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Messiaen's Use of Plainchant After Vatican II: An Analysis of *Puer Natus est nobis* from *Livre du Saint Sacrement*

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Although Olivier Messiaen did not write many works specifically for liturgical use, his compositions undoubtedly offer the listener an understanding of his fervent Catholic faith. During his tenure as organist at La Trinité from 1931 until his death in 1992, Messiaen witnessed the most revolutionary event in the Catholic Church since the Council of Trent: the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). One of Vatican II's more significant changes directly affecting the laity was the revision of the liturgy, which allowed the Mass to be celebrated in the vernacular rather than Latin and promoted the active participation of the laity in the liturgy. A modernized Mass allowed for modernized liturgical music, which undoubtedly affected Messiaen's responsibilities as organist and also his approach to composition.

In his article "La Statue reste sur son piédestal: Messiaen's *La Transfiguration* and Vatican II," Christopher Dingle divides Messiaen's creative output into three periods instead of the two accepted by most scholars.¹ The two

¹ Christopher Dingle, "La Statue reste sur son piédestal: Messiaen's *La Transfiguration* and Vatican II," *Tempo*, New Series, No. 212 (April 2000): 8-11.

conventional periods of Messiaen's creative output consist of an early period and then a second period that began around 1949 with the illness of his first wife, Claire Delbos, and post-World War II hardships. It was during this time that Messiaen began to deviate from relatively traditional compositional methods and to develop his musical language. Dingle accepts these first two periods but adds a third and final compositional period in Messiaen's life that began with (and was initiated by) Vatican II.² Dingle argues that Vatican II had a tremendous impact on Messiaen's personal faith as a conservative Catholic and also on his compositional approach to plainchant. The implementation of the vernacular liturgy posed a threat to plainchant, which had a rich tradition in the French organ school. Dingle's article focuses on *La Transfiguration de Notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ* (1965-1969), an oratorio that Messiaen wrote shortly after several documents from Vatican II were published. Dingle interprets *La Transfiguration* as a juxtaposition of the composer's past and current musical styles that emphasizes aspects of the traditional Latin liturgy and other pre-Vatican II sentiments.³ The unaccompanied plainchant found in *La Transfiguration* was most likely an attempt by Messiaen to preserve chant in light of Vatican II, but he does not relinquish the use of his progressive stylistic developments.

Dingle states that *La Transfiguration* was the first of several large religious works in which Messiaen attempted to overwhelm the listener with a combination of old and new musical styles. Although he does not cite any specific later examples, I will argue that Messiaen's organ cycle *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, particularly the fifth movement entitled *Puer natus est nobis*, further supports Dingle's assertion that Vatican II had a significant impact on Messiaen's music and fostered the

² Dingle, "La Statue reste sur son piédestal," 8.

³ Ibid., 9.

beginning of his final creative period. The organ cycle demonstrates the same preservation of the plainchant tradition and simultaneous exploration of progressive compositional techniques that Dingle ascribes to the composer's post-Vatican II period. After a brief introduction to the complete *Livre du Saint Sacrement* and Messiaen's reflections on Gregorian chant, I analyze *Puer natus est nobis* in light of Dingle's observations. Finally, I address various aspects of the piece in order to support the claim that Messiaen had a third creative period after Vatican II and that the council's rulings on liturgy and music had a profound influence on his compositional style.

Messiaen wrote the *Livre du Saint Sacrement* ("Book of the Holy Sacrament") in 1984, a year after he finished his opera, *Saint François d'Assise*. The *Livre* was his last and longest work for the organ and was commissioned by the city of Detroit and the American Guild of Organists. The piece was premiered by Almut Rössler on 1 July 1986 at the national A.G.O. convention in Detroit at the Metropolitan Methodist Church.⁴ The *Livre du Saint Sacrement* consists of eighteen movements, ranging from only two minutes in length to close to twelve minutes; altogether, the length of the piece is about two hours. The first four movements represent acts of adoration before Christ: *Adoro te*, *La Source de Vie*, *Le Dieu caché*, and *Acte de Foi*. Movements five through eleven are meditations on the mysteries of Christ's life in chronological order, from his birth to his apparition to Mary Magdalene after the resurrection. The remaining movements are prayers to Christ in his present earthly form: the Blessed Sacrament.

Despite Messiaen's personal religious beliefs and lifelong career as a Catholic organist, scholars have neglected the role of Gregorian chant in his compositions. The chants are often

⁴ Boston University Messiaen Project, "Compositions," Boston University; available from www.oliviermessiaen.net; internet; accessed October 28, 2009.

overlooked in favour of Indian rhythms, his invented chords, birdsong, and other eclectic musical influences. However, Messiaen held chant in the highest esteem. In a conversation with Claude Samuel, the composer remarked that “there is probably only one truly religious music because it’s detached from all external effect, and that’s plainchant.”⁵ Although the vast majority of Messiaen’s music includes complex harmonic structures, he appreciated the historical context of Gregorian chant, which was composed at a time when functional harmony and even chords were unknown. He admired the anonymous monks who composed the chants without signing their names, and remarked that composers today would not even consider living in such anonymity.⁶

The organ cycle’s fifth movement, *Puer natus est nobis*, is named for the chant that forms its basis. This movement is the first of a series in the *Livre du Saint Sacrement* devoted to the mysteries of the life of Christ, beginning with his birth. Traditionally, the “Puer natus est nobis” is the antiphon of the Introit for the Christmas Day Mass (see Examples 1 and 2). Not only is this chant appropriate to the theme of the movement (Christ’s birth), but Messiaen integrated the chant into several of his compositions, for instance in *La Nativité du Seigneur*, which he completed in the summer of 1935.⁷ Messiaen also frequently improvised on this chant; today, these performances are preserved on video recordings, including his performance of the *Quartet for the End of Time*.⁸

⁵ Claude Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen, Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, trans. E. Thomas Glasow (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1994), 29.

⁶ Nigel Simeone, “‘Chez Messiaen, tout est prière:’ Messiaen’s Appointment at the Trinity,” *The Musical Times* 145, no. 1889 (Winter 2004): 36-53, 53.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁸ Olivier Messiaen, *Quartet for the End of Time, Improvisations*, DVD, directed by Georges Bessonnet (Paris: G.B. Productions France/Image Entertainment, 1999).

Example 1: “Puer natus,” Introit for Christmas Day Mass from the *Liber usualis*, Mode 7⁹

THE MASS OF THE DAY.

Intr.
7.
P

U-er * ná-tus est nó- bis, et fi- li- us dá-tus est
 nó- bis : cú-jus impé- ri- um super hú- me-rum é-
 jus : et vocá- bi-tur nómen é- jus, mágni consí-
 li- i Ange- lus. *Ps.* Can-tá-te Dómino cánti-cum nó-
 vum : * qui- a mi-rabí- li- a fé- cit. Gló- ri- a Pátri.
 E u o a e.

“PUER NATUS,” *Liber usualis*

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⁹ This page from the *Liber usualis* is very similar to, if not exactly, what Messiaen would have looked at while improvising at the organ and composing pieces with this chant in mind. In the DVD performance cited above, the composer is clearly seen reading from the *Liber usualis* while improvising on Gregorian chants in the *Quartet for the End of Time*.

Example 2: Transcription of the “Puer natus,” Introit for Christmas Day Mass, Mode 7¹⁰

The motive that unifies the fifth movement of Messiaen's work is based on the first three notes of the “Puer natus est nobis:” a perfect fifth with the second note repeated. This motive is found throughout the entire movement, either as a monophonic line or harmonized.

Example 3: Perfect fifth motive, excerpt from opening measure

“PUER NATUS” from the *Livre du Saint Sacrement*

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Another important feature of the piece is that most of the phrases of the “Puer natus” appear without alteration. In other words, Messiaen retains the exact pitch level of the original chant with no deviations from the melody. The first and second phrases of the chant appear together near the beginning of the piece, and the section containing the third, fourth, and sixth phrases is found throughout the movement's middle section. The movement ends with a harmonization of the chant's second phrase in the Mixolydian mode on G, the mode of the original chant. The harmonization begins and ends on the tonic

¹⁰ My transcription.

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chord, with an intermediate chord progression of ii, VII, and IV harmonies. Messiaen avoids a standard tonal progression, preferring to harmonize the chant modally rather than via a major or minor key.

Example 4: Harmonization of the second phrase of the “Puer natus,” bars 85-90

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The perfect fifth motive recurs eight times throughout the movement, five times as three unharmonized notes and three times as a harmonized melody. Susan Landale refers to the motive as a “petite fanfare” (a “little fanfare”).¹¹ In the harmonized sections, Messiaen frames the first and second phrases of the chant by a highly chromatic chord; he repeats this technique again with the third, fourth, and sixth phrases of the Introit.

Example 5: Chromatic chord moving to a perfect fifth, bars 9-10

“PUER NATUS” from the *Livre du Saint Sacrement*

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¹¹ Susan Landale, “Olivier Messiaen: *Livre du Saint Sacrement*,” ed. François Sabatier et al., special issue, *L’Orgue: Revue trimestrielle* 22 (September/December 1992): 30.

The chromatic chord contains all the notes of the chromatic collection with one exception; Messiaen excludes the B-flat in order to preserve the perfect-fifth motive in the top voice.

Messiaen also harmonizes the perfect fifth motive with “chords in transposed inversions.”¹² These chords are derived from a V⁹ chord but replace the third with the tonic note and feature unresolved appoggiaturas for added colour. Messiaen then transposes three of the four possible inversions so that they all share the same bass note.¹³ As seen in Example 6, the D-natural in the top voice of the perfect fifth motive does not fit into the chord and therefore is considered to be an added note. Added notes in Messiaen's nonmodal chords are uncommon, and in this case it appears that he wanted to preserve the opening motive even though the D would not be part of his chord.

Example 6: Chords of transposed inversions with added notes, bars 20-23

(G: + montre 16)
(G: - montre 8, - montre 16)
(G: - flûte 8)

MAN.
p
mf
f

29

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¹² Vincent Benitez, “Aspects of Harmony in Messiaen's Later Music: An Examination of the Chords of Transposed Inversions on the Same Bass Note,” *Journal of Musicological Research* 23 (2004): 187-226, 187. The chromatic chord and the chords in transposed inversions are two of Messiaen's own inventions. The same chordal techniques appear in his later compositions, works that draw on his interest in musical colour rather than his modes of limited transposition. An example of another work that uses these chords is his opera *Saint François d'Assise*, as noted by Benitez, 197-98. For more detailed information on these and all of Messiaen's nonmodal chords see Benitez's article. See also Wai-Ling Cheong, “Rediscovering Messiaen's Invented Chords,” *Acta Musicologica* 75, no. 1 (2003): 85-105.

¹³ Benitez, “Aspects of Harmony in Messiaen's Later Music,” 195.

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Interspersed between the perfect fifth motive from the *Puer natus* incipit and the actual chant are two sections that are more harmonically developed as well as a birdsong. In section A, the manuals emphasize major thirds and the pedal contains perfect fifths that descend by whole steps (see Example 7). The fifths simultaneously evoke the chant's opening gesture and reference the early organum of the Notre Dame School. When the section returns later in the piece, both manual parts are identical to the opening A section (with the exception of the ending phrases), and the pedal part contains the same parallel fifths moving in whole steps but with more motion and rhythmic interest.

Section B is a developmental section similar to section A in which the perfect fifth motive and phrases from the "Puer natus" can be heard more distinctly than in section A. The fifth motive is heard directly after the first two phrases of the Introit and again following the section containing the third, fourth, and sixth phrases of the chant. After a descending line beginning in the right hand, Messiaen uses chords from his third mode of limited transposition (different transpositions of SC 6-15 [012458] and SC 6-21 [023468]) to harmonize pieces of the Introit's melody. Since mode 3 is generated by a succession of major thirds in which each segment is divided into a whole step followed by two half steps, major thirds are prevalent throughout this modal section, but the basic contour of the chant's melody remains the same and the perfect fifth interval is unaltered.

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Example 7: Section A, bars 26-27

Un peu vif

MAN: *legato* *pp* *G*

PED: *legato* *p*

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Example 8: Section B, bars 37-42

Modéré

MAN: *R: (p)* *G:*

PED: *(pp)*

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Toward the end of the piece, Messiaen includes a birdsong that does not appear to have any musical connection to the “Puer natus” or its beginning notes. As he specifies in the score, he quotes the song of the olive tree warbler. Messiaen most likely learned about this bird during a trip to Israel.¹⁴ Perhaps he imagined an ancestor of the bird perched in a tree near the stable where Christ was born, singing a joyful song to announce Christ’s birth.

Example 9: Birdsong, bar 80

Un peu vif (Hypolais des oliviers)

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "Un peu vif (Hypolais des oliviers)". The score is written for a piano (MAN.) and features a complex, non-modal harmonic language. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system has a treble and bass staff for the piano, with a "Pos" (Piano) marking and a "mf" (mezzo-forte) dynamic. The second system continues the piece. The notation includes many accidentals and non-standard intervals, characteristic of Messiaen's style. The score is labeled "MAN." on the left of each system.

“PUER NATUS” from the *Livre du Saint Sacrement*

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However, with the exception of this birdsong, Messiaen focuses on the “Puer natus” chant throughout his fifth movement. Although he does not abandon his modes of limited transposition and nonmodal chords while harmonizing the perfect fifth motive and melodic ideas, he makes a special attempt to preserve five of the six phrases of the “Puer natus” in its original form; the chant’s phrases appear as exact transcriptions, which is unusual considering Messiaen’s usual,

¹⁴ Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen, Music and Color*, 106.

freer treatment of plainchant throughout his career. Although he precisely quotes various chants in all the movements of the *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, this technique remains exceptional in the broader context of his opus. The only other exact transcription of a chant in Messiaen's music is the "Alleluia for All Saints' Day," which is found in the eighth movement of the *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité*.¹⁵ Messiaen did not include exact transcriptions of chants in his music until after Vatican II; *Méditations* was written in 1969, four years after the conclusion of the council. The chant phrases in the fifth movement of the *Livre du Saint Sacrement* are presented in unaccompanied octaves, and Messiaen preserves the rhythm and phrasing of the original chant as well. Messiaen also uses a relatively plain organ registration for the chant phrases; they are played with 16-, 8-, and 4-foot flutes, an 8-foot principal, and a gamba without any mixtures or mutations.

Messiaen thus exercises his own particular taste in the modern performance of Gregorian chant. Although he approved of the Abbey of Solesmes' work with chant, Messiaen complained that in many churches, the neumes were often sung incorrectly, and he especially despised the harmonization of chant.¹⁶ He believed that it was a "big mistake" to create accompaniments for chants.¹⁷ The sparse, unmodified presentation of the chant in Messiaen's organ cycle confirms this account of his musical taste. Even when Messiaen does harmonize the chant's second phrase in the last line of the piece, he uses the Mixolydian mode instead of a major or minor key; likewise, this phrase only occurs at the very end of the work, giving the unharmonized phrases prominence throughout the main body of the piece. Messiaen's treatment of the perfect

¹⁵ David Lowell Nelson, "An Analysis of Messiaen's Chant Paraphrases" (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1992), 136.

¹⁶ Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen, Music and Color*, 29.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

fifth motive also reflects his desire to set the chant explicitly. The first three notes of the “Puer natus” are probably the most distinctive characteristic of the chant, and Messiaen makes certain that the motive is heard in a variety of musical contexts, from three unharmonized notes to part of a highly chromatic chord, all the while altering his usual techniques in order to forefront the motive melodically.

Despite the great care he takes to ensure that the chant is recognizable in the fifth movement, Messiaen never explicitly stated that he associated the preservation of chant with the Vatican’s liturgical reforms. However, in a statement to José Bruyer in 1931, Messiaen described Gregorian chant as “terribly neglected.”¹⁸ Presumably, Vatican II’s focus on modernizing the Mass only intensified Messiaen’s sentiment later in his career. The composer claimed that the only musical tradition that existed in France was Gregorian chant, and he traced this tradition traced back to early polyphony, early chant rhythms, and even the ancient Gallican liturgy that fell out of practice.¹⁹ Not only was Messiaen passionate about Gregorian melodies, he also wanted to make certain that the original language of the chants was preserved, a predominant topic for debate in the Catholic Church after Vatican II. In his conversations with Claude Samuel, Messiaen gave Latin his high estimation in several different contexts. For instance, when Samuel brought up the idea of singing Gregorian melodies in French, Messiaen replied: “[Singing chant in a language other than Latin] robs the music of its majesty and dreamlike quality. The statue comes down from its pedestal!”²⁰ Dingle cites this same phrase in his article’s title, drawing attention to the import of Messiaen’s statement. Messiaen also offered a more practical reason for his

¹⁸ Nigel Simeone, “Messiaen, Boulanger, and José Bruyr: Offrandes Oubliées 2,” *The Musical Times* 142, no. 1874 (Spring 2001): 21.

¹⁹ Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen, Music and Color*, 159.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

support of Latin in Catholic churches, namely that it was easier for him to understand the liturgy when he traveled abroad.²¹ Musically, Messiaen attempts to preserve the Latin liturgy by incorporating Latin texts or titles in works like *La Transfiguration* and *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum* (1964).

During an interview for La Trinité's parish magazine in March of 1991, Messiaen was asked what he thought of the recent changes in the liturgy. He responded by saying, "quite frankly, I think there is only one worthwhile kind of liturgical music: plainchant. There has never been, and never will be, anything better."²² Although he does not discuss the role of the liturgical reform with regard to his personal faith or his career as a Catholic organist, Messiaen's post-Vatican II commitment to traditional texts and chants in his music confirms his ardent support of the traditional Tridentine liturgy. Messiaen's treatment of plainchant in his later works differs substantially from his earlier pieces; he includes chants that are melodically unaltered and goes to great lengths to preserve their original phrase structure. That these changes coincide with the Second Vatican Council is too strong a coincidence to ignore; just as Messiaen's later pieces were influenced by historical developments in the Catholic Church, so too must musical scholarship look to the impact of Vatican II on his works.

²¹ Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen, Music and Color*, 146.

²² Simeone, "'Chez Messiaen, tout est prière': Messiaen's Appointment at the Trinité," 53.

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