

Making the Invisible Visible: The Culture, Theology and Practice of Olivier Messiaen's Improvisations

for Dennis Hunt

‘Christ alone is the way and he is invisible.’¹

‘Art does not reproduce the invisible; rather, it makes visible.’²

Spontaneity and Grace

In his novel *Doctor Faustus* (1943-47), Thomas Mann describes the attendant audience's discussion of a piano improvisation by the fictional composer Adrian Leverkühn:

The limitations were debated, which this conception had to tolerate, by virtue of culture, tradition, imitation, convention, pattern. Finally the human and creative element was theologically recognised, as a far-reflected splendour of divinely existent powers; as an echo of the first almighty summons to being, and the productive inspiration as in any case coming from above.³

Mann set out a convincing framework for the discussion of improvisation. While he was clearly aware that improvisation is not the spontaneous art that it appears to be - it can be practised and learned like any other skill - Mann's focus was on the process by which artistry transcends artisanship, and then on the way in which artistry is itself subsumed. Even so, his imagery of improvisation as a reflection of divine splendour and as an ‘echo of the first almighty summons to being’, implies the somewhat

¹ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1973), 115. My thanks to Anna McCready and Peter Bannister for their comments on this work.

² Paul Klee, ‘*Kunst gibt nicht das Sichtbare wieder, sondern macht sichtbar*’. From *Inward Vision* (1958), *Creative Credo* (1920), cited in the *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 4th edition, ed. Angela Partington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 402.

³ Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn, as told by a Friend*, trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter (Penguin Modern Classics, 1968; first published by Secker and Warburg, 1949), p. 112.

traditional mythology that surrounds improvisation where the artist, as spiritual intermediary and visionary, leads humanity towards an unknown spiritual utopia. In this way, the improviser becomes the mouthpiece of a divine dialogue: human and creative elements are informed by the divine presence and inspiration ‘from above’.

At the heart of this dialogue is spontaneity and its origins. Around the same time as Mann wrote his novel, the somatic educator Moshe Feldenkrais speculated about these issues in his book *The Potent Self*, when he stated that:

Painters, mathematicians, composers, and everybody else who has ever done anything worthwhile, always had to learn to paint, to think, and compose - but not in the way they were *taught*. They had to learn and work until they knew themselves sufficiently to bring themselves to the state of spontaneity in which their deepest inner self could be brought up and out. Such people are not free of compulsion—much to the contrary. The difference is that what they produce out of the state of compulsion has some value because of the true spontaneous nature of the production.⁴

In the spirit of Socratic investigation, where does spontaneity come from? For the Catholic composer and improviser Charles Tournemire (1870-1939), grappling with this issue in his *Précis d'exécution de registration et d'improvisation à l'orgue* (1936), this question had a distinctly theological root:

The art of improvisation is like an illumination which suddenly brightens the soul of the artist, the door towards the heights, and the procedures disappear completely when the thought is noble, the emotion real.

It is thus that the improviser feels himself sustained as though by a mysterious force in which he finds beautiful periods, beautiful accents, without the narrow and infantile preoccupations that ‘comb’ [*peigner*] an indigent counterpoint in two parts, a *cold* trio [Tournemire's italics] of keyboards ... or some other combination ... All *preparation* therefore is opposed to this special

⁴ Moshe Feldenkrais, *The Potent Self* (Berkeley, California: Frog Resources, 1985), xl. The precise dating of this book is at present unknown but in the ‘Foreword’ to the book, Mark Reese states that: ‘Feldenkrais began writing *The Potent Self* in London in the late 1940s...’. Reese goes on to discuss the fascinating reasons why the book remained unpublished until one year after the Feldenkrais’s death.

art. This does not signify, however, that any fault is therefore to be let go, *without will*, to the display of disorder! Quite the opposite.⁵

Despite inconsistencies, and Tournemire's not so veiled attack on the perceived didacticism of Marcel Dupré (evidenced in his comments on counterpoint), Tournemire points beyond the issues discussed by Adrian Leverkühn's audience (in Mann's novel), 'imitation, convention, [and] pattern', towards improvisation as a medium for the discovery of God.⁶ For Tournemire, the player is not subsumed, as if he were some puppet-like tool for the dissemination of the divine through music, but is engaged in an unwitting dialogue with that part of himself that St Augustine describes as 'more inward to me than my most inward part'.⁷ This process entails an involuntary giving of the self so that something more, perhaps of what is truly himself (and therefore not readily recognisable), can be returned. Writing in his *Centuries of Meditations*, the seventeenth-century mystical writer Thomas Traherne (ca. 1637-74) articulated this phenomenon:

Were you able to create other worlds, God had rather that you should think on this. For thereby you are united to him. ... The world within you is an offering

⁵ Charles Tournemire was a luminary in the pantheon of Parisian organ improvisers of the 1920s and 1930s; Messiaen was a regular visitor to his *tribune* at Ste-Clothilde. Charles Tournemire, *Précis d'exécution de registration et d'improvisation à l'Orgue* (Paris: Eschig, 1936), 102. Tournemire states that long preparatory studies are required; 'that is to say the profound understanding of harmony, of counterpoint above all. It is important that every artist attracted by this fugitive and sometimes marvellous genre, understands that he may only honestly be able to improvise if, first of all, he has the prudence *to arm himself* [Tournemire's italics] in the manner of which we will speak.' He emphasises that the serious artist must avoid clichés and espouse knowledge of all music, technique, the organ, architecture, form and the ability to manipulate material.

⁶ Dupré's music and teaching reveal a profound interest in counterpoint. See in particular the early *Trois Préludes et Fugues* (1912) Op. 7, which, technically and musically, blaze new trails for French organ music. Tournemire was exceedingly displeased when Dupré was appointed to the organ professorship at the conservatoire in 1934. See p. 63 of Tournemire's unpublished *Mémoires (1886-1939)* in which, after describing the announcement of Dupré's nomination, Tournemire insinuates that Dupré received this through discreditable means, he writes: 'Dans cette triste affaire, il ne faut retenir qu'une chose: le manque de décence de mon "rival" vis-à-vis d'un artiste de mon age pour le moins! Le manque de franchise de Rabeau, qui m'avait promis depuis longtemps ce poste...' (Tournemire's emphasis)

⁷ *The Confessions of St Augustine*, trans. E.B. Pusey (London: Dent, 1970), 40.

returned, which is infinitely more acceptable to God Almighty, since it came from Him, that it might return unto Him [...]...The material world is dead and feeleth nothing, but this spiritual world, though it be invisible, hath all dimensions, and is a divine and living being, the voluntary Act of an obedient Soul.⁸

Yet the reciprocity Traherne perceives is certainly not guaranteed (and remains unlooked for), neither is it a closed circuit with the player, like the nineteenth-century image of genius, in communion with his art, and therefore with the sublime (a secular reflection of his maker); reciprocity is an engine that requires fuel and a spark to ignite it.

The mysterious gift of love (a reflective of divine love), as an *action de grâce* can tell us something about the power and profundity of this process. For the participant, love, like comedy also, brings with it an involuntary and even irrational outpouring of oneself. This spontaneous act of love or laughter may be beyond control and understanding, but its effect (upon return or withdrawal back to the self) may be a transformative realisation that confronts and even improves us. So when Tournemire speaks of 'mysterious forces of sustenance', he is, like Mann when he writes of the 'splendour of divinely existent powers; as an echo of the first almighty summons to being', attempting not only to understand the source of inspiration but, again, in a circular vein, to provide a description of the serendipity and revelation of that which is returned. For Tournemire, awareness of this dividend seems to awaken a recognisance of self and reality, which, like the momentum of a swinging door, is difficult to close or resist.

For Christian artisans such as Tournemire or Messiaen, serendipity is the humanist flipside of grace, the loving action of God through Christ given to imprint itself on the hot wax of humanity. If, for the theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, grace 'does not denote something which would be added to an already completed man, but is the form in which man is definitively himself', then improvisation, through the spontaneous process of giving and the mystery of the gift that is returned, may be understood as a cathartic means of bringing about this realisation of grace

⁸ Thomas Traherne, *Centuries of Meditations, The Second Century: Meditation 90* (Fintry: The Shrine of Wisdom, 2002), 96.

while confirming and enriching mankind's own sense of its humanity.⁹ Christ's humanity allows him to be not merely an archetype but an image that is transferred to humanity so that we are also granted the freedom to share in this grace.¹⁰

To the musician with a religious imagination, the freedom to enter this space is a door opened by the apparent intangibility of improvisation. The listener is invited not only to participate in the completion or fulfilment of the process of creation, but also to engage in a process of renewal, as each improvisation disappears only to demand a new improvisation from the player. For a Christian such as Messiaen, therefore, humanity is given freedom to engage at a fundamental ontological level, with grace and the image of Christ, so that he may carry forth this awareness through a continual musical discourse facilitated in part by the obligations of performing music within the Catholic liturgy.¹¹ It is in this arena especially that improvisation can become a vessel for a continuing dialogue between God and humanity.¹² In the words of Balthasar:

⁹ Angelo Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Theological Style* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 48-9.

¹⁰ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, Volume III: *The Dramatis Personae: The Person in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco, Ignatius press, 1978), 525: 'The triune God does not appear onstage alongside other characters but in them (...) The divine can thus irradiate and transfigure creaturely reality only because what is created, as such – which is utterly and absolutely *not* God – is an *image* of God that can never be totally destroyed, even by sin. Being, in its hierarchical stages and degrees of interiority (existence, life, feeling, thinking and loving) simply cannot be anything but a trace, an image, of eternal, triune being; and the more vibrant, communicative and fruitful it is, the more clearly it manifests this relation.' On p. 458 he writes: 'Every human being who is awakened to freedom owes his existence ultimately to an ultimate freedom. At its very origin, therefore, infinite freedom is communicative; it is not purely transcendent and self-sufficient.' On p. 459, note 7, Balthasar also states: 'The exchange of address and answer, the encounter of love and mutual recognition, completing and confirming the two persons, is an image of the Holy Spirit. If we keep this in view, the act of (Augustinian) self-knowledge is orientated directly towards the absolute, triune God.'

¹¹ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, Vol. III, 458. Balthasar writes: 'I only possess my own incommunicable subjectivity insofar as I leave room in myself for other subjects. In this way, I experience the structure of being as such, which thus contains an "image" of the trinitarian constitution of absolute Being.' Balthasar is referring here to God.

¹² Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, Vol. III, 459.

Finally there is the awareness that, having been addressed by a free, loving Thou, I am both given an answer and called to give one in return. The gift implies a task. Having been awakened to free subjectivity, I have also been entrusted with a “mission”; what I have been given is to be transformed and freely given back, and in this way I shall not lose it: on the contrary, now I shall really possess it for the first time.¹³

Improvisation in this sense becomes a searching engagement. The anxiety of possibilities inherent in improvisation and its inherent instability turns a spotlight on the dialogue between the visible and invisible (and the unseen), between presence and absence, and, indeed, on the difference between something and nothing. But it is this very sense of incompleteness and the embracing of the incompleteness of improvisation that allows it to be such a potent means of spiritual dialogue. In improvisation, the perpetual quest for the horizon beyond the shifting formulation of the visible - elements of culture and tradition, the sensibility of fallibility, the craggy physiognomy of musical taxonomies, systems and decisions silhouetted on the horizon of the imagination - complements not only the utopian sense of praise and hope and the eschatological longing inherent in modernity. It also illuminates a deep human need: a search for that which can be given, and an awareness of the depths that can be returned.

This is perhaps why, for Messiaen, catching the muse that flew from his organ loft, through recording, re-creating, and adapting his extempore creations in his compositions, was fundamental his own creative process. In order to understand something of the way in which improvisation became an intrinsic element of Messiaen's compositional development, we can usefully turn to another source of tradition and culture in Messiaen's development, his organ improvisation tutor at the conservatoire, Marcel Dupré (1886-1971).

¹³ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, Vol. III, 458.

Improvisation and Composition

In any discussion of Messiaen's tutors, care must inevitably be taken not to overemphasise their role in his development. Above all the concern in the following discussion is not with the revelation of 'influence' (this can be found in Messiaen's music without looking too hard), but to establish how (to paraphrase Feldenkrais), Messiaen's feeling of identity (security) and his self-image was cultivated in his dependence period, and how, as this dependence diminished, he became a more potent personality, and began to change both earlier established patterns, and the tradition from which his music derived.¹⁴

If Tournemire had provided a spiritual and ideological locus for Messiaen's work, then Dupré built upon the foundations of Messiaen's organ technique that had impressed even Dupré himself.¹⁵ Messiaen has said that Dupré helped him *to discover himself* [my italics] 'by making me work methodically at improvisation'; a pedagogy evident in Dupré's own improvisation treatise.¹⁶

One of Messiaen's most interesting early organ works is the *Diptyque (Essai sur la vie terrestre et l'éternité bienheureuse)* (1929-30), dedicated to Paul Dukas and Marcel Dupré, because it so clearly bears the marks of Messiaen's formal training in Dupré's *classe d'orgue* and the burgeoning personality that would flower in *L'Ascension* (1933).¹⁷ The first half of the piece (*la vie terrestre*) reflects the musical language of Dupré's *Symphonie-Passion* (1924) for organ, and in particular his

¹⁴ Feldenkrais, *The Potent Self*, 11. On p. 40 Feldenkrais writes: 'The need for security is directly related to dependence. It is not surprising, therefore, to find dependence and the craving for independence in the background of all human activity. In every habit of thought, in every action, it is possible to trace the effects of this factor.'

¹⁵ Dupré's influence on Messiaen is well documented, not least by Dupré himself. See Marcel Dupré, 'Du temps où la gloire', in 'Olivier Messiaen a 50 ans', *Le Guide du concert et du disque*, Paris, année 39, no. 229 (April 3, 1959), p. 1090. 'I have the interior pride to have been the first to have given Messiaen confidence in himself as a composer, several months before he knew Paul Dukas, to whom he was not slow in giving all his affection.' Dupré was amazed at Messiaen's aptitude for the organ, and at the almost devotional zeal with which he approached his studies. For more details see Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Messiaen* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), 22.

¹⁶ Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), 30.

¹⁷ N.B. The word 'Essay' in the title suggests that the work has a pedagogical directive. The *Diptyque* was Messiaen's first work to appear in print (May 1930). See Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Messiaen*, 26.

Scherzo (1919) for organ. It is dominated by a *recherché* contrapuntal style (somewhat uncharacteristic of Messiaen).¹⁸ In his obituary of Dupré (1971), Messiaen paid homage to Dupré's *Symphonie-Passion* in language that reveals both the long shadow of Dupré's presence in Messiaen's dependence period, and also the degree to which Messiaen's own musical aesthetics had reconfigured his understanding of Dupré:

I have often read, played, and replayed it since. It is such [*encore*] a prophetic work. The Peons and Epitrites (rhythms of 5 and 7) of the first movement, the oriental and modal poetry of the second, the overwhelming *Crucifixion* (where one finds the germ of the future *Chemin de la Croix*), the flashes of stained-glass windows, the prayer [*la mantée*] in glory, the cosmic halo of the Resurrection: all the organ literature derives from this beginning, this first indispensable monument!¹⁹

It is unsurprising therefore that Messiaen's *Diptyque*, a work written two years after Messiaen heard Dupré's *Symphonie-Passion*, should act almost as a companion piece to Dupré's work. While Dupré addresses (chronologically) the turmoil of the world before Christ the Saviour, Christ's birth, death and finally his resurrection in the four movements of the symphony, Messiaen complements this ascendant telos by contrasting the location of ontological states. It is perhaps deliberately ambiguous whether the titles of the two parts of Messiaen's *Diptyque* (*la vie terrestre* and *l'éternité bienheureuse*) refer to Christ's life, or the life of humanity (or the soul), or if they are to be understood as images of human life without Christ ('the anguish and useless torment of life' as Messiaen explains in a programme note to the first performance of the work), followed by the 'peace and charity of Christian paradise' i.e. life with Christ.²⁰ This latter interpretation might seem more germane to the way

¹⁸ In Dupré's *Scherzo*, see p. 6 system 3 and 4. These systems have a similar texture to several passages in the first section of Messiaen's *Diptyque*.

¹⁹ Olivier Messiaen, 'Hommage à Marcel Dupré', *Courrier Musical de France*, no. 35 (1971), p. 113. Dupré's *Symphonie-Passion* was originally an improvisation created in the Wanamaker store in Philadelphia in December 1921. Its first performance as a written piece was on 9 October 1924 in a concert at Westminster Cathedral, London. Messiaen attended the French première of the work in June 1928.

²⁰ See Messiaen's programme note for his first performance of the *Diptyque* on 20 February 1930, cited in Hill and Simeone, *Messiaen*, 26.

in which the first section (*la vie terrestre*) is metrically almost exactly transformed in the second section (*l'éternité bienheureuse*), but transfigured in a long languid melody of the utmost serenity and languor that looks over its shoulder to the *Communion* pieces in Tournemire's *L'Orgue Mystique*, Messiaen's *Le Banquet Céleste* and forward to the *Extrêmement lent, tendre, serein* section of *Combat de la Mort et de la Vie (Les Corps Glorieux)*. Here is an outline of the form of *Diptyque*:

la vie terrestre:

Section	Bar	Structure (in bars)	Key
A	1-16	(4+4)+(4+4)	c (modal consequent)
B	17-30	(3+3)+(2+4)+(3)	c – E (c#) – g - (dominant preparation)
a1	31-47	(4+4)+(4+4)	G
b1	47-61	(3+3 ½)+(1 ½+4)+3	g – b flat – f - (dominant preparation)
a2	61-76	(4+4)+(4+4)	f - e flat
b2	77-101	(3 ½+3 ½)+(7 ½+7 ½)+3	e flat – f# (c#) - modal - g (c) - (dominant preparation)
a3	102-117	(4+4)+(4+4)+3	c (dominant preparation)

l'éternité bienheureuse:

a4	121-6	(3+3)	C
b3	127-35	(2 ½+3 ½+3)	C – modal – C
a4	136-41	(3+3)	C
b4	142-51	2 ½+3 ½+4)	C – modal – C

The form of the *la vie terrestre* section is relatively simple, revealing an overall movement to the higher dominant (g), the lower dominant of (f), a stabilising move to the tonic, followed by a dominant preparation which leads to a final section in the tonic (c).²¹ The academic contrapuntal style of the first section (use of canon, diminution, augmentation) is unusual for Messiaen, and owes much to Dupré's love of form and counterpoint.²² Each a section of the first part contains a registrally and texturally articulated 8+8 bar antecedent-consequent structure, and uses a half-

²¹ This sort of tonal trajectory is used in *La Mort du Nombre* and *Prière du Christ (L'Ascension)*.

²² This is evident not only in Dupré's own compositions but in his preference for contrapuntal forms in his recorded improvisations.

cadence and a full cadence in the appropriate spots, just as Dupré states in his improvisation treatise. A distinct break is then made before the **b** section, which clearly functions as what Dupré in his treatise calls a 'deductive commentary', and is in the *phrase ternaire* form of D'Indy (like the first four bars of the piece except expanded over 14 bars).²³

If one imagines that this piece was improvised, the skill of the player is tested in sections **a1**, where he is asked to play the theme in augmentation in the l. h. and to create an accompaniment in the r. h., and in section **a3**, to play the theme in canon. One can almost see Dupré peering over Messiaen's shoulder and gently nodding his approval.²⁴ The second section of the piece, *l'éternité bienheureuse*, is created from the material of the first. The transformation of the initial melody is evident:

Ex. 1 *Diptyque: la vie terrestre* (opening) and *l'éternité bienheureuse* (opening)

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Modéré (50= ♩)

Tres lent (58= ♩)
G. Fl. harm.

²³ *Phrase ternaire*: three melodic periods, separated by two reposes: two modulatory cadences and one tonal (i.e. Schoenbergian 'sentence'). Vincent D'Indy, *Cours de Composition Musicale* (Paris: Durand, 1912), Vol. I, 41-4. See also *Technique de mon langage musicale (TMLM)*, trans. John Satterfield (Paris: Leduc, 2001), 44.

²⁴ There are also other classical aspects to the piece such as the dominant preparation for the final statement of the theme (b. 99-101), and the way in which register, rhythm and motivic fragmentation combine to atrophy the theme at the end of the first section in preparation for the second section of the work.

In contrast to *la vie terrestre*, where rich foundation stops (together with the strict metrical divisions) dramatise the turmoil of the world-weary soul without Christ, the gentle undulation of the organ's string stops, serene flute solo and the extreme *lenteur* which undermines any sense of the formal regimen of *l'éternité bienheureuse*, evoke the soul (or Christ's) liberation. The improvisatory quality of the r. h. flute melody embarks on a heavenward voyage, casting off the earthly sloth of the pedals to end in *l'éternité bienheureuse* on the highest note of the organ keyboard (c⁴).

The rigorous structure of the first half of the piece is present yet sublimated in the second half of the piece, almost as a metaphorical image of the way in which improvisation once learned may become a pathway to artistic freedom and eschatological release. The transformation of the theme, as a visible image of spiritual and/or ontological change, does not merely imply the kind of separation of time and eternity (an axiom of Messiaen's musical philosophy discussed below) that could also be inferred from the bi-partite form of the piece. Rather it suggests that the Catholic belief in a bodily resurrection after death takes place in a space that is a mysterious change of state in which time does not end, but, like our own mortal state, is changed.

Messiaen speaks of this change as a moment when we will be dazzled by an excess of truth. His idea of dazzlement (*éblouissement*) implies that at the cathartic moment of ontological transformation, subjectivity is broken down as we are overcome by God's glory.²⁵ Yet this kind of action seems to demean and even alienate the subject from the process of transformation. Indeed, rather than eclipsing the subject, the sense of improvisation in *l'éternité bienheureuse*, in its attempt to embody the soul musically and to make visible the invisible, provides an image of the listener being taken upwards towards an active participation in God's glory.

But the search for such a liminal point at a visible threshold with the promise of future glory, can be understood more fundamentally in the relationship between the organ and the creation of Messiaen's harmonic thinking. As a general rule, organs have foundational stops (at 16, 8, 4 and 2 ft pitch), 'mutation' stops such as mixtures

²⁵ Messiaen quoted in Almut Rössler, *Beiträge zur geistigen Welt Olivier Messiaens* (Duisberg: Gilles und Francke, 1984), trans. Barbara Dagg, Nancy Poland and Timothy Tikker as *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen* (Duisberg: Gilles und Francke, 1986), 10. 'And, as St. Thomas Aquinas says: music brings us to God through 'default of truth', until the day when He Himself will dazzle us with 'an excess of truth'. That is perhaps the significant meaning - and also the directional meaning - of music ...'

(which contain a delicate balance of usually 3 or more harmonics) or mutation stops (which give specific single harmonics only), and reed stops.²⁶ The mixtures are designed so that, especially in the acoustic of a church, they function to amplify and resonate the foundational sounds. They dazzle the ear with their brilliance, but also irradiate and amplify the resonance of the foundation sounds. Messiaen's harmonies, as we shall see, can be explained in part by a confluence between these effects and his own kinaesthetic response to the keyboard. It is, therefore, almost impossible to underestimate the role of the possibilities inherent in the organ's timbres and registers in the formation of his harmonic language.

Messiaen states that he first learned to use his modes of limited transposition through improvising at the organ.²⁷ His harmonisation of these modes individuates his work and articulates part of the kernel of his musical originality. In his modal harmonisations, triads are often used to regulate and dilate the degree of dissonance or specific colourist quality, which allows Messiaen to create a kind of interior musical narrative of colour. In effect, this means that his musical language allows a sense of tonal (centricity) without tonality; dissonance acts as a kind of amplifier of foundational triadic colours (like the mixture stops on an organ). But perhaps what is remarkable about Messiaen's chords is that the traditional view of the separation between tonal elements and non-tonal, or the facilitation of tonal elements by dissonance (chromaticism) is undermined. Because a chord is not just a harmony but also a colour, any sense of progression in Messiaen's harmonies can often seem like a perpetual and unresolved dialogue, between the imminent and transcendent, and between what can be heard and what is sensed.

For Messiaen both the organ and his own kinaesthetic approach to the instrument, act together as catalysts for this process. To some extent one can understand how Messiaen learned to control the use of dissonance in his chords and why natural resonance was so important to him. On good quality instruments, such as Messiaen's altered Cavaillé-Coll at La Trinité, the harmonic spectrum of the voicing of organ pipes moves from the extreme fundamental quality in the bass and gradually gets

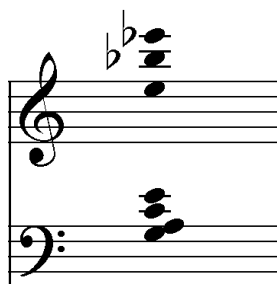
²⁶ Messiaen also uses 1 ft stops in his music *Le Banquet céleste* and *Les Mains de l'Abîme* for instance, but this stop is used as a special effect.

²⁷ Messiaen says of his modes that he 'progressively appropriated them by improvising at the organ.' Interview in Jan. 1992 with Jean-Christophe Marti in *St François d'Assise, l'Avant Scène Opera*, (Salzburg Festival 1992), 12.

brighter. The richness and brilliance of the instrument's timbres is in turn magnified by the acoustic of the church (around six seconds).

What this means is that if one were to play (even on 8 flue ft stops) a fundamentally triadic chord in the l. h. (for instance a second inversion of the dominant seventh of C with an added sixth, for a little spice), one could add chords above, such as the second inversion of F#, or, as demonstrated in example 2, e, b flat and e flat (which include dissonant appoggiaturas to the l. h. chord), so that the addition of the r. h. chord creates an effect of enrichment and 'dazzlement'.

Ex. 2



The sense of tonal grounding created by the consonant triadic chord in the l. h. is amplified and transformed by the r.h. in the acoustic of the church, an effect that is heightened by the addition of 4 ft, 2 ft and mutation stops.²⁸

To a certain extent one can see Messiaen using this technique in the DVD improvisations on the plainchant melody *Puer natus est* recorded at La Trinité on 21 October 1985.²⁹ From around 4.10 on the first track Messiaen uses chords of contracted resonance, transposes them, and then, as he moves inexorably towards a cadence, the chords gradually become more tonal, until he concludes on a triumphal G major chord. Almost throughout this passage, the l. h. remains in the middle of the keyboard, ensuring a strong foundational quality to Messiaen's harmonies, and allowing greater dissonance in the r. h. This example tells us something profound about the way Messiaen hears his chords, and ultimately about the relationship between Messiaen's kinaesthetic response to the instrument, and about his imaginative desire to use the timbres and registers of the organ to dramatise the impasse between the imminent and the transcendent, and between the visible and the invisible.

²⁸ This can also be seen for example in the 'chord of resonance'. See *TMLM*, 70-1.

²⁹ *Olivier Messiaen: Quartet for the End of Time/Improvisations*, GB productions ID5085GCDVD, 1992. This DVD contains three improvisations that revisit the ideas of the shepherds and the wise men used in *La Nativité du Seigneur*.

Such an impasse is more simply but more graphically illustrated, almost notated for the eye, in *Joie et Clarté des Corps Glorieux* where the *style-oiseaux* r. h. (in example 3) is used with enormous improvisatory freedom to symbolise the agility of the body after death streaming with an *allégresse*, reminiscent of plainchant alleluias, over a D flat major chord (with an added 6th):

Ex. 3 *Joie et Clarté des Corps Glorieux* p. 11 (first three systems)

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The improvisatory quality of this birdsong (for Messiaen the voice of God in nature) intimates the state of joy and glory that, as a Catholic, Messiaen believed he would attain after death. This is not an image of completeness, but of transformation and continuance that resonates with, but significantly departs from Messiaen's ideal (inherited from the Greeks and used as an axiom of mediaeval theology) of the separation of time and eternity: time is a property of man, and eternity a property of God. Certainly, the improvisatory freedom of Messiaen's *style oiseau* seems to resonate towards a kind of atemporal and ecstatic image of eternity. But the idea of improvisation creating its own temporal paradigms, transforming clock-bound time, and our ontological sense of this time, is evident throughout Messiaen's work. This kind of engagement with time is perhaps more profoundly expressed in the opening movement of the *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* (1940-1), the *Liturgie de cristal*. In

example 4 (see below) a *tâle* or repeating set of chords in the piano (first 20 of 29 chords shown) beginning with ‘chords of transposed inversions on the same bass note’ provides a kind of ground for the improvisation of the blackbird [*merle noir*] in the clarinet.³⁰

Ex. 4 *Liturgie de cristal* (opening)
 (Reproduced by permission of Editions Durand)

A Bien modéré, en poudrolement harmonieux (♩=54 environ) (comme un oiseau)

Violon *pp* (son fluté, (comme un oiseau)

Clarinet in Si b *p* expressif *tr* *b* *3*

Violoncelle *ppp* (vibrato)

Piano *pp* legato (très enveloppé de pédale)

Von *vers la pointe* *3*

Cl. in Si b *gliss.* *gliss.*

Ville *gliss.* *gliss.*

Pno

While Messiaen may have intended that this collective organised improvisation should act to confound our sense of clock-bound time, what transpires does not guarantee any image of eternity. In this example, time is in a perpetual evolution

³⁰ In Messiaen's *Préface* (p. I) he writes: 'A blackbird [*un merle noir*] and a nightingale soloist improvise, surrounded by the sonorous dust of a halo of trills lost very high in the trees. Transposing this to the religious plain: you have the harmonious silence of heaven.'

rather than merely static as Messiaen would have us believe. It is an open-ended knot constantly being unravelled by freedom and grace. Such a perspective provides a complementary reading of the text that inspired the *Quatuor*. In the preface to the work, Messiaen cites the (sixth) angel of the apocalypse as the direct inspiration for this work. He refers in particular to Rev.10: 5-7:

⁵And the angel which I saw stand upon the earth lifted up his hand to heaven,
⁶And swore by him that liveth for ever and ever, who created heaven, and the things that therein are, and the earth, and the things that therein are, and the sea, and the things which are therein, that there should be time no longer:
⁷But in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, the mystery of God should be finished, as he hath declared to his servants the prophets.³¹

Messiaen takes the sixth verse out of context and radically misreads it. If we take the New Revised Standard Version (rather than the Authorised Version) of the Bible, a version that translates ‘there shall be no more time’ as ‘there shall be no more delay’, the meaning of this passage becomes clearer.³² St John does not announce the end of time, but that ‘there will be no more time before God completes his purposes’, and that time and ourselves will be changed in a way that remains a mystery.³³ This means that the promise of the transformation of the world into God’s kingdom will occur. Messiaen’s *Quatuor* can not only be understood as a wager on what will happen, but also, through the course of its eight movements, as an improvisation with time and our own experience of it. Indeed as Philip Edgcumbe Hughes comments on the biblical passage cited above:

Time, however, far from being an entity in itself, is but a convention for understanding and recording the sequence of changes and happenings that belong to human experience and that constitute history as a whole. As depicted in this

³¹ *The Bible* (Authorised [King James] Version), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press [Eyre and Spottiswoode]), 1143.

³² *The Bible with Apocrypha* (New Revised Standard Version), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 249.

³³ Jeremy S. Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 174.

book of Revelation, eternity is certainly not an uneventful, static, and quasi-frozen state, for the new heaven and the new earth are full of activity.³⁴

Time only appears to be static (a trope that Messiaen uses to connect himself to neo-Platonic theology), or progressive, but these, of course, are ideologically loaded narratives that make time more visible and understandable. What is more interesting is to see the way in which Messiaen's diverse use of time, his improvisation with time, is used by the composer to create a discourse in which stabilising and centrifugal musical elements are in dialogue with centripetal elements. Even inside his chords, unity is achieved less in spite of, but rather because of a dialogue where triadic elements may become irradiated by non-triadic tones. Both textural and temporal elements work from the inside (the invisible and the barely tangible) towards an enfolded texture (the visible).

In the example from the *Quatuor* above, the sense that the piano is providing a template, and guiding the progression, is partly a visual illusion (the piano is beneath the other instruments on the score), and owes much to analysis grounded in traditional bass-orientated music, rather than to an appreciation of the essential play of multivalency in the passage. The meaning and effect of such a passage is facilitated by the audible iconography of birds, which Messiaen considered the greatest improvisers.

Birds not only sing very high and fast, but they have a different metabolic rate or existence in time: they are short lived, some can move too fast for the naked eye to comprehend, they have the natural gift of flight, and they are almost untouchable. Most importantly, we co-exist with them as though they hold no great mystery. With their supra-human skills; their intangibility; their incomparable and incomprehensible language; and their parallel existence, birds provide a model for our understanding of God and indeed music itself. For Messiaen, birds are not only the voice of God in nature, but through their capacity to improvise their songs, they become visible signs of an invisible reality. They become harbingers of grace and freedom, which through their chimerical nature, tell us of a momentary and euphoric intimation of glory that

³⁴ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), 117.

may be perceived (perhaps by the agency of the Spirit as Jeremy Begbie has argued) as a realisation of the divine.³⁵

Birdsong provides Messiaen with the means of creating some of the most colourful and dissonant music to the glory of God. As a synaesthete, harmonic 'colour' becomes a positive displacement of the negative modernist associations of dissonance, for example in the marvellous ornithological improvisations in the *Epôde* of *Chronochromie* (1959-60), as much as a visible metaphor for the radiance of *la vie intérieure*. If synaesthesia can be said to be a *prima facie* self-affirmation for Messiaen of the presence or dwelling of the holy spirit, then any revelations afforded by this condition are not a process of mere ego fortification (of being or feeling chosen), but the 'recipient of grace' is both enthralled by and dispossessed of that which is most private.³⁶

This idea is confirmed in the sixth *tableaux* of Messiaen's opera *St François d'Assise* (1975-83), in which St Francis comes to share Christ's mission through the agency of the colour and entropy inherent in an avian improvisation that externalises the internal realisation of his 'divine life'. Earlier, in tableau 3, the Angel speaks to Francis and facilitates the growth of grace in his soul through A major mode 3, but in

³⁵ In thinking about Improvisation I have found the thought of Jeremy Begbie stimulating. See 'Theology and the Arts', *The Modern Theologians: an introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, ed. David F. Ford, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 693-96. For further reading see his *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). In the same way, when a musician plays from memory, the lack of sheet music releases a musician's powers to reflect on the music (and himself), and this can create an appreciable connection and spontaneity that engenders a higher level of communication between player and audience.

³⁶ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, Vol. III, 527: 'However, the "imago" has been created for the sake of the "similitudo", not in order to develop toward it by its own self-perfection or through a dialectical process, but to serve as a place where the divine Archetype [*Urbild*] can be implanted. In Christ, through grace, creaturely man can become a (theological) person, that is the Father's child, who has been given a share in the qualitatively unique way in Christ's mission: this takes place through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in him, whereby he becomes a dwelling place of the divine Persons (Jn 14.23; 1 Cor 6:19, Eph 3:17(.))...the man who is the recipient of grace. Everything "private" disappears in this process: man is dispossessed in favour of the divine life, and hence he is also taken over for God's salvific purposes for the world.' Balthasar continues: 'He is universalized and fashioned after Christ; in Christ he receives not only the grace of new divine sonship, of being born with Christ from the Father's womb, of sharing with him the gift of the Holy Spirit: he also receives a mission that is "cut from" Christ's and represents a portion of the church's mission.'

the sixth tableau, A major precipitates Francis's identification with music (just before fig. 106), which in Messiaen's aesthetics is our only human possibility for an asymptotic translation towards the divine. This is highlighted in the *Grand Concert d'oiseaux* of tableau 6, which occurs after St Francis preaches to the birds. Almost in spite of the swirling ornithological entropy of Messiaen's orchestration, nowhere is A major clearer than at one bar before fig. 120:

Ex. 5 *St François d'Assise* Tableau 6, 4 bars before Fig. 120

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The image shows a page of a musical score for Olivier Messiaen's *St François d'Assise*, Tableau 6, 4 bars before Fig. 120. The score is for a large orchestra and includes parts for Piccolo, Flutes, Clarinets, Bassoons, Percussion, and Strings. The key signature is A major. The score shows complex rhythmic patterns with time signatures of 2/16, 3/32, 2/16, and 2/32. The page number 120 is visible at the bottom right.

True to Messiaen's style of orchestration, the tonal embolism of A major is audibly visible in the woodwind choir. Messiaen's harmony at this point entices our tonal imagination and provides a theological image of transcendence. Perhaps one of the clearest examples of the infusion of the sense of tonality and birdsong is in *la joie de la grâce*, the fifteenth piece in the *Livre du Saint Sacrement* (1984). In the following example of birdsong (*Iranie à gorge blanche*), the almost invisible sense of a movement from E major through A flat and back (suddenly) to E, is obscured and amplified by Messiaen's use of register and chord spacing, notation (pitch-class spelling), and timbre (there are no eight-foot sounds) and dissonance which challenges the limits of human hearing, language and comprehension in this image of the divine:

Ex. 6: *la joie de la grâce* (p.121 of the *Livre du Saint Sacrement*)

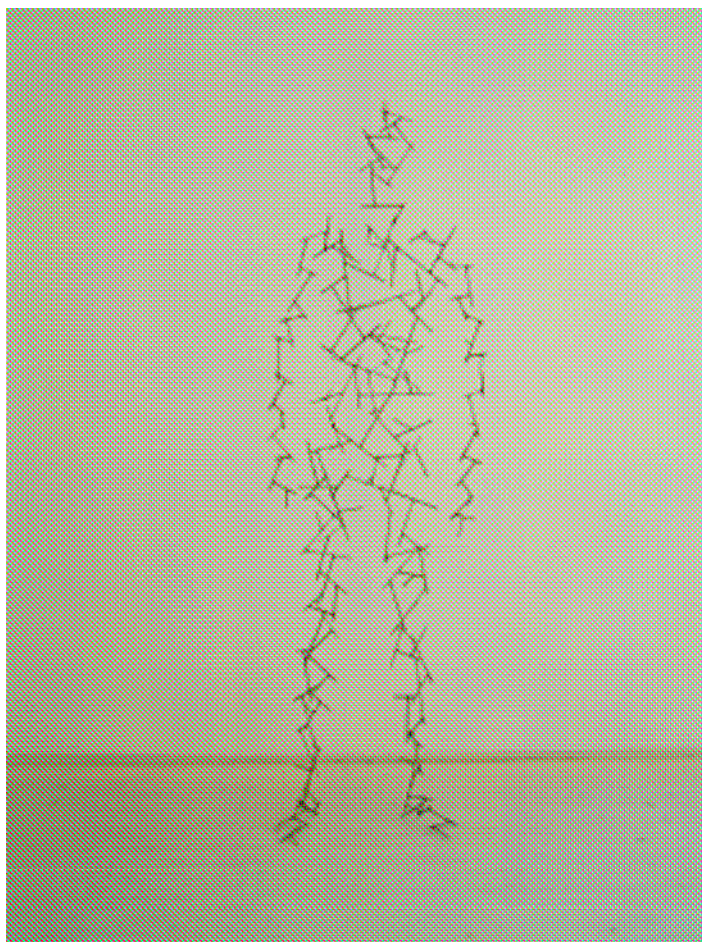
(Reproduced by permission of Editions Alphonse Leduc: owner and publisher for all countries)

(Iranie à gorge blanche)

The musical score consists of four systems of music for the MAN (Mandolin) instrument. Each system is in 3/4 time, indicated by a tempo marking $(\Rightarrow 3/4)$ below the staff. The first system is marked 'Un peu vif' and features a *mf* dynamic. The second system starts with a *f* dynamic and includes a *mf* dynamic marking. The third system is marked *mf*. The fourth system starts with a *f* dynamic and includes a *mf* dynamic marking. The notation is complex, with many chords and melodic lines, and includes various articulation marks such as accents and slurs. The key signature changes throughout the piece, reflecting the tonal embolism mentioned in the text.

In his poetics of music Stravinsky observes that ‘...just as the eye completes the lines of a drawing which the painter has knowingly left incomplete, just so the ear may be called upon to complete a chord and co-operate in its resolution.’³⁷ With Messiaen’s chords it is not merely that added notes irradiate and irritate the triad, but that there is a productive interdependence between the essential and inessential, so that such distinctions are rendered invalid. Like the shards of metal that form the figures of Antony Gormley’s *domain field* sculptures (2003), the heart of the chord simultaneously radiate outwards to an unknown point and radiates inwards towards an invisible presence.³⁸

Fig. 1 Antony Gormley: from *Domain Field*



³⁷ Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music* (bilingual edition) trans. Arthur Knodel and Ingolf Dahl (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), 45 and 47. Much analytical ink has been spilled on whether this is the case with dissonant chords and whether they should just be thought of as dissonances. See for example Arnold Whittall’s ‘Music Analysis as Human Science? *Le Sacre du Printemps*’, *Music Analysis*, Tome 1 (1982), pp. 33-53.

³⁸ This image from *Domain Fields* is used by courtesy of the artist and Jay Jopling/White Cube.

In Gormley's figures the essence of the person is both enshrined and released; yet there is at once no beginning or centre of the energy, and no visible end to their invisible presence. Though there are many figures in Gormley's *domain field*, the unique quality of each person is retained in each figure. They are not atrophied, neither is their mortality diminished. Indeed, like the absence of Christ after the resurrection and his resonance in human spirituality, their absence only enhances their power.

In improvisation the absence of a prescribed score allows more of the spontaneity, of the unique humanity of the individual to appear, but a score generated from improvisation (like the *Messe de la Pentecôte* discussed below) may provide a well-rehearsed snapshot, a cross-section of the possibilities inherent in its origins. If an analogy can be made between the circles of colour in the paintings of Robert and Sonia Delaunay (that mysteriously seem to resonate out of their paintings without any perceivable origin), and the interiorisation of Christ, metaphorically represented and exteriorised by the movement of colours in Messiaen's musical aesthetics, then perhaps the phantasmagorical elements of Messiaen's compositions do indeed refer to or rely on his improvisations as an invisible yet tangible source.

So, if improvisation can be understood in this way, does this seemingly ephemeral art in which music only lives to die, tell us perhaps that our participation in time through our musical imagination is an integral part of the divine purpose, or that through the processes of this music we are given an intimation of our own mortality, able to sense the radiation of our own being from its source? Do we therefore also intuitively sense an engagement between a centrifugal pull towards Christ (the *logos*) at the invisible centre of Messiaen's work, and a centripetal dilation of his presence throughout the world? Perhaps if we can sense that something of Messiaen's improvisations is still imbued in his compositions, like an invisible photographic negative, his music may encourage and even empower a process of awareness by which, as BKS Iyengar puts it, the 'knower, the knowledge, and the known become one'.³⁹

³⁹ BKS Iyengar, *Light on Life* (London: Rodale, 2005), 80.

Making the Invisible Visible

The implications of the transformative power of music and self-awareness are exposed in Messiaen's own description of the genesis of his *Messe de la Pentecôte* (1949-50). In this work and the *Livre d'Orgue* (1951) Messiaen attempts to consecrate some of the most radical and modern sounds ever to have been written for the organ to the glory of God.⁴⁰ Messiaen described the genesis of his *Messe de la Pentecôte* in his *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d'ornithologie* (TRCO):

Work written in 1950. But improvised at the organ a long time before [...] These improvisations became little by little 'one' improvisation, always forgotten, always refound, always repeated: the terrifying growlings of the beast of the apocalypse alternated with the song of thrushes and blackbirds, the sounds of water and the wind in the leaves with the religious meditation and the Holy Spirit's tempests of joy [note the surrealist conjunction of language here as well as the reference to the catalytic power of the Holy Spirit], the Hindu rhythms mixing with the neumes of plainchant, the choir of skylarks with Tibetan trumpets, the melodies of resonance and timbre of the chromaticism of durations, the most searched-for polytonalities, the most strange and shimmering timbres connected to [*voisinaient*] the clearest permutations and rhythmic *interversions*. One finds there the known and the unknown, the visible and the invisible, the world of men and the world of angels. It is thus that my *Messe de la Pentecôte* was born. Without being my best work, it is without doubt the *one that most conforms to my true nature* [my italics, note that the idea of music's function of revealing a hidden self], and it is also the only one truly written for the organ at La Trinité (of which it utilises all the timbres and combinations of timbres), since it had been improvised several times - during the course of the years 1948 and

⁴⁰ In doing so he may have felt that he had reached a certain limit of expression with the instrument. One only has to think of the extraordinary registrations used in the *Entrée*, the *Offertoire* with its (sounding) C¹ *basson* 16 snorts [Tournemire uses a similar idea, but with a different timbre, in his *Supplications et fugue modal* (*L'Orgue Mystique* no. 34) [*IX^e Dimanche après la Pentecôte*]), and the glockenspiel-like combination of flute 4, piccolo 1 and tierce 1^{3/5}, the birdsong in the *Communion* and the conjunction of the extreme 1ft and 32 ft registers at the end of this movement, and also the strange landscapes of the two *Pièces en trio*, *Soixante Quatre durées* and *Les Mains de l'Abîme* (*Livre d'Orgue*).

1949 - on the organ of La Trinité. I committed it to paper in 1950. Since then I have renounced all improvisation.⁴¹

Of course for an improviser like Messiaen to renounce improvisation is tantamount to the impossibility of renouncing inspiration. While such statements infer the ideal of bringing improvised music to a state of perfection in a written form, Messiaen's inference that his improvisation was 'always forgotten, always refound, always repeated' implies an action of giving and receiving in which his 'true nature' or being becomes irrigated with grace.

It would of course be fascinating to have heard how the work evolved through improvisation; what experiments with timbre, colour, register, birdsong were undertaken in the private sanctuary of the organ loft at La Trinité? The complexity of the work as described in *TRCO* is surely not worked out in improvisation, but perhaps the rhetoric and expression of the work, together with its poetic inspiration embedded in and divined from the liturgy, may have been. It might seem callous to classify much French organ improvisation as either sound frescos of praise and light, or mystical meditations (incense captured in music), but Messiaen's Organ Mass represents a continuation and radical enhancement of this aesthetic (established by Tournemire in *l'Orgue Mystique*) to the point where improvisation absorbs and effectively transcends or, more pointedly, perhaps even serves to counteract the liturgical tradition that inspired it.⁴²

⁴¹ Messiaen, *TRCO*, Tome IV, 83.

⁴² For more on the relationship between organ improvisation and liturgy see Andrew Cyprian Love's unpublished paper: *Eschatological Rhetoric: The Liturgical Improvisations of Charles Tournemire* (2004), and also *Musical Improvisation, Heidegger, and the Liturgy: A Journey to the Heart of Hope* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003). On p. 229, Love states that: 'In liturgy, imagination expressed in musical imagination is an ontological communication showing the liturgical community how it passes beyond itself to what is other.' Then on p. 235 he summarises: 'the organ improviser responds to the collective instinct of the community, receiving a commission from the community, then enacts a symbolisation of eschatological destiny which further sustains the community's intuitive sense of eschatology's communal element. There is a circle of mutual confirmation. The improviser enacts an artistic medium of 'pure reflection', or plural reflexivity [terms borrowed here from Victor Turner's *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage: A Study in Comparative Symbolology* (New Delhi: Concept, 1979), 94] for the liturgical community of which she is part, helping it to portray, understand, and act on itself.' It seems evident however, that in the case of Messiaen's *Messe de la Pentecôte*, the 'circle of confirmation' is somewhat distorted, if not broken.

Almost undoubtedly, this may not have been Messiaen's intention. Certainly the anti-normative language of the *Messe de la Pentecôte* can be understood as an attempt to portray or complement the extraordinary biblical events of Pentecost. Messiaen creates a work in which vanguardism - incorporating the rejection of hierarchy, values and social signification - is turned on its head somewhat by the religious rhetoric of the work.⁴³ Some might argue for instance that music and liturgy are subsumed in a higher order.⁴⁴ But assuming for a moment that the background (unheard) improvisatory source for the work was more fragmentary and iconoclastic than the final text, then improvisation, as represented in the score of the *Messe de la Pentecôte*, may be understood not merely as a means of personal and compositional development for Messiaen, but as a process through which the invisible (improvisation) is brought, through awareness, towards an embodiment (the visible) in the score. Its reconfiguration in performance, then, rather than completing the work, only further amplifies the utopian ontology inherent in the process of its gestation; the forces between the constellations of fragments that inhabit the surface of the work exist without the necessity to achieve any sense of synthesis.⁴⁵ Therefore, the spontaneity, freedom and grace associated with improvisation remain at the heart of the work. The role of these elements in music 'always forgotten, always refound, always repeated', points to a way, for Messiaen, of accessing and renewing an awareness of the creative unknown within himself, and, in Catholic parlance, participating in the redeeming action of Christ's love.⁴⁶

Memory and apperception become interdependent if not indistinguishable in the barely-mediated conduit from the inner world to the outer, from wellsprings of grace and hope unknown by their recipient. It is in this spirit, therefore, of thanksgiving for the invisible gift imparted by his Mother, the poetess Cécile Sauvage, that Messiaen reveals his wish to intimate and colourise his own presence in a recording of organ

⁴³ Susan McClary, 'Terminal Prestige: The Case of Avant-Garde Music Composition', *Cultural Critique*, no. 12 (Spring 1989), 60.

⁴⁴ For more on this see my: 'Olivier Messiaen, the Avant-Garde and the *Messe de la Pentecôte*', on oliviermessiaen.net.

⁴⁵ This can be seen in the way in which certain motives or ideas are recontextualised throughout the *Messe de la Pentecôte* and yet remain fragmentary and atrophied. For more on this see my: 'Olivier Messiaen, the Avant-Garde, and the *Messe de la Pentecôte*' on oliviermessiaen.net.

⁴⁶ Messiaen, *TRCO*, Tome IV, 83.

improvisations on her poems from *l'Âme en Bourgeon* [The Burgeoning Soul], recited by Gisèle Casadesus.⁴⁷ Messiaen states his desire to:

surround them [the poems], to accompany them, and to prolong them through an improvised musical commentary [...] I wanted to be discrete, the most discrete possible, that one should hear me without hearing me and, in the end to leave the poems in their light and darkness, adding only here and there my humble colours. A man may not say these things in a high voice: that is the property of woman and Cécile Sauvage who had the knowledge to say it. My only excuse was to have been the awaited infant ... But the musician of 1978 remembers himself always to have been the infant of 1908, and it is his most pure pride to have inspired *l'Âme en Bourgeon*.⁴⁸

These poems form part of the last chapter of Sauvage's book *Tandis que la terre tourne* (pub. 1909) and are essentially an interior monologue between mother and child, using beautiful images from the natural world to describe what she carries. With his recording of poetry and improvisations, Messiaen pays homage to his mother, who believed that the child she was carrying would be a musician. Seventy years after Messiaen's birth, Messiaen realises his Mother's intimation through the spontaneity and grace of improvisation. In this recording, Messiaen's improvisations

⁴⁷ Liner notes to *l'Âme en Bourgeon*, recorded in La Trinité, French Erato, Stereo LP STU 71104. My thanks to Simon Colvin for bringing this document to my attention. The disc does not contain all of *l'Âme en Bourgeon*, but poems 1, 3, 5, 4, 6, (and on side 2 of the LP) 8, 11, 14, 17, 16, 18, 9. It is most notable that Messiaen leaves out no. 8 '*Il est né...*', which begins with the sense of loss and the rude severance of birth. One can sense in these verses, perhaps with hindsight, the mediation of darkness into light, the contrast between the internal world and the external as a metaphor for the relation between mortality and the afterlife, as well as an image of the dim religious light and incense laden atmosphere that (as in the novels of J.K. Huysmans) creates the rich spiritual atmosphere inside a large Gothic building. The richness of iconographic imagery from the natural world imbues the poems with the sense of the great richness of *la vie intérieure* - the poet's spiritual life and her unborn child. At the same time, there is trepidation and even dread of the birth that will one day break the intimate bonds between mother and son. Messiaen's improvisations can be understood as an attempt to re-establish this metaphysical connection. See also Philip Weller's complete translation of *l'Âme en Bourgeon* in *Olivier Messiaen: Music, Art and Literature*, ed. Dingle and Simeone (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 191-278.

⁴⁸ Liner notes to *l'Âme en Bourgeon*, recorded in La Trinité, French Erato, Stereo LP STU 71104. My thanks to Simon Colvin for bringing this document to my attention.

reveal a search for a means of accessing and renewing an awareness of the creative unknown within himself (described above), essential to any artist, and the kernel of his own being represented in Sauvage's poetic images that are the vestige of his own birth. Speaking of the child in her womb, Sauvage reveals a premonition of the colours and birds which would feature in her son's music:

Ce carré de clarté là-bas, c'est la fenêtre	The plot of brightness there, is the window
Où le soleil assied son globe de rayons.	Where the sun seats his globe of sunbeams
Voici tout l'Orient qui chante dans mon être	There all the Orient sings in my being
Avec ses oiseaux bleus, avec ses papillons; ⁴⁹	With its blue birds, with its butterflies;

To have a set of poems written about himself, to read them and see elements of his own history in them was indeed self-revelatory for Messiaen. His ideal of Catholic predestination was based on his belief that his mother's poetry formed his future as a musician. Messiaen combines this with the New Testament ideal that predestination is God's loving purpose to make people his sons and daughters. As a musician 'born with faith', music therefore could act as the medium through which the loving grace of God could bring humanity to an encounter with the divine.⁵⁰ This process of drawing humanity towards God is analogous to the idea of conforming to the perfect imitation of Christ that St Thomas à Kempis describes, but it is also reflected in the art of improvisation on a number of levels.⁵¹ Through the repeated practise such as Messiaen describes in the genesis of the *Messe de la Pentecôte*, the nature and

⁴⁹ Liner notes to *l'Âme en Bourgeon*. This is v. 8 of *Tu tettes le lait pur...*. See Cécile Sauvage's *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: La Table du Ronde, 2002), 45-76 (see p. 56 for the verse in the text above), originally published (Paris: Mercure de France, 1929).

⁵⁰ Cécile Sauvage orientated Messiaen towards the phantasmagorical elements of his religion. Messiaen states that: 'Cécile Sauvage said "I suffer from an unknown music." It is from that that I found my belief in predestination.' Interview with Messiaen in *Diapason*, no. 234 (December 1978), p. 38. Sauvage wrote *L'Âme en Bourgeon* while Messiaen was still in her womb, and addressed the poems to her unborn child. Messiaen has stated that: 'I did not come from a religious family. I was not brought up in the Christian faith, I was born with faith.' [Messiaen's emphases] *Olivier Messiaen: The Music of Faith*, London Weekend Television (LWT), first broadcast on 5 April 1985, transcript 1986, p. 5.

⁵¹ See for instance Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price (London: Penguin, 1952), 31: 'Who has a fiercer struggle than he who strives to conquer himself? Yet this must be our chief concern - to conquer self, and by daily growing stronger than self, to advance in holiness.'

purpose of musical material can become clearer, while the improviser is also brought closer, not necessarily to the 'œuvre écrite' that Tournemire describes, but to a sense of empowerment, awareness and therefore control over his actions.⁵²

The most extended improvisation occurs at the beginning of the disc before the protagonist of the first poem feels herself as one with the primordial mire of nature and feels the 'fruit of her body which grows from her sap'.⁵³ Messiaen uses chords of contracted resonance and clarinet *interjections en crescendo* that bear a remarkable resemblance to the opening of *L'apparition du Christ ressuscité à Marie Magdalene* (no.11 of *Livre du Saint Sacrement*), written seven years later in 1984, where these chords describe the darkness, literal and spiritual, and confusion of night, the primordial amniotic mire of Christianity, before the morning of the third day after Christ's death.⁵⁴

⁵² Tournemire states that 'it appears to be absolutely impossible to fix the rules of improvisation, it is thus that improvisation truly deserves its name', but he also states that improvisation should 'give the illusion of something written' even though he acknowledges that inspiration cannot be always entirely consistent. Tournemire, *Précis d'exécution de registration et d'improvisation à l'Orgue*, 102. In his teaching, Mosche Feldenkrais was fond of saying that 'When you know what you are doing, you can do what you want'. The question then arises of how you know what you are doing, how you are using yourself, and how this direction creates a sense of kinaesthetic and aesthetic satisfaction in the player and listener. For more on this see my review of Alan Fraser's book *The Craft of Piano Playing: A New Approach to Piano Playing in Music and Letters*, Vol. 88, no. 1 (February 2007), pp. 190-92.

⁵³ 'Nature, let me mix in your mire ...' [*Nature, laisse moi mêler à ta fange*]

⁵⁴ The clarinet is a plangent organ stop on the positif organ at La Trinité.

Ex. 7 Opening of *L'apparition du Christ ressuscité à Marie Magdalene (Livre du S.S.)*

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The musical score for Ex. 7 is presented in three systems. The first system is marked *Modéré* and *legato*, with dynamics *ppp* for the right hand and *ppp* for the left hand. The second system is also marked *Modéré* and *legato*, with dynamics *pp (<1/2)* for the right hand and *pp* for the left hand. The third system is marked *Bien modéré* and *legato*, with dynamics *mf* for the right hand and *mf* for the left hand. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

There are various other connections with the *Livre de Saint Sacrement* on this disc, but by far the most recurrent idea throughout Messiaen's improvisations here is the angular melody that first appears in the *Trois Petites Liturgies* and the *Offertoire (Les choses visibles et invisibles)* from the *Messe de la Pentecôte*.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Messiaen says he derives this motive from Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (see Messiaen, *TRCO*, Tome IV, 93). Another connection with written music is made when Messiaen also deploys the effect that would be used at the beginning (b. 3) of *Puer natus est nobis* (no. 4 of *Livre du Saint Sacrement*); after the eighth poem on the disc *Je savais que ce serait toi* (poem 14 of the cycle), in which Sauvage writes of the freshness and wonder of her new child, but as if she had always known him. Another aspect used is quiet chords in mode 3, and birdsong like that used in the *Fauvette des jardins* sections of *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte Trinité* (nos. 2 and 9).

Ex. 8: *Messe de la Pentecôte: Offertoire (Les choses visibles et invisibles)*

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Pos: quintaton 16, cor de nuit, 3^{ce}

Modéré

reification, provides a powerful and attractive metaphor in the search for a reconnection with God. Improvisation in a liturgical context not only implies these things, but it also provides a visible image in which humanity can understand something of the way the wager of faith is configured.

When Messiaen improvised at La Trinité, as he does on a set of 29 liturgical improvisations recorded in 1985, he was clearly working within an established liturgical tradition.⁵⁸ Yet, despite the apparent comfort inherent in the kind of wish fulfilment that this implies, Messiaen the improviser, situated in a prominent place high up on the west internal wall of the church, becomes, for the audience, akin to a tightrope walker as well as a ventriloquist facilitating the voice of God. If God is the invisible creator, and the improviser the visible creator (albeit perhaps only in sound), then the notion that the audience comes to meet their creator through improvisation implies that the improviser is the provider of a fascinating *tromp l'œil*. Not only does the improviser represent humanity at its best and most vulnerable at the same time, but he also functions as a substitute or representative of the divine. The audience, therefore, holds God and creation up to scrutiny. What if God could fall off the tightrope? The spell cast over the attendant audience, caught in the headlights of the 'illusionist's art' is part of the desire to experience the danger of the spectacle vicariously. What if the audience is not able to perceive the grace, spontaneity and freedom of improvisation? What if the audience or even the performer cannot attain a state where they have faith that the tightrope will not fail or the performer fall? In a letter of 15 December 1983 to Felix Aprahamian, Messiaen seems only too aware of this issue:

My only organ teacher was Marcel Dupré, for whom I had the deepest admiration and a very great and respectful affection. But I went occasionally to hear the improvisations of Charles Tournemire (a composer of genius, and a marvellous improviser). When Tournemire improvised in concert, it was good. But the improvisations were much more beautiful during Masses at Sainte Clothilde, when he had the Blessed Sacrament in front of him. I think I resemble him

⁵⁸ *Olivier Messiaen Live: Improvisations inédites*, La Praye DLP 0209 (2 CDs). These semi-professional recordings provide the closest encounter with the raw musical imagination of Messiaen the liturgical musician. In these performances, we can hear Messiaen occasionally searching for new ideas and sonorities but more typically repeating certain learned patterns,

somewhat in this respect. I improvise much better during a Service, on my organ at the Trinité. In a concert, my gifts desert me, and my imagination disappears. Don't forget that I am 75 years old and that it is not possible for me to lay myself open to ridicule, playing useless pastiches in one of London's largest concert venues. There are my reasons. I hope you will understand them! [...] ⁵⁹

Yet less than two years later, Messiaen allowed a collection of his liturgical improvisations to be recorded, presumably with the knowledge that they would be made available to the public (possibly after his death). It is not that Messiaen's improvisations are inferior to his compositions; they are of a different order, created *ex tempore* (on the spur of the moment), or in a different temporal paradigm, but that Messiaen's improvisations make his compositions more visible, more clearly differentiated through the refined characteristics of Messiaen's musical fingerprints. While these qualities are certainly present in these recorded improvisations (to some extent), in these improvisations we not only hear Messiaen walking on a tightrope, but also the safety net of his dependence period – the presences of Tournemire and Dupré still hardwired musically and kinaesthetically like bones beneath the flesh. ⁶⁰ Perhaps what is particularly striking is the way in which plainchant is used in these recorded improvisations. Tournemire frequently quoted the novelist J. K. Huysmans when describing plainchant:

conventions, rhetorical gestures and improvising within a certain Catholic tradition of improvisation prescribed by his forbears, including most particularly Tournemire and Dupré.

⁵⁹ Nigel Simeone, ed. and trans., 'Letter from Messiaen to Aprahamian 15/12/83', «*Bien Cher Félix*» *Letters from Olivier Messiaen and Yvonne Loriod to Felix Aprahamian* (Cambridge: Mirage Press, 1998), 51. Like Tournemire, Messiaen took direct inspiration for improvisation from the Catholic liturgy and the architecture that is so often linked with French organ music. In La Trinité, as in Ste-Clothilde, the organist faces directly down the nave from the loft; in both cases this is a truly majestic sight. Messiaen has stated: 'I was a good performer, nothing more, but I was a very good improviser.' *Olivier Messiaen: The Music of Faith*, London Weekend Television (LWT) 1986, transcript, p. 18.

⁶⁰ Perhaps what is most striking about the improvisations is their regressive quality, particularly the *pièces terminales* that utilise the tutti of the organ, and how his improvisations correspond to the formal thinking and even the textures of Tournemire's work in *L'Orgue Mystique*. Compare for instance the alternation of chords with unison plainchant lines (used in *L'Orgue Mystique* no. 44) with Messiaen's similar use of plainchant in a number of the improvisations on these discs. The block structures of many of Tournemire's finales is also similar to the way in which Messiaen shapes his strident improvisations (most likely recorded at the end of the Mass).

By using modern polyphony as clothing, I have always respected the lightness of the Gregorian lines, the fluidity of the aerial paraphrases. Did not Huysmans write 'Plainchant is the aerial and unchanging paraphrase of the immobile structures of Cathedrals'? That is fine. Only, I have been forced to put my stamp on the rhythm of Solesmes: I was obliged to modify much in the case of rhythm, and to give in to imperious exigencies of diverse composers and strong variations that I had undertaken.⁶¹

Tournemire is evidently drawn to the anonymous, seemingly egoless, pre-enlightenment ideal of purity that he attaches to this material. But when Messiaen and Tournemire actually use and transform this material, something subtler takes place. Plainchant becomes a vehicle for heightened subjectivity rather than the transference of an objective spiritual material. In fact, its 'success' in this music can be calibrated by the degree to which plainchant (for the listener) can lose its auratic quality and become phantasmagorical; the modernist aspects of its presentation in the music of Tournemire and Messiaen allows it to be perceived as a semblance of the divine.⁶² So through the aesthetic microcosm of plainchant arises one of the chief issues of liturgical music and improvisation in the context of the liturgy: music provides both a conduit to and a semblance of the divine. If the improviser vicariously represents God the creator and God the spirit, he also, however unwittingly, has the power to overcome and alienate the listener. The role of *éblouissement* (dazzling) that Messiaen attaches to his music can come to replace the liturgy, and this promotes the fear (perhaps based on a belief) that music has an almost idolatrous power to create something more spiritually potent than worship

⁶¹ Tournemire quoted in Bernadette Lespinard, 'L'Orgue Mystique de Charles Tournemire', *Cahiers et Mémoires de L'Orgue II*, no. 139 bis (1971), p. 6. In the preface to each volume of *L'Orgue Mystique* Tournemire wrote: 'Plainchant, truly an inexhaustible source of mysterious and splendid lines - plainchant, triumph of modal art ... Endeavours were made to retain the infinite suppleness of phrasing, incomparable suavity, mystical depth, and also to associate mediaeval garlands with the multiple resources of polyphony, leaving aside the accents which could alter the serenity of this "music of cathedrals"; various forms: interludes, fantasies, paraphrases, chorales, etc., find their place in this work.'

With this orientation, the author found precious encouragement and retained marvellous impressions of Plainchant from Solesmes Abbey. [...] Though this new organ music is for the adornment of the liturgical offices, it will also be useful for concerts.'

⁶² For more on this see Peter Bürger, 'Adorno's Anti-Avant-Gardism', *Telos*, no. 86 (Winter 1990/91), pp. 54-56

itself.⁶³ Indeed, if it is true that the *Messe de la Pentecôte* was forged and polished on the anvil of the congregation of La Trinité (Sunday by Sunday), then Messiaen's improvisations come to dramatise the liturgy in a way that may be neither congruent nor complementary with the liturgy. It is almost as though the language of the work with its highly technical and invisible framework seeks, on the one hand, to dramatise the fantastic, the surreal, the marvellous and the supernatural elements of faith (those elements that are least normative), while also attempting to challenge and transform the perception of the visible elements (the liturgy, vestments, the choreography and iconography of religion, and of course, the people themselves).

Improvisation, especially when presented in such a radical reworking, as in the *Messe de la Pentecôte*, therefore functions as a medium of catharsis. It provides a way not only of bringing the performer and the listener to a sense of the divine, but, in its attempt to break through the membrane separating 'the known and the unknown, the visible and the invisible, the world of men and the world of angels(.)', as Messiaen himself puts it, his music attempts to overcome or transcend the teleological (eschatological) expectation of progress.⁶⁴

The value given to the hope inherent (in a secular sense) in progress, reform and regeneration belie their underlying epistemology of amnesia so essential both to improvisation and the telos of modernity. Each new improvisation succeeds rather than improves upon the previous attempt, the way each day may bring us closer to the perfection of the divine; improvisation reveals the illusion of humanity's desire for perpetual renewal. For a catholic such as Messiaen, this 'illusion' fundamental to modernity, is reconfigured in the realm of faith and hope. The *défaut de vérité* that Aquinas/Messiaen/St Francis speak of implies the qualitative disparity between the glimpse of the invisible offered by music/poetry and the overwhelming *excess* of visibility granted by divine revelation.⁶⁵ For Messiaen the task of music, and in

⁶³ For more on *éblouissement* and idolatry see Sander van Maas, 'Forms of love: Messiaen's aesthetics of *éblouissement*', in *Messiaen Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), ed. Robert Sholl, pp. 78-100.

⁶⁴ Messiaen, *TRCO*, Tome IV, 83.

⁶⁵ My thanks to Peter Bannister for this observation. Messiaen, 'Introduction to the Programme Booklet for Paris, 1978', in Rössler's *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen*, 10. 'And, as St Thomas Aquinas says: music brings us to God through 'default of truth', until the day when He Himself will dazzle us with 'an excess of truth'. That is perhaps the significant meaning - and also the directional meaning - of music ...'. At the end of Messiaen's Opera *St François d'Assise* (1975-83), St Francis sings: 'Saviour, Saviour, music and poetry

particular the organ, is therefore is to take humanity up and out through the prismatic stained-glass window of his music towards God:

The stained-glass windows magnify the light, one of God's first creations, but the organ brings to the church something similar to light that yet surpasses it: the music of the invisible. It is the wondrous overture to the beyond ...⁶⁶

The organ is therefore a means of reciprocity: God's grace breaks through art to engage with humanity and empower a response. Not only is the modernity of his music the catalyst for this dialogue, but also modernity and humanity are themselves transformed through this process. For Messiaen, alienation must be reconfigured in a new subjectivity based on faith, and this faith must reorientate 'progress' towards a fresh realisation of 'divine and supernatural mysteries'.⁶⁷

To live in the hope that this will occur is, therefore, as Balthasar puts it in a different context, to 'inscribe things of absolute validity upon a time continuum that is running out'; the transcendental is at once so attractive and yet so difficult to achieve because we are 'forever trying to translate what is absolute into terms that are relative and transitory'.⁶⁸ Indeed, because Messiaen's rich tapestry of Christian metaphor is worked out in a musical discourse sedimented with the negative aesthetic resonances of alienation and progress, the euphoria created through this language, often troped as eschatological vision, provides fuel for the wilful amnesia of modernity. Rather than overcoming this, improvisation in a liturgical context seems to use religion somewhat as a pretext, a rationalisation to anchor and configure its own meaning. Religion may amplify the semblance of the absolute, but it does not disguise the way improvisation reflects and parallels modernity in its struggle and inability to embody certainty,

have brought me towards you, by image, by symbol, and by default of truth (...) ... Deliver me, intoxicate me, dazzle me with your excess of Truth ... (*he dies*)'. Translation from the Programme booklet for a performance of the opera at the Opéra Bastille in 1992, 105. For more on the importance of this moment see my article: 'The Shock of the Positive: Messiaen, St Francis and Redemption through Modernity', in *Musical Theology*, ed. Begbie and Guthrie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

⁶⁶ Messiaen quoted by Olivier Latry in the liner notes for Latry's complete recording of the organ works DG 471 480-2, 60.

⁶⁷ Messiaen, 'Réponses à une enquête', *Contrepoints* 1, no.3 (March-April, 1946), p. 73.

⁶⁸ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, Volume IV, 100 and 94 respectively.

groping from the fleeting and temporal towards the eternal asymptotic enticement of salvation.

Messiaen's improvisations and written compositions do not easily side step such issues. For Messiaen, modernity's resistance to the divine, principally through scientific knowledge and rationalism, is only to be resolved in a music that reaches into our deepest subjectivity, and attempts to connect this with God's grace. To provide a vision, etchings from the map of our predestination, required an extraordinary, anti-normative and cathartic music. Improvisation provided a blueprint for Messiaen's visions of redemption and glory, a redemption in which intuition is preferred over ideology, and the invisible remains a chimerical phantasm received as a gift through the physiognomy of the visible.