

Hongzhen Wang

piano

Recital in partial fulfillment of the
Doctor of Musical Arts degree, 2025
Student of Bruce Brubaker

Saturday, December 9, 2023
8:00 p.m.
Burnes Hall

PROGRAM

Olivier Messiaen
(1908–1992)

from *Vingt regards sur l'enfant Jésus* (1944)

I. Regard du Père (Contemplation of the Father)

(And God said: "This is my beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased ...")

II. Regard de l'Étoile (Contemplation of the Star)

(The fall of Grace: the Star shines innocently, surmounted by a Cross ...)

III. L'échange (The Exchange)

(Descending in a spray, rising in a spiral; the terrible trade between humans and God. God made man to make us gods ...)

IV. Regard de la Vierge (Contemplation of the Virgin)

(Innocence and tenderness ... The woman of purity, the woman of the Magnificat, the Virgin gazes upon her child ...)

V. Regard du Fils sur le Fils (Contemplation of the Son upon the Son)

(Mystery, rays of light in the night – refraction of joy, the birds of silence – the person of the Word in a human nature – union of the human and divine natures in Jesus Christ ...)

VI. Par Lui tout a été fait. (By Him everything was made)

(Abundance of space and time; galaxies, photons, contrary spirals, inverted lightning, by Him (The Word) was everything made ... in an instant, creation reveals to us the luminous shadow of his Voice ...)

VII. Regard de la Croix (Contemplation of the Cross)

(The Cross said to Him: You will be a priest in my arms ...)

VIII. Regard des hauteurs (Contemplation of the Heights)

(Glory in the Heights ... the Heights descend to the manger like a lark's song ...)

IX. Regard du Temps (Contemplation of Time)
*(The mystery of the plenty of Time; Time sees born in itself the
One who is Eternal ...)*

X. Regard de l'Esprit de joie (Contemplation of the Spirit
of Joy)
*(Violent dance, intoxicated tone of horns, rapture of the Holy
Spirit ... the joy of the love of the Blessed God in the soul of
Jesus Christ ...)*

French composer, organist, educator, Catholic, and ornithologist **Olivier Messiaen** was born in Avignon, France, on December 10, 1908; he died in Paris on April 27, 1992. Born into an intellectual family, Messiaen's mother was Cécile Sauvage, the French poet, who wrote a cycle of poems during her pregnancy. His father, Pierre Messiaen, was an English teacher and a translator of Shakespeare. *Vingt regards sur l'enfant Jésus* is a suite for solo piano, comprising twenty distinct movements. Messiaen composed this work between March 23 to September 8, 1944, dedicating it to the pianist Yvonne Loriod, who was Messiaen's student and later became his second wife. The premiere took place in Paris, at Salle Gaveau on March 26, 1945. A complete performance lasts approximately two hours.

During World War II, Messiaen joined the French army and was taken into a prisoner of war camp by the German Nazis at Görlitz in Silesia, 1940. After premiering one of his most significant works, the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* with three fellow musicians in the camp, he was released in 1942, and returned to Paris where he was appointed as Professor of Harmony at the Paris Conservatory. He soon attracted many illustrious students, including Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Yvonne Loriod, and many others. His collaboration with the pianist Yvonne Loriod inspired him to compose large-scale works for the piano, including a suite of seven pieces for two pianos *Visions de l'Amen* (1943), and this monumental cycle of twenty pieces for solo piano *Vingt regards sur l'enfant Jésus* (1944). Loriod remained until her death the foremost interpreter of his piano music, and her long association with Messiaen culminated in their marriage in 1962.

While working on *Vingt regards sur l'enfant Jésus*, Messiaen and Loriod gave their first performance of the *Visions de l'Amen* at the Concerts de la Pléiade on May 10, 1943, during the German occupation of Paris. Additionally, the composer was writing his first treatise, *Technique de mon langage musical* (1944), which he completed in the same year along with the piano cycle. Meanwhile, life in Paris was turbulent with severe shortages of food, fuel, and electricity because WWII entered into the last months before the liberation. Paper shortages disrupted music publishing, and a prominent musical magazine, *L'Information Musicale*, had to close due to these constraints. In August, strikes and calls for insurrection spread, with the Allied armies poised to enter the city. The police went on strike, and resistance groups took control, raising the French flag for the first time in four years. Eventually the Allies liberated Paris on August 25, 1944. Amid the chaos of war, it is an extraordinary accomplishment that Messiaen completed a two-hour-long work.

Before the 1945 premiere, Messiaen rehearsed with Loriod at the home of her godmother Mme. Sivade, in the rue Blanche on December 15. Four days later, on December 19 at 6:15 p.m. Loriod gave a trial public performance of two selected pieces (movement X "Regard de l'Esprit de joie" and movement XV "Le baiser de l'Enfant-Jésus") in the Salle du Conservatoire. During the premiere on March 26, 1945, Messiaen gave an introduction to each piece and he also prepared printed program notes containing brief commentaries which were later extended and transformed into the preface of the first edition, published in 1947 by Durand. In the preface, the descriptive texts are printed in French and here is the English translation:

Contemplation of the Child-God of the manger and Gazes cast upon him: from the inexpressible Gaze of God the Father to the multiple Gaze of the Church of Love, passing through the incredible Gaze of the Spirit of Joy, the most tender Gaze of the Virgin, then the Angels, the Magi, and immaterial or symbolic creatures (Time, the Heights, Silence, the Star, the Cross).

The Star and the Cross have the same theme because one opens and the other closes the earthly period of Jesus. The theme of God is obviously found in the “Regard du Père”, “du Fils” and “de l’Esprit de joie”, in “Par Lui tout a été fait”, in “le baiser de L’Enfant-Jésus”; he is present in the “first communion of the virgin” (she carried Jesus in her), he is magnified in the “church of love” which is the body of Christ. Not to mention the songs of birds, carillons, spirals, stalactites, galaxies, photons, and the texts of Dom Columba Marmion, Saint Thomas, Saint John of the Cross, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, the Gospels and the Missal that influenced me. A theme of chords circulates from one piece to another, split or joined in a rainbow; see also rhythmic canons, polymodalities, non-retrogradable rhythms amplified in both directions, values progressively accelerated or slowed down, asymmetrical enlargements, changes of register, etc. – The writing for the piano is very exploratory: inverse arpeggios, resonances, various traits. – Dom Columba Marmion (“Christ in his Mysteries”) and after him Maurice Toesca (“the Twelve Gazes”) spoke of the gazes of the shepherds, the angels, the Virgin, the heavenly Father; I took up the same idea but treating it a little differently, and adding sixteen new gazes. More than in all my previous works, I have sought here a language of mystical love, at the same time varied, powerful, and tender, sometimes brutal, in multicolored dispositions. (Durand Edition, 1947)

This magnificent piano cycle includes three cyclic themes that unify all the movements. The first cyclic theme is the thème de Dieu (the “Theme of God”), which appears in its complete form in the first piece, Regard du Père. The “Theme of God” also recurs in movements V, VI, and X. Two more instances of it can be found in movements XI and XV, which are in the second half of the cycle. The second cyclic theme is the thème de l’étoile et de la Croix (the “Theme of the Star and of the Cross”). This theme symbolizes the star that heralds the birth of Christ and the cross on which He died. It occurs in the second movement, Regard de l’étoile, as well as in the movement VII, Regard de la Croix. The third cyclic theme, thème d’accords (the “Theme of Chords”) does not function symbolically, but provides unifying material throughout the cycle. This chord cluster theme is featured in the movement VI. Additionally, there are also two additional themes that do not follow the cyclic structure: thème d’amour (the “Theme of Love”) in the movement VI and thème de joie (the “Theme of Joy”) in the movement X.

In terms of compositional technique, Messiaen employs an essential modal system known as the “modes of limited transposition” that yields a distinctive harmonic sound, significantly extending the possibilities of melodic and harmonic colors within his unique style. He frequently superimposes different modes, creating various sonorities and polymodality in three distinct layers. In Messiaen’s early music, the characteristic harmonic language often blurs the distinction between

consonance and dissonance. Tonality is absorbed into a broader concept of modality. His harmonic language challenges the idea of functionality, existing in a state that is neither dissonant, nor resolved.

Another distinct feature is “asymmetrical enlargement,” which is evident in movements III, VI, and X. In this technique, a theme or passage is repeated multiple times. Some groups of notes remain the same, while Messiaen transposes other groups upward and still others downward. Furthermore, Messiaen has employed several other devices such as rhythmic canon in movements V, VI, and IX. Birdsongs make appearances in various places throughout movements V and VIII, symbolizing nature, freedom, and immortality. These spiritual creatures seemingly descend from the sky and are perceived as a part of God.

The opening piece “Regard du Père,” serves as a prelude to the entire musical journey, surpassing the static meditation that can often be associated with Messiaen’s other slow music. This interplay between serenity and expressivity, forward-driving impulses, as well as the juxtaposition of eternity and time, underpin all subsequent slower movements. This calm, extending over the next four movements for approximately twenty-five minutes, prepares the ground for the dramatic revelation in Movement VI, “Par Lui tout a été fait,” the first of several technically challenging moments, marking *Vingt regards sur l’enfant Jésus* as an “Everest” of piano literature.

Movement VI is a large-scale fugue in which the first main section follows a symmetrical A-B-A form. The fugal subject contains various transformations, including changes in rhythm and registers, alterations between different voices, and asymmetrical enlargement in the fortissimo bass section. After the midpoint, a note by note retrograde occurs, followed by a mysterious stretto, and a triumphant recurrence of the “Theme of God.” The movement concludes with “The Creation sings the Theme of God,” a chord canon, culminating in a closing canon of octaves played by both hands featuring the main subject.

The following three movements are of a smaller scale. Movement VII is highly expressive and painful, symbolizing the crucifixion of Jesus. Movement VIII includes a lively lark-song passage, symbolizing the heights and concluding with different groups of birds in unison. Movement IX is reminiscent of the earlier movement V, and also incorporates the idea of polymodality and rhythmic canon. Messiaen describes it as a mysterious piece. The opening bars recur in various forms multiple times, with each iteration followed by a rhythmic canon that presents three distinct sonorities. This construction creates a sense of stasis or eternity, corresponding to the title of *Regard du temps*.

The last movement X begins with an “Oriental” dance in unison, like a plainchant. This style of writing recalls the dance elements in *Stravinsky’s Rite of Spring*, a work that was the cornerstone of Messiaen’s teaching. The following “Theme of Joy” emerges four times in total. In the preface, Messiaen describes that: “I have always been very struck by the fact that God is happy - and this ineffable joy continued to inhabit the soul of Christ. Joy that is for me a transport, an intoxication, in the craziest sense of the word” (Durand Edition, 1947). The hunting horn tunes of the middle section hold back the excitement a bit, but the “Theme of Joy” dominates

the entire piece and expresses overwhelming emotions. Messiaen simultaneously uses the extreme treble and bass registers of the keyboard to produce an unstoppable and powerful force with marked contrasts in timbre. Ultimately, the “Theme of Joy” is repeated at the coda, concluding the first half of this monumental cycle.

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