritone plus a perfect fourth). Contrary to Bruhn’s table, the second major seventh in the theme of the Father is a diminished seventh, but that interval also comprises a tritone plus half a tritone. The minor sixth that ends the theme of the Father is likewise a variation of the tritone from the theme of God; it was replaced by a major seventh, then diminished seventh, then minor sixth—a decreasing progression that is formed from the second mode of limited transposition.

Messiaen describes the theme of the Son as an inversion of the theme of Father. He writes that it is “comme deux regards qui se croisent” (like two gazes crossing). According to
Bruhn, this expression is usually used in romantic contexts to describe the gaze of lovers.\textsuperscript{31}

However, since God is love and the Son proceeds from the Father in an act of perfect love, and since all human love is a sharing in Divine Love, this is once again a very fitting compositional choice on the part of Messiaen. While the Son’s motif does in fact begin as an inversion of the theme of the Father, it does not continue as such. This deviation from an exact inversion is perhaps indicative of the second Person of the Holy Trinity taking on human flesh and blood, but more importantly it differentiates it from the theme of the Father. Messiaen varies the rhythm of the theme of the Son in various meditations, once again showing a Wagnerian transformation of a theme as the listeners come to perceive it differently.

Siglind Bruhn explains the differences between the themes of the Father and the Son thusly: “Considering these at first glance almost imperceptible but nevertheless crucial differences, one is reminded of the Thomistic distinction between the three Persons of the Trinity. As Thomas expounds in accordance with basic Catholic doctrine, the Father is defined by innascibility, paternity, and spiration: himself ungenerated, he acts upon the two other Persons of the Trinity whom he begets and spirates. The Son is characterized by filiation and spiration as he is begotten by the Father but spirates the Holy Spirit. Finally, the Holy Spirit is determined by procession, as the third Person of the Trinity is spirated in conjunction by the first and second Persons. If the Son is thus distinct from the Father in one significant aspect, it must have seemed obvious to Messiaen that the two Trinitarian Persons cannot be musically represented as simple mirror images.”\textsuperscript{32}

The Holy Spirit has three themes. Gillock lists one in his analysis; Bruhn highlights two more. All three of these themes, like the themes of the Father and the Son, are derived from the

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 109.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 109-110.
theme of God. The first theme, which is the primary one, contains the exact same pitches of the theme of God followed by its retrograde, but in faster rhythmic values. It is almost possible to hear the wind of the Spirit blowing over the earth to renew it. While Messiaen does not list the theme for the Breath of the Spirit in his preface, he does mark it in the score of the fifth meditation. This theme is in constant sixteenth notes, played in octaves, and it comprises the pitches of the theme of the Father followed by the pitches for theme of the Son.\textsuperscript{33} By placing the Breath of the Spirit in octaves Messiaen is recycling one of his own techniques. In the final movement of \textit{Messe de la Pentecôte}, titled the Wind of the Spirit, the Holy Spirit blows over the face of the earth in octaves on full organ. This is one additional way that Messiaen was building on his own oeuvre and continuing the traditions of organ writing in which he was steeped.

The other theme of the Holy Spirit appears in the fourth meditation, one movement before the Breath of the Spirit’s theme. This second theme appears in a short trio in the pedal while the right hand plays the theme of the Father and the left hand plays the theme of the Son. It is the only time in \textit{Méditations} that all three themes are heard simultaneously, and the trio texture gives a clear musical depiction of three in one. This theme of the Holy Spirit has less obvious similarity with the theme of God, but Bruhn once again very helpfully analyzed the connection between them.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 112.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 111.
As can be seen in this example, the second theme of the Holy Spirit (the top line) alternates its pitches between the original theme of God and the transposition of the same up one half-step. This is another example of transformation, possibly one that shows the Holy Spirit elevating us toward God as its theme partially rises a half-step while maintaining four of the original pitches. Messiaen’s choice to alter some of the pitches of the Holy Spirit’s theme for this short trio in the fourth meditation is a reminder of which Persons of the Trinity proceed from Whom.

The relationship among all these themes for God and the Persons of the Holy Trinity makes them all a transformation of one another. It is a theological statement reflecting the nature of the Trinity; the Father is not the Son is not the Holy Spirit, but all three of them are God. Consequently, it is the theme of God from which each Person’s motif is derived. At the same
time, the Wagnerian technique of leitmotif transformation is highly applicable not only to Messiaen’s motifs themselves, but also the changes they undergo throughout Méditations.

Messiaen himself acknowledged the Wagnerian similarity in his themes, stating that Wagner would have considered them leitmotifs.\(^{35}\) It is very important to mention that Messiaen once described Wagner’s leitmotifs as the closest a composer has come to creating a universal music, because the leitmotif not only depicted “objects and ideas, but also created a fundus of basic symbols which enabled [Wagner] to speak directly to his public.”\(^{36}\) The langage communicable is Messiaen’s attempt at creating a universal music, following in the tradition of Wagner and his leitmotif.

The langage communicable alternates between French words spelled out with Messiaen’s musical alphabet, symbols of Latin declensions, and various themes for God and the Persons of the Holy Trinity. Sometimes the themes appear without the alphabet, and sometimes they appear in the midst of it. Messiaen viewed his treatment of the motifs derived from the langage communicable as no different than Bach elaborately harmonizing a boring\(^{37}\) chorale melody.\(^{38}\) While Messiaen undoubtedly found his motifs more interesting than he found the melodies of Protestant chorales, the techniques of transforming a melody, or motif, are universal elements of music. This situates Méditations not only as building on the French symphonic tradition, Wagnerian practices, and Messiaen’s own career, but the works of Bach himself—a tradition that Wagner saw himself as building on. This strengthens the Wagnerian connection and the French symphonic organ tradition, both of which can be traced back to Bach. The ways that Messiaen treats his various motifs and alphabet as they transform over the course of Méditations is where

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\(^{35}\) Gillock, 204.

\(^{36}\) Bruhn, *Messiaen’s Interpretations of Holiness and Trinity*, 98.

\(^{37}\) This is Messiaen’s opinion of some (not all) chorale melodies, not Bruhn’s or my own.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 102.
the piece comes to life. I will explore this through an analysis of each movement in the following chapters.

All of these elements that comprise the *langage communicable* may seem overwhelming and impossible for anyone to follow while listening to *Méditations*. As Siglind Bruhn says, critics who object that no listener, even one with the most sophisticated ears, could possibly hear the words and expressions Messiaen is communicating through his musical language have missed the point of the *langage communicable* entirely.³⁹ In the preface to score for *Méditations*, Messiaen describes the communication of angels, stating that they “have the privilege to communicate among themselves without language, without convention, and, still more marvelously, without having to take into consideration time and place. There is a power there which exceeds us completely, an ability of transference almost frightening…One can read, in effect, in the *Summa Theologica* of Saint Thomas Aquinas (book of ‘Divine Government,’ question 107, ‘The Language of Angels’): ‘If the angel through his will, organizes his mental concept to show it to another, immediately the latter perceives it: in this way one angel speaks to another.’ And further on, ‘The angelic language consists of one intellectual operation. But, the intellectual operation of the angel disregards time and place. That is why the diversity of time or the distance of the place has no function where both time and place are disregarded.’”⁴⁰ The *langage communicable* is Messiaen’s attempt to communicate in the manner of the angels—where time and place do not matter.

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⁴⁰ Gillock, 201.
Chapter VII: Trinity Meditations and the Organ

In addition to Messiaen’s extensive preface to the score of Méditations, there is also an extensive appendix. This is also unique among his organ works. While the preface is concerned with some of Messiaen’s methodology for composing Méditations, the appendix is concerned with practical details of performing the suite. Méditations originated as a dual celebration of the church’s centennial and the rebuild of the organ itself. The appendix contains the details of the La Trinité organ such as its stop list, the registration stages of the new twelve-tier crescendo pedal, the combinations Messiaen set on the six general pistons, and the registration scheme for the Méditations.

One thing worth noting is that Messiaen lists the initial settings for the six general pistons, and then lists in between which movements the performer is to reset them. Additionally, in the score itself, he marks registrations by writing in which piston to use, so it is important to know how and when they are set certain ways. Obviously, resetting pistons takes time and would inhibit a continuous performance. While it is certainly not necessary to use only six pistons in performing Méditations, and probably disadvantageous to do so, Messiaen’s willingness to pause between movements reflects the improvisatory origins of the work with the sermons in between each improvisation. Therefore, taking some time between movements (although not as long as it takes to rest pistons) contributes to the key word in the title: meditations. The meditation should continue beyond the notes on the page.

While it is easy to adapt Messiaen’s six general pistons and their multiple uses to more pistons if one has them, what is essential is not using a crescendo pedal where Messiaen calls for one, unless one’s crescendo pedal mirrors the one Messiaen had at La Trinité, which is very unlikely given how early the manual sixteen-footes came on and that the reeds came on after the
mixture. In addition to his six general pistons, Messiaen extensively used the La Trinité crescendo pedal to register Medieval, which is presumably a further celebration of his refurbished organ by utilizing all of its newest elements. Thankfully, Messiaen lays out the stops that come on at each stage of the crescendo, making it easy to set pistons in place of a crescendo pedal. It may appear to be a problem if one does not have twelve general pistons, but no movement uses all twelve stages of the crescendo pedal in its registration.

This unique attention to the details of performing Medieval and how to perform it at La Trinité merits examination. Messiaen was undoubtedly celebrating his “new” organ, but at the same time he was giving a sort of staging directions, detailing how the performance was to run down to the last details of setting the organ. This level of detail may seem odd; after all, adapting works to various organs is as old a practice as the organ itself, and it is something Messiaen did on many occasions—notably with Les Corps Glorieux, which has a registration scheme for the Trocadero organ and not La Trinité’s. While we cannot know the exact reasons that Messiaen did this, the precise detail of how to perform Medieval at La Trinité creates an inextricable link between the church and suite that share part of a name: Trinité.

One thing that is clear from this link between church and suite is how much of Medieval was a celebration of Messiaen’s church, organ, and belief in the Triune God. From the first notes of the cosmos coming into being to God proclaiming His name to the joy-filled songs of the birds, Medieval is celebratory work. Not only was it a return to composing for the organ for Messiaen, in many ways it was the most explicitly religious and profound work he had yet produced. With the langage communicable, motifs for the Persons of the Trinity, extensive birdsongs, and unique registration scheme, the many diverse elements that make up Medieval
contribute to the mystery, wonder, and joy of God’s existence, while simultaneously showing how the performer and listener can join Messiaen is meditating upon this wonderful mystery.
Chapter VIII: Meditation I, “The Father Unbegotten”

The Méditations open with a series of variations. The overarching form of this movement is theme, first variation, second variation, commentary, third variation, and coda. The theme is the final leitmotif, in addition to the ones I discussed above, to represent the nature of God. This theme is labeled “the Father of the stars” in the score, and it is played in octaves on full organ. It traverses almost the entire range of the manuals, played legato and lent. The deliberate nature of the theme, both in the notes Messiaen wrote and the way he directs the performer to play them, musically depicts God the Father placing the stars or planets in the firmament, knowing the exact location and size of each one. The first octave cuts through silence in as striking a way as God saying, “Let there be light!”

The first light is the stars, and the slowly paced variations build on the “Father of the stars” theme, first by adding a counterpoint then by adding sparse yet sparkling chords. It is an example of development of the theme through repetition. This repetition both enriches the theme and establishes the vastness of the universe God the Father is creating out of love. Establishing a musical and supernatural world through repetition of an idea is something Wagner did in Das Rheingold, where he repeated E-flat-major arpeggios for over one hundred measures to establish the world in which the Ring Cycle takes place. Messiaen’s use of variations here serves a similar purpose, albeit on a slightly smaller scale.

Unlike Wagner, who was establishing a fantasy world of Norse gods in Das Rheingold, the world Messiaen is musically creating is what he considered to be our own universe. In conversation with Almut Rößler, Messiaen went so far to explain that the first ten notes of the
“Father of the Stars” theme represent the sun and the nine planets. This was Messiaen’s way of depicting the ancient music of the spheres, or as he called it, “the chant of the stars.”

Messiaen explained the significance of this chant in conversation with Rößler. “The Earth and the Sun have an octave relationship to each other, the same as Pluto and Mercury, so there’s a direct relationship between Intelligence (Mercury) and Death (Pluto): one has to pass through Death in order to understand. There’s also an octave relationship between Neptune (Water) and Mars (Fire) as well as a two-octave distance between Jupiter (Man) and Venus (Woman). Finally, there’s the tritone relationship (= half an octave) between Saturn and Uranus: the C of Time, which devours everything (Saturn), cuts the F# of Heaven (Uranus) into two parts: Time cuts Eternity in two.”

Since the first notes represent the sun, the first light of the universe, the striking sound of that first octave played on full organ becomes a musical representation of God saying, “Let there be light!” And thus, creation and Méditations are set in motion.

Motion, or rhythm, is one of the most important aspects of this movement. Each variation increases the motion, creating a driving impetus for the movement. The first variation has a counterpoint of steady sixteenth notes that hints at several of Messiaen’s leitmotifs. It begins with the pitches of the leitmotif for the verb “to be,” reminding the listener that God the Father is the source of all being and He is currently creating that being. The second variation contains sparse chords that punctuate the theme. The irregularity of the rhythms causes the momentum to increase.

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41 In 1969, Pluto was obviously considered a planet and not a dwarf planet.
42 Bruhn, Messiaen’s Interpretations of Holiness and Trinity, 113.
43 Ibid., 114.
Even the theme itself builds in momentum. The “Father of the stars” theme is composed of three phrases, and each phrase becomes shorter (quicker) in addition to comprising faster note values. The first phrase is ten notes, lasting a duration of thirty-six sixteenth notes. With a dotted quarter and quarters tied to sixteenth notes, this phrase contains the longest note values of these three phrases. The second phrase is nine notes, lasting a duration of twenty-seven sixteenth notes. The longest note value is a quarter. Finally, the last phrase is made up of seven notes, which last over a duration of twenty-five sixteenth notes. Until the final two notes of this phrase—a duration of five then ten sixteenth notes, the second which is longest value of any note in these three phrases—the five eighth notes were the quickest successive values Messiaen had written in this opening theme. In between each of these three phrases are several beats of rest. These rests are written to allow the room to reverberate with the sound, and then allow the next phrase to emerge from the silence. Gillock notes in a dry room, it is essential to shorten the rests so as not to make the silence disproportionately long and stop the building of momentum.\footnote{Gillock, 207.}

On a microcosmic level, the form of the entire movement is contained in Messiaen’s structuring of this theme. On another microcosmic level, the movement represents the universe being set in motion. The longest final note of the opening theme—a descending minor seventh that builds upon Messiaen’s descending tritone cadence—serves as a cadence, but more importantly it foreshadows the coda of this movement by virtue of being the longest (or slowest) note. The coda is marked \textit{extremement lent}, a tempo that Messiaen usually reserved for the tenderest, softest, most delicate, and most sublime moments in his music. Here, it is used for a section marked \textit{ffff}. The only common ties with Messiaen’s usual use of this tempo are the sublime quality of this moment and Messiaen’s desire to musically stop time.
The reason for Messiaen musically stopping time in a sublime fashion here are twofold. God exists outside of time, and at this section, the pedal is using the *langage communicable* to spell out “*inengendré,*” or “unbegotten.” Since God the Father is unbegotten, which is the climax of this movement, as well as the conclusion of the quote from the *Summa Theologica* spelled out in the lengthy middle commentary section, it is fitting that the music is at Messiaen’s slowest tempo, reserved for his attempts to musically stop time. Secondly, the *extremement lent* coda is the culmination of the theme, three variations, and commentary. Once the rhythm accelerates and the heavenly bodies have been set in motion, the music slows down to admire it. It is just as fitting that this admiration comes as a blaze of glory, as the unbegotten God the Father looks back on His handiwork of the universe and pronounces it good.

The coda is immediately preceded by a short flourish linking it to the third variation. This flourish traverses the keyboard as it ascends from the depths to the heavens, possibly answering the descent of the stars that concluded the opening theme. Rhythmically, it is the quickest section of the piece, growing out of the faster third variation, which previously had been the fastest presentation of the theme. The commentary is marked *un peu vif,* making it previously the fastest section of the movement, but this connecting material is marked *vif,* building on that section while it simultaneously builds from the chords of the third variation. It connects both the first presentation of the *langage communicable* and the father of the stars theme with the final use of the *langage communicable* in the coda. The massive ritard connects the quick sixteenth notes into the slow, powerful chords of the coda.

The third variation is titled, “the stars begin to turn.” As would be expected, the rhythm accelerates to represent the stars turning, and as I stated above, it is the fastest presentation of the theme in this movement. Messiaen presents his ten-note theme in the pedal in a stream of
constant sixteenth notes, jettisoning the opening rhythm for a unified continuous rhythm as the stars or planets rotate. Above the pedal, the left hand plays an ostinato of nine chords in the fifth transposition of mode four, and the right hand plays an ostinato of eight chords in the fourth transposition of mode six. It would take thirty-six repetitions of the theme for the ostinato to complete itself and return to the starting position; Messiaen only gives us four repetitions. This presentation of a small slice of a much larger ostinato is a technique Messiaen famously used in the first movement of *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*. It is a technique that suggests a temporal scheme occurring far beyond human comprehension in which we have been granted a small sharing. For starting a cosmic *Musikdrama*, Messiaen could not have made the scope and scale of this work any clearer.

The last section to analyze is the lengthy commentary that forms the heart of this movement. Here Messiaen extensively uses the *langage communicable* to quote the following passage from the *Summa Theologica*: “In relation to the Persons who proceed from Him, the Father is qualified thus: paternity and spiration; as for God as the ‘Principal who has no principle,’ He is specified thus: *He is not from another*: that is precisely the property of ‘innascibility,’ designated by the word *unengendered*.”45 The final word from that passage is saved for the coda, creating a link between it and the rest of this movement. The commentary presents the language and all of its elements: the themes for the Father, the Latin declensions, and of course, the alphabet itself. The *langage communicable* is harmonized by a counterpoint that recalls the texture and rhythm of the first variation, and the opening pitches are a reordering of the “Father of the stars” theme. This shows creation and the nature of God the Father as being

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intricately related as both the musical alphabet and its counterpoint grow from the first notes (or acts) of creation.

The counterpoint on the Great needs to be softer than the *langage communicable* on the Positive, which may necessitate a reversal on many American organs. Since Messiaen wanted the Positive super-coupled and sub-coupled to itself, Gillock says do not hesitate to pull extra stops at the higher and lower pitches if those couplers are unavailable. The most important part of playing this passage is that the *langage communicable* shines out like stars in the firmament as it proclaims the nature of God. The accompanimental material on the Great must complement it, creating a link between the theme of the stars and the *langage communicable*.

The sparse textures, strange harmonies, seemingly wandering sixteenth notes, and leaping quality of the themes may make this movement seem chaotic. However, there is an underlying order that gradually comes into focus throughout the movement. In the words of Gillock, this movement is bringing order out of chaos, the essential act of creation. Since this opening meditation is setting the stage for the rest of this suite and the story of creation itself, Messiaen presents all of his leitmotifs, either directly or through a derivation of them. For instance, we do not hear the theme of God, but the theme of the Father is derived from the theme of God, and that appears several times. The chant of the stars foreshadows the plainsong that will appear in subsequent movements, and the leaping accompanimental figures have a clear birdsong shape to them. With the firmament set and the nature of God depicted, Messiaen’s *Musikdrama* is underway.

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46 Ibid., 208.
47 Ibid., 206.
Chapter IX: Meditation II, “The Holiness of Jesus Christ”

The second meditation begins with another chant played in octaves. Instead of the chant of the stars, or Messiaen’s depiction of the music of the spheres, this chant is the Alleluia from the plainsong *Adorabo ad templum sanctum tuum* for the Feast of a Dedication of a Church. Messiaen had previously used this chant filtered through his modes of limited transposition in *Verset pour la fête de la dédicace* a decade earlier—his one short work for organ in the eighteen years between *Livre d’orgue* and *Méditations*. He would use the chant again in the fourteenth movement of *Livre du Saint Sacrament, Prière avant la communion* (prayer before communion). The use of this chant in his final three organ works indicates some level of its importance to Messiaen. It also indicates a common thread among praying before communion, dedicating a church, and the holiness of Jesus Christ.

The title of this chant translates, “I will adore at your holy temple.” The Alleluia is a song of praise; its notes are the first sounds we hear in the second Trinity meditation. As a contrast with *Verset*, in *Méditations* the chant is presented in its original Ionian mode. This difference of sonorities depicts the different focus between the two pieces. In the earlier *Verset*, Messiaen was recycling an ancient form (the verset) for the dedication of a physical building of a church or temple. Now in *Méditations*, he is focusing on the holiness of that dwelling, where Jesus Christ, present in the Blessed Sacrament, resides. (In *Prière avant la communion*, he uses the chant to focus on the act of adoring.) The purity of the ionian chant—again playing in octaves like the more chromatic chant of the stars—clearly reflects the holiness of Jesus. It also foreshadows both the simplicity of God through the chant used in the eighth meditation and Jesus as the Word Incarnate through the chant used in the sixth meditation. Perhaps most strikingly, if the austerity,

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48 Ibid., 211.
intensity, and seeming chaos of the first meditation was an overwhelming introduction into the world of *Méditations*, then the contrast of a diatonic harmony gives the listener, in the words of Gillock, a “welcome relief.”\(^{49}\)

The form of this meditation is likewise much simpler than the six-part form of the previous movement. It is a straightforward binary form with a coda. At the head of each section is the alleluia plainsong ending with a repetition of A’s that fade into the distance. This is followed by a musical representation of “You alone are Holy, you alone are the Lord, you alone are the most-high Jesus Christ” from the Gloria of the Mass. This section is briefly interrupted by the song of the troglodyte (a type of wren) and then returns to conclude on a half cadence the first time and on an authentic cadence in the second section. Both times the excerpt of the Gloria is followed by four birdsongs of varying lengths.

Improvisation influences abound in this movement. The strophic nature of the binary form (A-A’) enables Messiaen to recycle ideas and develop them much like an improvisation. The birdsongs should all be played as if they are spontaneous or improvisatory. Birdsongs themselves are improvisatory with repeating and alternating cells. The exact repetition of the Alleluia plainsong gives each section a clear starting point from which Messiaen can develop his other themes. The lengthening and reordering of musical material, such as the phrases of the troglodyte’s song, again showcases Tournemiresque improvisation techniques through the quick succession of motifs and development by expansion. Finally, this is the first movement to end with the call of the *Bruant jaune*, the birdsong Messiaen used in his original improvisations that were the inspiration for the suite.

\(^{49}\) Ibid.
While this meditation does not use the *langage communicable* or any of the leitmotifs for the Persons of the Holy Trinity, the motifs that Messiaen does use are the five different birdsongs and the opening plainchant. These motifs are equally important as the *langage communicable* and the Trinitarian leitmotifs, as they will appear throughout the rest of *Méditations*, often in conjunction with Messiaen’s other leitmotifs. If the first meditation was laying out the motifs of Messiaen’s creation, the second meditation lays out the ones that he borrowed from other sources (plainsong and birdsong). These motifs also introduce the first characteristic of God (His holiness) as well as the final characters in this Musikdrama: the birds.

This is the first movement to extensively feature the unaccompanied songs of birds. The fourth and ninth meditations will do so again, and the seventh meditation will superimpose birdsong with the *langage communicable*. After the song of the troglodyte in the middle of the Gloria excerpt, there are four more bird songs. They are the *merle noir*, *pinson*, *Fauvette des jardins*, and *Fauvette à tête noir*. The *Fauvette des jardins* (garden warbler) has the most extensive song both times, forming a lengthy centerpiece among the birdsongs. Perhaps it is a choice to reflect the innocence and holiness of the Garden of Eden or the holiness of the Garden where Mary Magdalene saw the risen Christ. The brief song of the *Fauvette à tête noir* (Eurasian blackcap) is underscored by a first-inversion A-major triad with an added sixth. This chord and the song of the blackcap restore the serene and holy A-major sonority first established by the opening chant.

These four birdsongs follow a half cadence in the first section, and an authentic cadence in the second section. These cadences clearly mark both halves of this movement, ending the presentation of God as holy and giving way to the birdsongs that follow. The cadences emerge

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50 While Messiaen technically composed his birdsong transcriptions, they have another source instead of being completely original as the *langage communicable* and Trinitarian leitmotifs are.
from clusters in the third mode of limited transposition, giving a small-scale recapitulation to the order emerging out of chaos theme, which dominated the first movement.

The opening plainsong alleluia is used to depict the holiness of God. Messiaen marks it “Dieu est saint” in the score. This characteristic of God is the first of six that will appear throughout the suite. As the characteristics of God are the final leitmotifs, their presentation and transformation are every bit as important as the other Trinitarian leitmotifs. This chant appears three times. The first two times it is identical, echoing each phrase from Great to Positive. These occurrences head the first and second halves of the movement. The final appearance of the chant is in the coda. This is the longest version of alleluia—an example of development through expansion. Messiaen initially begins with the same echoing technique, but after the second phrase on the Great, he breaks off. To conclude the second meditation, he slows down the plainsong alleluia and reharmonizes it in E mixolydian instead of A ionian—recalling the two cadences from the Gloria section of the movement. The echoing continues between Great and Positive, but this time against the backdrop of the Swell. Finally, the chant dies away and is answered by the call of the Bruant jaune—played on a nazar, two-foot, and one-foot—very high and distant. It is a call that will return lower and closer to us as we further understand the nature of the trinity.
Chapter X: Meditation III, “The true relation in God is really identical to his essence”

The third meditation solely comprises the langage communicable and Hindu rhythms. It is in a trio texture with one solo voice and two accompanimental ones. The three-part texture reflects the nature of God—three voices, one piece is analogous to three Persons, one God. The unbegotten soloist voice, the right hand, has two other voices that proceed from it. In the words of Gillock, “If one thinks of Méditations as an ‘opera,’ this movement is an ‘aria.’”51 The soloist right hand is proclaiming the very nature of God using the langage communicable to spell out the following quote from the Summa Theologica: “The true relation in God is really identical to his essence.”52

The right hand is played on the Swell reeds. It begins alone, unaccompanied spelling the word “relation.” (Articles are deleted in the langage communicable.) Just like God the Father existed unbegotten (the last word we heard in the langage communicable), the melody spelling out the relation of the other Persons in God begins by itself. The preposition “in” is represented by the locative case in Latin, and that motif appears next. As Messiaen is depicting the relation in God, the forward theme of God appears next. Then he sets the verb “to be” for the word “is.” As adverbs are deleted as well, Messiaen moves on to setting “identique” before moving onto the dative motif. After that motif, Messiaen spells out “essence” and uses the genitive motive to signify “of.” Finally, the theme of God appears again, but in retrograde.

If we look at what the right hand has spelled out, it is: “Relation in God is identical to essence of God.” It is not exactly the same words as used by St. Thomas Aquinas. However,
focusing on these words highlights the central point of this meditation and the passage from the *Summa* on which it draws. This is how the *langage communicable* works. In spelling out select words, it emphasizes them to highlight the mystery of the Holy Trinity. While neither the letters nor the words will be perceived individually, the musical themes they create have a distinctive shape that unmistakably signifies awe and mystery.

In using the *langage communicable*, the soloist traverses the entire range of the keyboard as it descends from the E above the treble staff to the D below the bass staff. In the center of this is the ascending and descending theme of God. The second presentation answers the first, and yet they are the same pitches. The relation of the two presentations of the theme of God (or musically, God) is thus identical to its essence. The same pitches (the essence of the theme) are played in opposite orders, creating a relation that balances the first while being composed of identical material.

The left hand and the pedal are secondary voices, but they contribute important aspects to meditating on the nature of God. To quote Messiaen’s explanatory paragraph, as translated by Gillock: “The accompanying voices use ‘deçi-tâlas’ (provincial rhythms of ancient India). In the left hand, in succession: *pratápaçe[khara* (the force which emanates from the forehead: dotted quarter note, sixteenth note, dotted sixteenth note), which one hears two times—*râgavardhana* (the rhythm which gives life to the melody) in its primitive form—*varnamanthikâ* (analysis of color) treated in diminution and by dotting the long values—then we start over again. In the pedal: it is the tâla *rangapradîpaka* (luminous color) which is repeated…One hears it in pairs, separated by silences of variable lengths.”

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53 Ibid.
Messiaen also referred to the deći-tâlas as “rhythmic personages,” and he compared their rhythmic interactions to actors on a stage, with one actor acting upon another while a third watches. In the third meditation, the voice watching is the solo melody in the right hand. While this voice is not a deći-tâla, the deći-tâlas provide a sort of commentary that enriches the melody. As the melody sings of the very essence of God, the rhythmic personages of the deći-tâlas give the music life, color, and force. The radiance of the melody on the Swell reeds is colored by the deći-tâlas of the left hand and pedal. The perfect harmony among the three voices (or Persons of the Trinity) comes into clearer focus throughout this meditation. The voices that began independently come together rhythmically when the soloist sings the final theme of God, as the pratâpacekhara and rangapradîpaka are superimposed against the theme in retrograde. Messiaen is indicating the luminous (rangapradîpaka) nature of God that emanates as a force among all three Persons of the Trinity (pratâpacekhara).

Chapter XI: Meditation IV, “I Am, I Am!”

The fourth meditation begins with a shock that announces the arrival of a chorus of birds. It also serves as a contrast with the ethereal nature of the preceding meditation. The cry of the *pic noir* (black woodpecker), the first of these birds, is marked in the score to be played *en fusée* (like a rocket). These three thirty-second notes are the first sounds that the listener hears in this movement. If this birdcall is an example of the “pebble in the water,” a contrasting stimulus or shock that propels the music according to the analysis of Timothy Cochran, then the following chord in the lowest two octaves of the organ is the harmonic backdrop that forms like ripples reacting to the initial propulsion. The contrast is not only effected by the very different rhythms, but the register and timbre of the organ. The opening birdcall is played on mixtures and reeds, whereas the answering chord is played on lower pitched, darker stops to heighten the registral contrast. This shriek of the *pic noir* followed by the chord of E-A-B-D-sharp-F-G-sharp marks the beginning of each section of this piece, dividing it into four sections of unequal lengths. Messiaen expands the length of each section, making the subsequent ripples that develop from the initial pebble drop of the *pic noir* longer and more complex. He also expands the length of the *pic noir’s* song itself at the beginning of the third and fourth sections.

The material that follows the opening birdcall and chord varies each time, but Messiaen connects the different motives. The first section follows the opening gesture with the call of the blackbird and then the owl, the second of which is heard as an echo, suggesting the ripples from the initial pebble drop fading away into silence, allowing a new shock to begin the second section.

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The second section has no birdsong at all after the initial cry of the woodpecker. However, the trills use a similar registration to the owl’s call in the first section, and the staccato sixteenth-note punctuations—played on stops of the highest unisons and mutations—form a microcosmic repetition of the opening gesture. Additionally, these punctuations foreshadow similar ones in the third section. The heart of the second section is a short trio, comprising three Hindu rhythms, to represent the Holy Trinity. The texture, timbre, and rhythm of this passage are a recollection of the third meditation. It’s an example of Cochran’s aesthetic of shock, interrupting the soundscape of birds and water before it disappears, but it also foreshadows the climax of this movement, where the birdsong and theological expression come together.

The third section is composed entirely of birdsong. The opening gesture has been expanded, and then Messiaen follows it with three pages of birdcalls and water drops, musically depicting what Gillock calls “being in the forest at night: you are all alone except for many birds whose songs you hear, one at a time, coming from different locations—some near, others far away. You never know which one will sing next.”\(^5^6\) This section is a series of shocks, all occurring in intervals that Cochran would refer to as “irregular periodicity.” Messiaen organizes this section a sort of miniature concerto for birds in which the *Grive musicienne* (song thrush) is the soloist whose song cuts through the rest of the texture as a shock and the other birds and drops of water are an accompanimental response. This effect is achieved through Messiaen’s registration and use of register. He sets up the three manuals of the organ with different sounds, making the Great the loudest with a four-foot reed and a mixture that cut through the rest of the texture; it also has the widest range of any other part, traversing the entire keyboard. On the Positive, he uses the highest stops for arpeggios suggesting a breeze rustling through the trees.

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\(^{56}\) Gillock, 216.
Finally, on the Swell, he draws the lowest flutes with higher mutations, creating a spatial, atmospheric registration that both provides a backdrop of water gently falling off trees in the woods and echoes of the song thrush’s music. Finally, Messiaen gives many colorful descriptors for how to play these passages: “bright, very dry like pizzicato, like drops of water, like torn silk.” These all contribute to the idea that this movement is a perpetual flow of one stimulating or shocking event and its ripples to another.

The final section of this movement opens with the longest version of the woodpecker’s cry. One of the punctuations and trills from the second section interrupts this section before the blackbird’s song returns. Finally, the culmination of the entire movement is a brief $f f f f$ toccata, which is a representation of God calling his name out to Moses: “I Am!” It is worth mentioning that this is not God speaking to Moses from the burning bush, but rather the second time Moses ascended Mount Sinai to receive the covenant after Moses had broken the original tablets containing the Ten Commandments—the culmination of the Mosaic law corresponds with the culmination of this movement. The rhythm of this toccata is short-long, like the woodpecker and blackbird’s songs. The first chords of it are the biggest shock in the piece, both from the dynamics and from this being the culmination of all the smaller shocks in the movement. The shocks have developed into what Cochran would call “dazzlement,” and that word is very appropriate here to describe the way Messiaen has woven together the various shocks that made up this movement into a culmination of the various motifs to represent the divine presence on earth. This overwhelming explosion of sound fades away into the owl call from the first section, which provides a recapitulatory example of the ripples from the pebble fading away.

The rhythmic organization of this meditation illustrates a non-traditional approach to time wherein rhythmic interruptions create the form. Returning to Cochran, he claims, and I agree,
that “irregular periodicity” is Messiaen’s way of challenging “the efficacy of meter,” which is Messiaen’s unorthodox approach to time in his music. Since birds sing in their own meter, and since divine time functions differently from human time, these musical events occur outside of the constraints of time imposed by regular meters, which can be seen through Messiaen eschewing regular metric divisions in the fourth meditation.

While all of the Méditations eschew regular metric divisions, the fourth meditation has even less regularity with its alternating among birdsongs. Messiaen has progressed from a trinitarian trio to the most prominently recurring characters in his Musikdrama: earth’s first musicians, the birds. They sing as a commentary between scenes until their songs merge to unite with God in proclaiming, “Je suis,” reflecting the beauty of His creation and the silence from which He speaks.
Chapter XII: Meditation V, “God is Immense, Eternal, Immovable—the Breath of the Spirit—God is Love”

We have arrived at the epic centerpiece of the work. If Méditations were an opera, there would be an intermission after this movement. As it is, the ending of the fifth meditation marks a halfway point through the second call of the Bruant jaune. This time it is played on an eight-foot bourdon in the highest octave of the organ. It is an octave and a half lower than we last heard it, with the bird moving closer to the audience, yet still distant. Just as the mystery of the nature of God is becoming clearer the longer we meditate upon it, the framing birdcall is becoming more present as well.

Messiaen outlines six sections in this movement. While that is certainly formally correct, timewise, two sections will be more apparent to the listener. The sixth section is almost as long as the first five combined. It is also a marked contrast to the other five in regards to registration and tempo. This is fitting, because the sixth section is a meditation on the most important quality of God—God is love. Messiaen is stating that we need just as much time to meditate upon God’s love as we do His other qualities.

The first section contains the first three qualities of God that are meditated upon in this movement: immenseness (omnipresence), eternality, and immovability (unchangingness). It also contains a fourth theme, the Breath of the Spirit. The second section repeats these four motifs and develops them through expansion, much like the second meditation did with its repetitions. The third section slowly states two other qualities of God: He is all-powerful and He is Our Father. From these three sections, emerge the fourth: a powerful toccata erupting from the wind of the spirit, God’s power, and His omnipresence. At the conclusion of the toccata, the fifth section emerges and repeats the motifs for God’s eternality, His power, and being Our Father.
Then the sixth section emerges after a silence. This section is played on the Swell gamba and celeste, another marked contrast with the full organ toccata, reed solos, and full Swell reeds used in the previous sections.

Writing a powerful toccata followed by a serene second half is something Messiaen did as far back as his second organ piece, *Diptyque*, which is subtitled, “an essay on earthly life and blessed eternity.” Messiaen used this type of movement for the epic centerpieces of both *La Nativité* and *Les Corps Glorieux*, *Le Verbe* (the Word) and *Combat de la mort et de la vie* (the combat of life and death) respectively. From these three works, the solemnity and sacredness suggested by Messiaen’s use of this technique should be apparent. The business and stress of earthly life gives way to heavenly bliss. The Word of God exists with Him in Heaven, but after it descends on full organ, a soft and slow second half shows the act of love of the Word becoming flesh. After the great struggle between the powers of death and life, the triumph of life is celebrated through peace and bliss, represented by extremely slow music played on the strings and celestes.

With the fifth meditation, the theme of “God is Love” forms the slow, serene second half. In the first half, Messiaen uses all sorts of colors and dynamics to represent God being omnipotent, unchanging, and the Holy Spirit proceeding from Him. All of this gives way to one of the most tender and most important sections in the entirety of *Méditations*: God is Love. That love is represented by a warm G major in the third mode of limited transposition on the Swell voix celeste. It foreshadows the last two sections of the eighth meditation, which are “My yoke is easy and my burden light” and “Had I but wings like a dove, I would fly away and be at rest.” Jesus’ yoke is easy and burden is light because of his love for us. Likewise, we will truly be at rest in God’s love. In the eighth meditation, the first of those sections is in G major, like God is
Love in the fifth. Then the concluding section of the eighth meditation is played on the same registration as “God is Love” while being in C major filtered through the third mode of limited transposition.

As the ninth meditation is a finale, or curtain call, for all the characters and motifs in Méditations, the eighth meditation would be the end of act two, were Méditations an opera (more detail in chapters XV and XVI). The G-major/C-major relationship between the endings of meditations V and VIII sets up dominant and tonic relationship. This relationship suggests that the wings of the dove that end the eighth meditation are flying away to rest in God’s love, as depicted in the fifth meditation. On a microcosmic scale, this G-major/C-major relationship will form the structure of the sixth meditation, and the half cadence/authentic cadence form that this creates was first foreshadowed in the second meditation (see chapter IX).

These connections to preceding and proceeding meditations strengthens the fifth meditation as the centerpiece of the work, and it creates a Wagnerian transformation of motifs and sonorities that enrich our understanding of the Holy Trinity. The third mode G major of the fifth meditation is transformed to a diatonic G major that is answered by a third mode C major in the eighth meditation. The eighth meditation will be the next time we hear the call of the Bruant jaune, and it will be the same pitches as in the fifth meditation, except the accompanying chord will be a C-major one, and not a G-major chord. Instead of ending on a flat-six scale degree as it does in the fifth meditation, it will end on a flat-three scale degree in the eighth meditation, coloring the chord by having a different third. The bird call and our understanding of God has transformed.

One final transformation in the “God Is Love” section is the chord that prominently featured in the first meditation as God created the universe (see chapter II). That chord has
returned, reminding us that God’s creation is an act of love. Instead of being one brief sonority in the seemingly chaotic texture, that chord appears at the beginning of the section and sets up several of the following harmonies, which emerge as the other chords descend from it through the third mode. This is another example of something that was initially barely perceptible coming into clearer focus as the meditations progress, or in other words, a transformation.

The fifth meditation also opens with a transformation. The motif for “God is immense” is a transformation of the theme of God. Messiaen shortens the duration of the first pitch and places the theme in the lowest two octaves of the organ. To capitalize on the lowness of the register, the motif is played on the unaccompanied Positive sixteen-foot bassoon—a stop of the Trinité organ which was immense and resonant.\(^\text{57}\) This is answered by the brilliance of the Swell reeds and mixtures proclaiming “God is eternal” three octaves higher. The chords played for this motif comprise two quick thirty-second notes followed by a quarter note; the two thirty-second notes repeat and are then followed by a whole note. The stark differences in duration of these chords give a clear indication of God existing outside of time, or being eternal.

These two motifs (God is immense and God is eternal) depict two different attributes of God and are fittingly different in their composition. They are followed by a third motif, titled “God is unchanging.” This motif is yet another stark contrast. Slowly pulsed chords on the sixteen and eight-foot foundations of the Great suggest sameness, especially through their sole use of the third mode of limited transposition. At this point in the meditation, Messiaen has used a solo stop, a reed chorus brightened by mixtures, and a foundation chorus. He has utilized the different families of stops, the different manuals, and three different registers all within the first

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 221.
page of the meditation. Thus, this opening contains several examples of threes in ones, depicting a subtle reminder of the nature of God.

Following these three motifs, the next motif is “the Breath of the Spirit.” As I stated in chapter VI, this theme is composed of the theme of the Father followed by the theme of the Son. As the theme of the Son is a loose retrograde of the theme of the Father, and as the theme of the Father is derived from the theme of God, this motif for the Breath of the Spirit is therefore also derived from the theme of God. The way that these themes proceed from one another connects this fourth motif with the first one that opened the meditation.

The Breath of the Spirit is not just the octaves comprising the pitches of the theme of the Father and that of the Son. It has two other sections as well, which is fitting for the third person of the Trinity. The octaves slow into trills, which are octaves at first, but then grow into clusters. Beneath the trills, the pedal plays fragments of the theme of God, providing another connection between all the material Messiaen has presented thus far in this meditation. Finally, the trilling clusters give way to flourishes that run up and down the keyboard, blowing the wind of the Holy Spirit from the highest heavens to the lowest depths.

The second section of this meditation is made up of the same four elements, except in repeating them, Messiaen transposes and expands them, much like he did in the second meditation. In the second iteration, the motif for “God is immense” is transposed to reach the lowest note of the organ, making His immensity felt even more. The second presentation of “God is immovable” ends on the same chord that the first presentation began, emphasizing the notion that God is unchanging. The “Breath of the Spirit” is longer, helping to foreshadow the toccata that is to follow.

58 Ibid.
Before we arrive at the toccata (the fourth section), there is a short third section that conveys another aspect of God: He is all-powerful and is our Father. Through the registrations, this section recalls both “God is eternal” and “God is immovable.” “God is eternal” used the Swell reeds in the upper register of the organ; “God is all powerful” uses them in the middle range. “God is immovable” used the foundations in the middle range of the organ; “Our Father” uses the foundations in the upper range. This reversal of registers while maintaining the same stops provides a sort of mirror with the first section. Messiaen’s decision to superimpose these two motifs provides another connection in retrospect with the separate motifs of the first section.

Finally, we have arrived at the toccata, which is the heart of this centerpiece movement. Recalling the Breath of the Spirit, the music ascends from the lowest register of the organ, played with the same sort of semi-staccato touch. It arrives at pulsating chords, quick but not too quick, that allow the listener to hear the shifting meters implied through the various groupings of notes. These mixed meter groupings hearken back to the technique Dupré used in *The World Awaiting a Savior*, which may seem odd for Messiaen to use for depicting the powerful Breath of the Spirit and God’s immensity. However, the nature of God is a mystery beyond our full comprehension, and God exists outside of time. Therefore, a mixed meter toccata which remains unpredictable in its presentation of beat hierarchies contributes to portraying this mystery. Also, a technique associated with “musical primitivism” would depict the power of God from the earliest ages, or His existence outside of time.

The mixed meter may make the chords of the toccata seem slightly chaotic, which hearkens back to the first meditation and its depiction of the dawn of creation. Another connection with the first meditation is the chord that appeared at the end of the second variation in meditation I (see example on page 9). In the fifth meditation, this chord begins to emerge in
the toccata, providing a subtle structure as to where phrases end—a descent of that chord interrupts the more repeated chords that form the main section of each phrase. As I said above, the chord will return in the final section of this meditation; therefore, it provides a link between the first five sections and the last one.

Finally, the pedal in the toccata plays the motif for “God is immense.” Superimposing this motif with chords that emerge from the “Breath of the Spirit” clearly suggests that the Holy Spirit is God, and the Three Persons are One. As a way of answering the descent of “God is immense” that occurred between the first two sections, in the toccata the theme ascends, building in intensity until it begins fragmenting. Fragmenting the theme is an answer to the expansion of themes that occurred between the first and second sections. The fragmentation also foreshadows the end of the toccata, which breaks down into smaller and smaller groups of chords until the chords transform into the fifth section: a repeated and expanded statement of “God is eternal.”

By composing the toccata this way, Messiaen ties it into all the other sections of this movement. The fifth meditation contains motifs for six attributes of God and one for the Holy Spirit (seven motifs total, the number of divine perfection). Through repetition of motifs, shared chords, and similar registrations Messiaen crafted a movement that shows all the various qualities of God are for one and the same God. While this movement could have been chaotic in having more motifs than any other, the careful placement of motifs and their relationships to one another provides a richer and deeper understanding of the mystery of the Holy Trinity.
Chapter XIII: Meditation VI, “The Son, Word and Light”

Like the second meditation, which is also about the Second Person of the Trinity, the sixth one is a strophic binary form. Once again, Messiaen begins both sections with plainsong played in octaves. This time the plainsong is the offertory chant for the Epiphany, “Reges Tharsis.” The lyrics of this chant are “The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall offer gifts, the kings of Arabia and Seba shall bring tribute.” Messiaen has paired this chant with his musical representation of John 1:4, “In the Word was the Life and that Life was the Light.”59 There is an obvious connection between that verse from the first chapter of John and the Epiphany; the three Magi followed the star (a light) to Bethlehem and found the Light of the world and the Word incarnate.

Another similarity between the second and sixth meditations is the focus on Jesus Christ Incarnate, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. While the second meditation focused on Him being holy, the sixth meditation focuses on Him being the Word of God and Light of the world. To reflect this quality of God, the sixth meditation is a tonal movement in the suite. The opening chant strongly suggests C major, the subsequent phrases are in C lydian, the first half of the movement ends on a huge G-major ninth chord (a dominant), and the meditation itself ends on a dazzling C-major chord with an added ninth and sixth. Messiaen strongly associated colors with different sonorities, and to him C major represented golden and white light.60 These colors are naturally associated with divine radiance, and the triple forte ending represents the splendor and power of the Word taking on human flesh.

59 Ibid., 224.
60 Ibid.
Chants for the feast of the Epiphany pervade this meditation. In addition to the offertory chant that begins each half of the meditation, the Alleluia for the Epiphany concludes both halves, and the Gradual for the Epiphany forms the middle part of both larger sections. These chants form three subsections within each larger half. Each subsection demonstrates a different approach to setting the plainsong, and all three reflect improvisatory techniques that transform the chant in various ways.

The first chant, the Offertory of the Epiphany, is set in dialogue with mode-three chords played on the Swell. The chant is played on the Great. Messiaen provides detailed tempi and articulations, all of which are to help the organist play the chant like a soloist singing it. The three sections of chords on the Swell build in intensity by becoming longer and a little bit faster with each presentation; yet, the one recurring similarity is they always resolve to a C-major first inversion triad. Not only does this establish C major as a tonic sonority, it foreshadows the glorious ending of this meditation—a small taste of the Divine Light of the Word Incarnate until we are ready to perceive it in its fullness. Each phrase of the chant continues from where the previous one left off, becoming longer and more familiar as the chant becomes a sort of refrain in this miniature rondo. From the use of chant in this section alone, the Word and the Light are already becoming clearer through Messiaen’s meditation.

In the next section, Messiaen uses a technique from the earliest stages of his career. He filters the chant through modes of limited transposition. The chant is the Gradual for the Epiphany, and it is harmonized in perfect and diminished fifths. In his early years, Messiaen did this to mask the origins of the material he borrowed, presenting it through a “deforming prism”
that transformed it into something completely in his own style. After two straightforward, unaltered presentations of plainsong in *Méditations*, it may seem odd that Messiaen returned to a compositional technique he had not utilized in years. What Messiaen has done in this section is combine the two ideas of the previous sections: chant and modes of limited transposition. Instead of presenting one then the other, he superimposes them. Therefore, the chant is heard filtered through a mode of limited transposition, while it is accompanied by chords in a different mode. This departure from tonality provides a development that makes the subsequent return to tonality all the more powerful. That return will be heard fully in the following subsection, but the Gradual chant’s phrase conclusions on a C-major triad with an added sixth in the bass continue to foreshadow the final chord of this movement, while reminding the listener of the first inversion C-major chords that ended the Swell phrases of the first section.

The third subsection contains the most contrast between the two halves. The first time it is in G, and the second time in C. This is different than the first and second subsections, which begin on the same pitches in both halves. The second subsection sets up both keys in which the Epiphany Alleluia will be played by ending on a G-major chord with an added ninth the first time, and ending on C-major chord with an added ninth the second time. These chords form a strong dominant-tonic relationship between these two sections. On the one hand, it is an improvisatory technique to have various motifs end on a dominant chord, to repeat them, and then to conclude on a tonic chord. At the same time, the dominant-tonic relationship of the final subsections creates a development and transformation of the chants.

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In this third section, Messiaen sets the Alleluia in nearly every harmonization imaginable. He begins in organum, playing perfect fifths in octaves—a clear recollection of the octave chant that opened this meditation. The fifths then stack upon each other, first forming ninth chords and then thirteenth chords—the limits of diatonicism. Then, the chant is harmonized through chords in Messiaen’s modes of limited transposition, beginning with two iterations of the chord used in “God is Love” in the fifth meditation and at the end of the second variation in the first. Finally, the modes give way to a dazzling triad, much like they did in the first section. However, this triad is in root position and has added ninths (and sixths the second time), providing the grandiose conclusion that the Word and Light of the world demand.

Having various phrases of chant answered by chords, then superimposing the chords with a chant, then presenting another chant in harmonizations that recall both sections provides a natural progression to this meditation. It also transforms each chant we hear, giving them a new context that builds from the Magi offering gifts to the Word Incarnate to a jubilant celebration of the Light of the world. Alternating among small phrases of chant is something Tournemire did both in his compositions and improvising. Messiaen’s use of that technique in the sixth meditation recalls the origins of Méditations. More importantly, by utilizing harmonization techniques from the Medieval ages to Messiaen’s own musical language, it also shows Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, as existing outside of time.
Chapter XIV: Meditation VII “The Father and the Son Love Themselves and Us through the Holy Spirit”

If the sixth meditation provided several transformations of the chant and chords within the movement itself, the seventh meditation provides transformations of motifs from the first five meditations. The theme of the Father returns from the first meditation, but in a different context. Like the second meditation, the seventh ends on an E-major sonority, except now that E major is a tonic instead of a dominant. The heart of the seventh meditation is trio in which one voice speaks in the langage communicable, just like the third meditation. The theme of the Son, first heard in the fourth meditation returns, again in a different context. Also, like the fourth meditation, birdsong features prominently in the seventh meditation. Finally, Messiaen introduces a new motif, “to love.” This motif is derived from the soprano line in the section “God is Love” from the fifth meditation. While the mysterious chords and foreign birdsongs may make the seventh meditation appear to be one of the most unique movements in Méditations, in reality it provides a cyclic unity to the suite.

The two birdsongs that Messiaen used in the seventh meditation are not French birds. The first is an unknown bird from Persepolis, and the second is the bulbul from Morocco. By using these two birds Messiaen is providing a contrast with the French birds of the second and fourth meditations. This contrast expands our notion of God, as birds from around the world sing His praises. It is a transformation of the birdsong in addition to the transformations of motifs from the other meditations.

The bulbul sings at the same time that we hear the langage communicable. This superimposition of a birdsong over the langage communicable is unique among the meditations. However, the commentary of the bulbul recalls the commentary of the accompanying voice in
the first meditation through its quicker durations and sparse, interjectory textures. It also recalls both the third and fourth meditations, which juxtaposed the *langage communicable* and birdsong, by playing the two most prominent features of those movements simultaneously.

The bulbul and the *langage communicable* are the first two voices that comprise the trio that forms the heart of this meditation. The third voice is a rhythmic ostinato in the pedal. Counting in sixteenth notes, the durations of this ostinato are: 5-5-4-4-3-3-2-2-1-1-1. The ostinato occurs six times with a twelfth and final pitch that progressively descends down the pedalboard, increasing the intensity of the ostinato. The themes for Persons of the Holy Trinity appear nine times total. The multiples of three may be coincidental, but with the trio texture, six repetitions of the ostinato, and nine appearances of Trinitarian leitmotifs it seems Messiaen is emphasizing the triune nature of God while musically spelling out the most important action of God: love.

The motif for “to love” appears four times (a combination of three plus one, perhaps reinforcing that there are three Persons and one God). Along with the motifs for the Latin declensions and words spelled out with the musical alphabet, the *langage communicable* states: “The Father and the Son love, through the Holy Spirit (the love which proceeds), themselves and us.”

That this declamation of this love is accompanied by birdsong unifies the two most notable elements of *Méditations*. Those elements are birdsong and the *langage communicable* with all its various leitmotifs.

Having birdsong and the *langage communicable* played simultaneously creates a duet that is sung in harmony to the accompaniment of the pedal ostinato. If *Méditations* were an opera, the bulbul would be one character, the Holy Trinity another, and the pedal ostinato would

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62 Gillock, 228.
be the orchestra. The texture of this trio has transformed the earlier trio of the third meditation, which was the last time we heard the *langage communicable*. Instead of a trio with one soloist and two accompanying voices, now there is a trio with two soloists and one accompanying voice. The ostinato of the pedal naturally recalls the repetition of the deçi-tâlas in the third meditation. Creating a trio with two soloist voices also recalls and transforms the bicinium of the first meditation where we initially heard the *langage communicable*. The duet of the first meditation with a soloist voice and accompanying voice has transformed into a duet of two soloists and one accompanying voice. The love of God which placed the stars in the heavens is now applied to creatures here on earth (the bulbul).

The simple presence of the bulbul while the other soloist proclaims the love of the Trinity deepens our understanding of the nature of God. In the first meditation, the soloist sung that God the Father is unbegotten through the *langage communicable* while a sparse accompanying voice derived from the theme of the stars demonstrated His first act of creation, which was born out of love. In the seventh meditation, the *langage communicable* proclaims the nature of God’s love, while a second voice sings in harmony with it. Since that voice belongs to a creature here on earth, it reinforces God’s love for all His creation. The similarity in texture between the bulbul’s song and the sparse star-derived accompaniment of the first meditation strengthens that comparison. Messiaen’s choice to add birdsong to the *langage communicable* takes the love of God in creating the universe and makes it personal by applying to it each and every creature He created.

Framing this meditation are seven mysterious chords, the song of the bird of Persepolis, and pulsing chords meant to imitate a horn call. All of these create a sense of mystery, reminding
the listener that while we can deepen our understanding of God, the nature of the Trinity will always remain something of a mystery due to our limited human understanding.

The seven mysterious chords all have different durations and different sonorities. Chords are an under-discussed aspect of Messiaen’s compositional techniques, and they were sometimes an instance when he abandoned the modes of limited transposition in favor of colors.\(^63\) That is unquestionably the case here. The mystery chords that open the movement are briefly in the third mode, but they quickly modulate away from it to no mode at all. The freely chosen harmonies provide a new perspective on the nature of God, and the mysterious backdrop that begins and ends this movement creates a soundscape for us to reflect on the nature of God’s love.

A mysterious backdrop is not unique to the seventh meditation. In the fourth meditation, the centerpiece of birdsongs had a harmonic backdrop of chords played on the Swell. The mysterious chords of the seventh meditation are also played on the Swell with very similar registrations: sixteen and eight-foot bourdons with the octavin and nazard. For the seventh meditation, Messiaen adds the tierce for a little more shimmer to the sound, adding to the aura of mystery.

The final of the seven chords is a chord of transposed inversion, which constitutes a dominant ninth with the leading tone replaced by the tonic and with two unresolved appoggiaturas added.\(^64\) There are three parts to this chord of transposed inversion: dominant, tonic, and chromaticism. Ending the mystery chords with this sonority, in which we hear two dissonances and a resolution simultaneously, concludes this section while setting the soundscape for the bird of Persepolis that follows. We hear this chord one other time in the seventh

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\(^{64}\) Ibid., 90.
meditation, when the mysterious chords return following the trio of the *langage communicable* and the song of the bulbul. The difference is this time it is the first chord of the seven. Messiaen has reversed the order of the mysterious chords, letting the listener see their colors forward and backwards.

While the return of the chords is marked by the chords themselves being played backwards, the durations of the chords maintain the same forward rhythm. Those durations are different for all seven chords, another element of their mystery. In the analysis of Wai-Ling Cheong, “Just as time is serialized through the intricate working of symmetrical permutations, the twelve-tone space is filled through the persistent superimposition of complex chords, in which colors prevail.” Applying this notion to the Trinity and *Méditations*, time belongs to God who remains unchanged, regardless of the ways in which we approach Him. Since the backwards chords follow the trio proclamation on the nature of God’s love, the mysterious chords with identical rhythms become a commentary that God’s love proceeds from Him in all directions (to the Persons of the Trinity and to humanity) while God himself remains unchanged like the rhythm of the chords.

The first mysterious chord of the seven is directly from mode three. The second is a chord of contracted resonance. Messiaen had multiple chords of contracted resonances, but this one, like the chord of transposed inversion, is a dominant ninth with the leading tone replaced by the tonic. It differs from the chord of transposed inversion, which has its root in the bass, because the two lowest notes for this chord of contracted resonance form a major second a half-step away from the tonic of the dominant ninth chord. The fourth mysterious chord is another chord of this type. Having three chords of the seven derived from dominant ninths provides an

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65 Ibid., 102.
66 Ibid., 96.
imperceptible unity to the mysterious chords, while transforming the sonorities of mode three into the dazzling splendor of the beautiful colors of God’s love.

The last two elements of this meditation are the bird of Persepolis and a horn call. Both follow the mysterious chords at the beginning and end of the movement, creating a small triptych to frame the central trio. Like the second meditation, Messiaen repeats the birdsong and develops it by expansion. I already mentioned that the E-major sonority that ends the seventh meditation was first heard in the second meditation. The second meditation also had a dominant-tonic relationship between its two halves (see chapter IX). The four chords of the horn call end on a B-seven chord with an added sixth the first time (a dominant) and end on an E-major chord the second (a tonic). Messiaen removes stops from the horn to call to suggest it fading away into the distance, a technique he used to end the fourth meditation. Even in these short sections, the seventh meditation provides a unity with the whole suite by incorporating registrations, techniques, and textures from the preceding six movements into one movement.
Chapter XV: Meditation VIII, “God Is Simple”

We have reached the final attribute of God to be contemplated in Méditations. He is simple, or He alone is God. In chapter XII, I called this meditation the final scene of Messiaen’s cosmic Musikdrama, with the following meditation being a sort of curtain call for the various motifs and characters. The eighth meditation is the final one to introduce new motifs—the Alleluia for the Feast of All Saints and a progression of chords titled “the Three are One.” The eighth meditation also recycles several of the Trinitarian motifs and the call of the Bruant jaune, continuing the Wagnerian transformation of themes.

At the same time this movement is an operatic conclusion, the ninth meditation is an organistic conclusion. Between the eighth and ninth meditations, Messiaen reflects the world of the symphonic organ writing that he knew so well. The eighth meditation has very strong similarities with the slow penultimate movement of an organ symphony, and the ninth movement is a toccata juxtaposed of various motifs. Continuing the organ symphony parallels, the first motif of the eighth meditation becomes an aria-like melody that reflects both the singing quality of an adagio from a French organ symphony and that of an operatic soloist.

The first motif in the eighth meditation is the Alleluia for the Feast of All Saints. It is used to express God’s simplicity or the notion that God alone is God. Gillock makes a point that the latter is a better translation of the concept behind the French word simple.67 This alleluia is the first plainsong in Méditations to be played as a monody. The previous chants were played in octaves. A single line of music expresses simplicity in a way that no other texture does. Like the chant used in the second and sixth meditations, Messiaen does not filter this chant through a

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67 Gillock, 232.
mode of limited transposition, but maintains the purity of its original pitch content, which is again fitting for expressing the notion of God as the source of all being.

The All Saints’ Alleluia is the basis for all four sections of the eighth meditation. It begins the first two sections as a solo, a harmonization of it forms the entirety of the third section, and the fourth section is a series of chords that emerge from final notes of the Alleluia. The mixolydian mode of the Alleluia forms a bridge between the celestial G major that ended the fifth meditation and the celestial C major that ends this one. Both the fifth and eighth meditations end with the exact same registrations, gamba and celeste on the Swell, as chords slowly fade away into the heavens. That alone clearly relates these two meditations, but introducing the G mixolydian at the beginning of the eighth meditation is a further means of linking the two endings. Since G mixolydian contains the same pitches as C major, the plainsong Alleluia maintains the same pitch center as the ending of the fifth meditation while using the same pitches that will end the eighth meditation.

Immediately following the All Saints’ Alleluia is new motif titled, “the Three are One.” It is a series of three chords in non-retrogradeable rhythm that expand in range over the keyboard. The groups of three chords repeat three times in different duration, but always maintaining the non-retrogradeable rhythm. The downward motion of the left hand is possibly reminiscent of the theme of the Father, while the upward motion could recall the theme of the Son. Playing these lines at the same time would musically suggest that the different Persons are one God.

The themes for each of those Persons follow this series of chords. This is the first time we have heard the three themes unaccompanied and in succession. After proclaiming that “the Three are One,” Messiaen clearly states who the Three are—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Hearing their themes immediately following one another and without accompaniment provides the clearest
musical depiction of God yet. Instead of hearing motifs partially obscured, we now hear them clearly. As St. Paul said in First Corinthians 13:12, “We see through a glass darkly, but then face to face.” Over the course of Méditations, Messiaen has made the nature of God clearer and clearer. It is a musical version of what St. Paul said in Corinthians, which has reached a culmination for the three Persons of the Trinity. Seeing them as one God will be the final step in Messiaen’s progression from through a glass darkly to face to face, and that will come in the ninth meditation.

Following the themes of the Persons of the Trinity is another musical representation of St. Paul. This next passage is inspired by Romans 33:11, “O the profoundness of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God.” This profundity is represented by the clarinet, quintaton, and nazard on the Positive. Starting on the lowest C of the organ, they play a phrase that is clearly reminiscent of the motif “to have.” This shaping reminds the listener that all we have comes from God and the riches of His wisdom and knowledge. The register of the Positive reed is another recollection of the fifth meditation, which began on the Positive bassoon in the lowest register. The profundness of the single line is deepened by a low C pedal point with a thirty-two foot, and then a series of chords contracting in register on the Swell. The contraction is unquestionably an answer to the expansion of “the Three are One.” Since the contracting chords begin with the same chord that has appeared throughout Méditations (the major triad with a seventh chord below it built from the major third below the root of the major triad), Messiaen has provided even more cyclic unity in his portrayal of the mystery of God’s nature.

For the second section, all of these elements are repeated and developed by expansion. This development recalls that of the second and sixth meditations, but it also maintains the improvisational influence on Méditations as a whole. The improvisational influence is also
maintained by the eighth meditation’s cycling from one theme to the next and its ending with the call of the *Bruant jaune*. The importance of improvisation on *Méditations* is not only due to its origin as an improvisation concert, but the freedom such a technique gave Messiaen in cycling from motif to motif as he meditated on the mysterious nature of God.

The third section is entirely composed of the Alleluia, only this time it is harmonized. With the harmonization, Messiaen gives the Alleluia a new symbolism. He pairs it with Matthew 11:28, “And Jesus said, ‘Come to me, all you that labor and are heavy burdened.’” The simplicity of God has transformed into a call to find rest in Him. The subsequent verse from Matthew’s Gospel, 11:30, links the beginning of the fourth section with the third. That verse is, “My yoke is easy, and my burden light.” Messiaen depicts this verse through the beginning of the celestial chords on the Swell, with a melody made up of the final notes of the alleluia. The melody is played alternating between the Great and the Positive on a sixteen-foot flue and either a nazard or a quinte. This registration creates an echo effect that foreshadows the remainder of the meditation, which will echo between different dynamics on the Swell before fading away to the softest sounds of the organ.

The Swell chords are paired with another scripture passage. Psalm 55:6, “Had I wings like the dove, I would fly away and be at rest.” The chords begin in mode three, and they transition into planing chords in a diatonic C major, which as I said above is reminiscent of the fifth meditation, which ended with a similar transition from modes of limited transposition to G major. The simplicity of the chant that began the eighth meditation is concluded peacefully and serenely by this final section. In the words of Gillock, “[This] is a celestial meditation that transports us far away into the heavens on the wings of a dove.”

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68 Ibid., 231.
chords that take us right up to heaven as the Swell diminuendos, seemingly forever. At La
Trinité, this effect was possible through an especially sensitive Swell box and the resonance of
the church. On many other organs, saving the final stages of the Swell box is a necessity, or on
large organs with more than two Swell strings one can remove additional string stops to lengthen
the diminuendo. The most important thing is to create the effect of leaving the world and its
worries behind for the glories of heaven, which Messiaen represents through a serenely slow and
peaceful ascent.

The final thing we hear in the meditation, upon arrival in heaven, is the call of the *Bruant
jaune*. It is at the same pitches of the fifth meditation, when we last heard it. However, it has
been transformed by the surrounding harmonies. The golden white light of C major surround the
D-flat and E-flat of the birdsong, instead of it being above the pitches of a G-major chord. It is
unquestionably an example of Wagnerian transformation of the *Bruant jaune*. It is also a
reminder of God’s love, which was the section where we last heard this birdcall. The eighth
meditation was about God’s simplicity, which returns to His love. It is from this love that He
calls all who are weary and labored to come to Him and gives them rest. Finally, as the seventh
meditation proclaimed, it is also this love that binds the Three as One.

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69 Ibid., 224.
Chapter XVI: Meditation IX, “I Am That I Am!”

We have arrived at a vision of God, and like Moses’ vision of God in the burning bush, this final meditation begins with the name God gave to Himself. It is represented by a variation of the theme of God, just like “God is Immense” from the fifth meditation was a variation of the same theme. This time, the theme is played on full organ in octaves, dramatically declaring that God is “I Am.” The final two notes of the theme (a descending tritone) are repeated in the pedal, giving the theme a descent over the full range of the organ. The repetition of the descending tritone gives a grandiose sense of finality to the theme, and its register recalls the fifth meditation, drawing a connection between the qualities of God meditated upon there and God’s name. This recollection is further strengthened through the subsequent birdsongs that return from the second meditation, and the chords of contracted resonance that immediately follow the pedal tritone—recalling the seventh meditation.

I previously referred to this meditation as a curtain call, because in the words of Gillock, “No real new material is presented.” The highly juxtaposed toccata that forms the majority of this movement may seem to contain new material, but on closer analysis, it becomes apparent that most of it is from the themes of the Father and the Son and the Breath of the Spirit from the fifth meditation. Framing this toccata are a swirling, crescendoing ascent before it and a swirling, diminuendoing descent after it. These sections are the closest to anything new in the ninth meditation, but they are transitional links that connect the theme of God to the birdsong that follows, building up energy for the toccata the first time, and dissipating energy the second time.

The toccata begins following the second statement of “I Am That I Am!” Its conclusion will be followed by a third statement of the same (three statements total for the triune God). A

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70 Ibid., 234.
rising ascent of thirty-second notes that happens three times as well frames the toccata. Each
time the thirty-second notes are expanded in both length and range.

Like the toccata in the fifth meditation, this one’s theme is also in the pedal. That theme
is composed of fragments of the theme of the Son and the theme of God. Unlike the fifth
meditation’s toccata in which the part for the hands is chords of transposed inversion, the part for
the hands in this toccata is the Breath of the Spirit—played in octaves and then harmonized. To
quote Gillock again, “Thus, the three persons of the Holy Trinity are united. The three are
one.”

Each time the elements comprising the toccata come back they are varied and developed
by expansion, all while maintaining the unity of the three themes. At one point, about halfway
through, it appears the toccata is going to end when the descending tritone in the pedal returns,
followed by a chord of contracted resonance. At this point, the frequency of alternating material
increases. The Breath of the Spirit returns on one manual at a time, and interrupting each phrase
of that is the pedal playing fragments of the theme of God followed by chords of transposed
inversion. This happens three times—once with the Breath of the Spirit on the Swell, then on the
Positive, and then on the Great. Each time Messiaen expands the theme and makes it louder.
These alterations between motifs build the energy through their frequency, and they culminate in
the longest statement of the breath of the spirit in the whole suite—both for this movement and
the fifth one. When the theme of the Son enters in the pedal in the middle of this section, it is
likewise the longest theme.

The energy of these alternating sections appears as if it will come to an end when the
toccata plays nine repeated descending tritones. However, instead of returning to the theme of

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71 Ibid., 235.
God, which would be expected since that happened the previous time that we heard the descending tritones, there is one final burst of energy as the final appearance of thirty-second notes traverses the entire range of the organ. This is the third statement of this motif, and it leads into another series of chords which set up the final exclamation of “I Am That I Am!”

This final exclamation repeats the concluding tritone of the theme three times, with three chords of contracted resonance (one following each tritone repetition). It should be the most overwhelming moment of the suite, surpassing that of “I Am!” in the fourth meditation. At the climax of this curtail call, this triple repetition is the most dazzling view of God as we have come the closest to understanding His nature as we can. The silence that follows this should not only allow the sound to die away in the room, but also give the listeners a chance to process all that they have heard.

From this point on, the meditation winds down, returning the listener to earth from the glorious mystery they have been contemplating. Just as birdsong introduced the toccata, Messiaen uses birdsong to conclude it as well.

The birdsongs in the ninth meditation are those of the *Fauvette des jardins* and *Fauvette à tête noir*, both of which prominently sing in the second meditation. Their return here provides a microcosmic scale of this movement. The slower and more subdued song of the *Fauvette à tête noir* is interspersed with livelier, more toccata like song of the *Fauvette des jardins*. The toccata itself alternates among *modéré* chords, *vif* diads, *un peu vif* octaves, and even *très modéré* pedal themes. All these elements form an unusual compilation of slower and faster elements that come together in dialogue, much like the two birdsongs.

In the second meditation, the *Fauvette des jardins* and *Fauvette à tête noir* originally sings of the holiness of Jesus Christ, who came to earth and took on human flesh. Here, they
form a link between the divine musical vision of God in heaven and the earthly life we will have to return to once this meditation ends.72 If the birth of Jesus Christ was the reconciliation of heaven and earth, then Messiaen is using the song of the Fauvette des jardins to be an earthly reminder of that link.

The song of the Fauvette à tête noir is accompanied by an A-major first inversion chord with an added sixth, just as it was the in the second meditation. That chord becomes the final chord that concludes the entire suite and the backdrop for one final birdsong. The last bird to sing is fittingly the Bruant jaune, which states its song one final time. This time it is played on the highest E-flat and F of the pedal on a four-foot flute, sounding a minor seventh lower than we last heard it in the eighth meditation. In a manner of speaking, the Bruant jaune has descended to the front of the stage, becoming no longer distant as it warmly reminds us of the divine mystery we have meditated upon. The accompanying chord is in the center of the organ’s register too, and not in the distant final octave. The pitches of the Bruant jaune’s song are the flat fifth and sixth of the chord against which they are played. This is the same relationship the birdsong had to its accompanying chord in the fifth meditation, which ended the first half of Méditations. In the eighth meditation, the pitches were the flat second and flat third of the accompanying chord. This return to the flat fifth and flat sixth provides one final similarity with the fifth meditation, which in turn balances the end of Méditations with its halfway point.

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72 Ibid., 238.
Conclusion

Messiaen’s Musikdrama for organ ends with a whisper, as do so many of his works. However, in this whisper the listener can hear the still, small voice of God that was present from the dramatic opening of the suite, which depicted the creation of the universe. This is one final transformation—not of musical themes, but of the listener’s understanding of God.

Throughout the course of the suite we have heard God the Father create the stars and planets; we have heard the holiness of Jesus Christ, who took on human flesh; we heard the langage communicable proclaim the nature of God’s essence; we heard birds sing the praises of God; we heard seven different attributes of God proclaimed; we heard that Jesus is the Word and Light of the world; we heard the nature of God’s love for all Persons of the Trinity and for us; we heard God call us to Himself to give us rest and peace; and finally, we heard God proclaim His name. It was a dramatic journey for the dramatic purpose of understanding a mystery.

In many ways it is fitting that Méditations originated as an improvisation, an art form in which one creates in the moment, the only time which we can meditate upon God. It is just as fitting that those improvisations were for the centennial of a church named La Trinité and for the celebration of a rebuild of the organ. Messiaen merged writing for his own instrument with his faith in a way that was unique in 1969, creating a suite that draws from not only his own organ tradition, but improvisation, and Wagner as well. It was an eclectic blend of styles for one of the most ambitious subjects for which he had composed: the nature of God. The result was a transcendent, meditative experience in which his music was an earthly partaking in something far greater beyond itself. For Méditations that was the Trinity, and it was Messiaen’s unique way of sharing his faith and his music.
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Scores and Recordings
