

Introducing Messiaen the Theologian

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Olivier Messiaen (1908–92) was one of the most influential composers, teachers and performers of the twentieth century, yet he has not been afforded the same degree of attention as composers such as Schoenberg or Stravinsky. There are currently only a handful of books in English that deal with his style and only two that concentrate on his biography. Messiaen is also one of the most widely performed and recorded composers of the twentieth century, but although his popularity is increasing, the theological component of his music continues to provide a serious impediment for some of his audience. It is often reported that he considered it his good fortune to have been born a Catholic and he is often quoted as having said that ‘the illumination of the theological truths of the Catholic faith is the first aspect of my work, the noblest and no doubt the most useful’.¹ For a composer whose music was a way of expressing his faith, this aspect of his life is clearly worth further investigation.

Under the aegis of the Boston University Messiaen Project [BUMP] a conference was held at Boston University in the autumn of 2007. A group of scholars, theologians and musicians gathered to discuss one aspect of Messiaen’s life and work that had so far been largely neglected: Messiaen the Theologian. The conference participants endeavoured to move away from what Messiaen himself said about his life and work and instead offered a rich context for listening to his music with understanding.

This collection of essays, developed from papers read at the Boston conference, is divided into four parts, each of which deals with a specific aspect of Messiaen’s theology. The essays cover a wide variety of topics such as Messiaen’s personal spirituality, the context of Catholicism in France in the twentieth century, comparative study of Messiaen with writers such as Dante and Maritain, and analysis of his music in a theological context. In addition to contributing to the understanding of several major works, including *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*, *Messe de la Pentecôte*, *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, *Sept Haïkaï* and *Saint François d’Assise*, the collection provides a basic framework for understanding the issues surrounding Messiaen’s theology by contextualizing French Catholicism in the twentieth century, understanding the role of lay leadership in the French Catholic Church, highlighting the problems associated with making music ‘speak’ of

¹ Claude Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color. Conversations with Claude Samuel and Olivier Messiaen*, trans. E. Thomas Glasow (Portland, OR, 1994), p. 20.

Catholic truths, issues of interpretation, and by discussing the key figures in Messiaen's musical and theological world.

In order to provide a framework for Messiaen's life as a theologian it is important to understand something of the history of Catholicism in France in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and some key concepts and terms used in these essays. For many readers, most of this will likely be new material and, because of its huge cast of characters, there is a glossary of people at the end of this volume that is designed to contextualize some unfamiliar names. Perhaps the most important historical factor to remember is that Messiaen lived in a time of both political and theological ferment that touched all aspects of social existence.

In the civil and political realm, Messiaen was born into a period of history in France known as the Third Republic, a republican parliamentary democracy that lasted from 1870 until the Vichy regime (1940–44). A provisional government ruled for a short time after the Second World War (1944–46) and was followed by the Fourth Republic (1946–58) and, currently, the Fifth Republic (1958–present). The Third Republic was established following the defeat of Napoleon III during the 1870 war against Prussia. In 1908, the year in which Messiaen was born, Paris, like other European capitals, was in its 'Belle Époque'. This retrospective appellation defined a 'beautiful era' for the upper classes that lasted from the late nineteenth century to the First World War. Though there was significant national and personal introspection during the period 'l'entre-deux-guerres' (the French expression for the period between the two wars that embodies the spirit of the time), during this period Europe was essentially at peace and it was a time of rapid growth, spurred by innovations in science and technology. The arts were radically transformed: Expressionism replaced Impressionism as the new avant-garde; Art Nouveau dominated design throughout much of Europe until the First World War; and many other movements such as Fauvism, Futurism and Surrealism flourished and were in turn superseded by new ideas. World fairs and new modes of transport meant easier access to the exotic and spurred a growth in orientalism and the fashion for Chinoiserie and Japoniserie in costume and design. In music, cabaret theater became popular, as did operettas and music in salons and cafés. In literature, as with the other arts, Realism and Naturalism developed into Modernism, and writers such as Émile Zola and Marcel Proust stretched the boundaries of both technique and imagination.

During these same years of the twentieth century the Catholic Church was trying to redefine its position and influence amidst tumultuous cultural change.² There continued to be a struggle between those who wanted a strong Roman

² For a more detailed introduction to the basic tenets of Catholicism, Catholicism in France in the twentieth century and Messiaen's theology see Andrew Shenton, *Olivier Messiaen's System of Signs: Notes Towards Understanding His Music* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 17–34. See also: James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, vol. 1 (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1988); James C. Livingston, Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, Sarah Coakley and James H. Evans, Jr, eds *Modern Christian Thought*, vol. 2 (Upper Saddle

Catholic presence in society and government, and those who wanted a more restricted involvement. Rooted in conflicts dating to the medieval period of history, these forces are called ‘ultramontanism’ and ‘gallicanism’ respectively. Ultramontanism is the movement that supported the prerogatives and authority of the papacy, with the intention of freeing the Roman Catholic Church from the jurisdiction and control of civic powers. Gallicanism was the movement seeking to minimize the authority of the pope in civil affairs. Another important concept and movement of the time was that of ‘laïcité’ [laicity or laicism], which strictly means the separation of church and state, but which from the late nineteenth century came to mean the freedom of public institutions from the influence of the Catholic Church, and now means that the French government is legally prohibited from recognizing any religion. In France, separation of the church and state officially became law in 1905. In 1870, at the First Vatican Council, the constitution *Pastor Aeternus* was accepted, which established both the primacy of the pope and his infallibility.

Less than ten years later, in 1879, Pope Leo XIII issued the encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, which established the teachings of Thomas Aquinas as the sole appropriate expression of theological endeavour. Thomism had always been an influential category of thought, but prior to *Aeterni Patris* it had taken two distinctive forms: Neo-Scholasticism represented the burgeoning interest in medieval scholastic theology and philosophy and its reclamation as a shield against growing dissent and change in theological circles; and Neo-Thomism, which was a much narrower category referring specifically to the study of the teachings of Thomas Aquinas. Following the issuance of *Aeterni Patris*, however, the emphasis on Aquinas’s teachings alone made the appellation Neo-Thomism the more appropriate frame of reference.

Not all theologians found this turn to Neo-Thomism acceptable, and many began to move in new and creative directions that combined Thomism with new ways of thinking. Broadly speaking these theologians called for a ‘return to the sources’, or for ‘ressourcement’ as it came to be known, moving away from the limitations and rigours of scholasticism in its many forms. Labelled disparagingly by its detractors as ‘la nouvelle théologie’, advocates of this path sought to restore Catholic theology to its original purity of thought and expression by returning to the original sources, traditions and symbols of the Christian faith: scripture and the writings of the Church Fathers. Several prominent theologians who are associated with this new theology are referred to or quoted by Messiaen, including Henri de Lubac, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Yves Congar, Marie-Dominique Chenu, Louis Bouyer and Etienne Gilson.

In returning to original sources, the work of Thomas Aquinas remained vital to the Catholic understanding of many important concepts central to the doctrine, including ontology, cosmology and the metaphysical proof of God’s existence.

River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000); and Marcellino D’Ambrosio, ‘Ressourcement Theology, *Aggiornamento*, and the Hermeneutics of Tradition’, *Communio* 18, no. 4 (1991): 530–555.

Indeed, the *Summa Theologiae* by Aquinas is arguably second only to the Bible in importance to the Roman Catholic Church. In the *Motu Proprio Doctoris Angelici* (29 June 1914), Pope Pius X summarized the importance of a Neo-Thomist understanding of the church, noting:

[...] the capital theses in the philosophy of St. Thomas are not to be placed in the category of opinions capable of being debated one way or another, but are to be considered as the foundations upon which the whole science of natural and divine things is based; if such principles are once removed or in any way impaired, it must necessarily follow that students of the sacred sciences will ultimately fail to perceive so much as the meaning of the words in which the dogmas of divine revelation are proposed by the magistracy of the Church.³

As a formal response to decades of change, Pope John XXIII convened the Vatican's Second Ecumenical Council (commonly known as Vatican II), which he opened in 1962 and which was closed by Pope Paul VI in 1965. 'Aggiornamento', an Italian term literally meaning 'bringing up to date', was one of the key words used during the Second Vatican Council to mean a spirit of change, openness and modernity. Vatican II addressed many key issues in its four major sessions and produced a number of important documents such as *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, and *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. *Lumen Gentium* discusses, for example, the hierarchical structure of the Church, the role of the laity and the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* is concerned with general principles for the restoration and promotion of the Sacred Liturgy, especially in encouraging active participation of the faithful and in more clearly defining the role of music and the arts in liturgical practice.

This is the tumultuous theological and civil environment in which Messiaen was raised and lived out his religious convictions. He lived during an extraordinary time of *renouveau catholique* or Catholic Renewal (a renewal movement in the early twentieth century France that was both a literary and social movement seeking to return to the original values of Catholicism), and during an era of strong Neo-Thomism united with a revitalized and renewed theological endeavour aimed at reclaiming the origins of the faith ('ressourcement') that culminated in a period of ecclesiastical 'updating', or 'aggiornamento'. It is against this rich tapestry of social, economic, political, musical and religious change that Messiaen accepted the challenges of being a faithful member of the laity by sharing in the three offices of Christ – priestly, prophetic and royal – by 'engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will [...] and to illuminate and order all temporal things' (Catechism of the Catholic Church (1992) §§871–872, 882).

³ <http://maritain.nd.edu/jmc/etext/doctoris.htm>, accessed September, 2008.

The contributors to this collection are internationally recognized scholars working in a number of disciplines. They utilize a broad range of methodologies including exegesis, theological studies and semiotics, with the specific aim of addressing directly the largest group of people who come across Messiaen's music: the audience.

The first part of the volume, simply entitled 'Messiaen the Theologian', enlarges what we know about Messiaen's own theology from an analysis of works in his library and then sets out to uncover his relationship to the musical avant-garde as a Christian composer. In the first essay, Yves Balmer sheds light on Messiaen's personal library and postulates how some of these books may have influenced his thinking. As a cataloguer of the Loriod-Messiaen collection at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Balmer has had unique access to Messiaen's library and in his essay he lists the citations concerning Catholicism in Messiaen's monumental *Traité de rythme, couleur et d'ornithologie*, creating a typology of the works and authors cited according to their origin (scripture, writings by saints, Catholic artists, theologians, etc.). This typology permits the virtual recomposition of the Catholic volumes in Messiaen's private library, focusing upon works that we can assume held a particular significance for the composer because of their citation in the *Traité*. Balmer examines the relationship between various French Catholic movements and these writings, in an attempt to better define the portraits of Messiaen the Catholic and Messiaen the reader of Catholic literature.

Peter Bannister investigates Messiaen's unusual position within the musical avant-garde in Western Europe after 1945 as an expositor of unfashionable Catholic doctrine in a predominantly hostile intellectual environment. During a period when overtly Christian composition was generally viewed with deep suspicion by the artistic vanguard, Messiaen's artistic credibility remained essentially undented even with those unsympathetic to his beliefs (the critical controversy of the 1940s known as 'Le Cas Messiaen' notwithstanding). Indeed, he can be said to have evangelized the secular world of the concert hall with works such as *Couleurs de la cité céleste* and *La Transfiguration* and even the opera house with his monumental *Saint François d'Assise*, in a unique musical dialogue with the culture of modernity. This constitutes a continuation and development of Messiaen's pre-1945 trajectory both in words and music, stemming from a particular theological outlook concerning the relationship between the sacred and secular. A major factor in the success of Messiaen's project is his bold synthesis of ancient and modernist elements in a highly individual theological rainbow at a time when the avant-garde largely regarded any reference to tradition as regressive. On a technical level, this is exemplified by Messiaen's openness to the atonality of the Second Viennese School (attempting to bringing serial techniques into an explicitly Christian framework in pieces such as the *Livre d'orgue*). The rootedness of Messiaen's music in the physicality of sound discloses an affirmative theology of creation's goodness in stark contrast to the negative dialectics of much composition after the Second World War, while his ongoing engagement with Modernism derives from his eschatological hope. Bannister concludes that this musico-theological

stance can provide material for reflection on the part of composers of younger generations.

Sander van Maas addresses the construction and meaning of the 'naïve' in Messiaen. Questions concerning this term in relation to the composer abound. Which elements of Messiaen's music, statements and attitudes are associated with this notion? In what sense is this notion applied, and how can this usage be understood in cultural-historical terms? What is the relation between Christian faith and the naïve? Why should Messiaen's alleged naïveté be 'impressive' and 'provocative,' as musicologist Richard Taruskin contends? How does the naïve come about and function in the context of self-conscious modernity? Addressing these and related questions van Maas suggests ways to make sense of an aspect of Messiaen that continues to inspire respect in both his fans and critics.

In the second part of the collection, three writers explore Messiaen's relationship with key theologians. Karin Heller highlights Messiaen's life and work as a church musician within the twentieth-century Church of France and in particular his relationship with Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, Archbishop of Paris from 1981 to 2005. In a more or less ideologically pressured context, Messiaen remained faithful to the Gregorian renewal movement initiated by Solesmes, a Benedictine monastery famous as the source of the restoration of Benedictine monastic life in France under Dom Prosper Guéranger after the French Revolution, while other currents exalted liturgy as an appropriate tool for evangelization and committed themselves to composition of church music in vernacular language. Hostilities and misunderstandings between the ecclesiastical authorities and Messiaen's art led him to limit his production of church music and to transfer the idea of the Catholic liturgy into concert halls. Heller contends that this effort, together with his strong interest in nature, reflects a view proper to Romantic theology. Cardinal Lustiger's admiration for Messiaen is best expressed in his statement: 'I hear in Messiaen's music the inspiring power of the Word and the expression of a musician who has received the Word; I found [in this music], through the meditation expressed by the musician, aspects that helped me to understand in a new way the Word he commented on'. Lustiger's affinity with Messiaen's music is rooted in a deep conviction that liturgy is God's way *par excellence* of making himself visible through the Word. This explains why scripture became absolutely central during Lustiger's ministry as a pastor of the Parisian church of Sainte-Jeanne-de-Chantal. Called to implement liturgical reform in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, Lustiger wrote, together with the church organist and composer Henry Paget, a contemporary liturgical repertoire entirely at the service of the Word of God. What made these programmes unique was not only the exclusive use of vernacular scripture texts, but their structure. This mirrors Messiaen's genuine combination of scripture and music in his own work.

Douglas Shadle explores Messiaen's relationship to the Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain's musical circle and to the movement known as 'Neo-Thomism', a modern revival of the theological and philosophical systems of St Thomas Aquinas led by Maritain. Shadle notes that Maritain's philosophical reach

extended much farther into Parisian musical life than we currently recognize. Before the Second World War, Maritain and his wife Raïssa developed intimate relationships with several prominent musical luminaries. Olivier Messiaen, however, now considered the twentieth century's premier Catholic composer, appears strangely to have sidestepped Maritain's influence. Had he not, his fate might have been substantially different. In order to understand this unpredictable development, Shadle explores the theological and musical milieu in which Jacques Maritain played a central role. Drawing on Thomas Aquinas's medieval theology, Maritain's philosophy of art orients artistic production away from emotional expression and focuses instead on art's foundation in the intellect. His closest musical companions, Igor Stravinsky and Arthur Lourié, adopted many of his fundamental ideas in their own writings and attempted to create a 'Neo-Thomist' musical style. Maritain's ideas also entered into broader critical discourse in music periodicals, as a wide circle of important composers and critics responded positively to his views. Indeed, their continued adoption of a broadly defined neo-classical aesthetic was a direct response to his philosophy. Although they appeared at the height of Maritain's influence on Parisian musical life, Messiaen's earliest religious compositions bear no apparent stylistic resemblance to neo-classicism or Lourié's musical Neo-Thomism. His sacred works from the 1930s, for example, differ markedly in style from those of both Poulenc and Lourié, two of Maritain's closest allies. Viewed in the light of its theological context, however, the radical separation between Messiaen's music and that of Maritain's circle makes more immediate sense. Like several prominent Catholic theologians, Messiaen rejected Neo-Thomism's austerity in favour of a biblically oriented outlook. Consequently, his style and success paralleled the thought and widespread theological acceptance of two of his favourite contemporary theologians, Romano Guardini and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Clearly, understanding the work of Thomas Aquinas is key to grasping the Catholic religious ethos of the time and essential to comprehension of both Messiaen's music and his theology. The essay by Vincent Benitez focuses on Thomist theology and its relationship to and influence on Messiaen's aesthetics and compositions. Benitez opens by introducing us to Aquinas and his theology, especially the *Summa Theologiae*, the essential practical manual of Christian Theology. He continues by considering Aquinas's theological ideas, particularly his synthesis of faith and reason and their place in the *renouveau catholique* in France. Using examples from several important works such as the *Trois petites Liturgies*, *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ*, and *Saint François d'Assise*, Benitez discusses Aquinas's influence on Messiaen's music. He argues that Messiaen had a profound understanding of Thomistic thought and incorporated its precepts into his music so that every technique at his disposal was used to produce music that glorifies God.

The third part of this collection highlights Messiaen's relationship with certain poets, noting similarities in theological themes. Despite numerous efforts to define Messiaen's relationship to Roman Catholicism, scholars have reached no

consensus about the foundation of his musical theology. Studies have discussed his connection to several medieval figures, including Sts Aquinas, Francis, Bernard and Bonaventure as well as to such modern figures as Chateaubriand, John XXIII, Maritain, Couturier, Chardin, Lubac and von Balthasar.⁴

Each of these sources adds to our understanding of Messiaen's theology. Nevertheless, a late medieval theology now called 'Gothic theology' synthesizes several important strands of this medieval tapestry. In his essay, Robert Fallon is the first to show the influence of Gothic spirituality on Messiaen, who Fallon argues was guided in this tradition by his reading of Dante. That Dante was not a theologian, but a poet, can only have appealed to Messiaen the musician. Fallon explores how Messiaen may have interpreted these comparisons and how he could have encountered Dante, and discusses formal similarities between Messiaen and Dante, including the use of symmetry, prime numbers and *retrogradatio cruciformis*. Finally, Fallon points out many parallelisms in their views of theology, particularly in reference to Tristan, Bernard, Francis, Aquinas and Bonaventure, the Neo-Platonic doctrines of illumination and emanation, bird metaphors, rainbows, the music of the spheres, the abyss of hell and the varieties of perfection found during the slow ascent to Paradise. Because these characters and theological principles appear in the works of both Messiaen and Dante, Fallon suggests that Dante was the artist whom Messiaen chose as his Bloomian precursor.

T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* were first published in 1943; Olivier Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* was published in 1944. Both works were written during the Second World War although both contain earlier material. My own essay sketches the composition and publication of both works and analyses certain

⁴ For Aquinas see C. C. Hill, 'Saint Thomas Aquinas and the Theme of Truth in Messiaen's Saint François d'Assise', in *Messiaen's Language of Mystical Love*, ed. Siglind Bruhn (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), pp. 143–167; for St. Francis see Larry W. Peterson, 'Messiaen and Surrealism: A Study of His Poetry', in *Messiaen's Language of Mystical Love*, ed. Siglind Bruhn (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), pp. 215–224; for Saints Bernard and Bonaventure see Robert Fallon, 'Messiaen's Mimesis: The Language and Culture of the Bird Styles' (PhD diss., University of California at Berkeley, 2005) and 'The Record of Realism in Messiaen's Bird Style', in *Olivier Messiaen: Music, Art and Literature*, eds Christopher Dingle and Nigel Simeone (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 115–136; for Chateaubriand see Robin Freeman, 'Trompette d'un Ange secret: Olivier Messiaen and the Culture of Ecstasy', in *Contemporary Music Review* 14, no. 3–4 (1996): 81–125; for John XXIII see Christopher Dingle, "'La statue reste sur son piédestal": Messiaen's La Transfiguration and Vatican II', in *Tempo*, no. 212 (2000): 11; and for Maritain, Couturier, Chardin, Lubac, and von Balthasar see Fallon, 'The Record of Realism' and 'Two paths to paradise: Reform in Messiaen's Saint François d'Assise', in *Messiaen Studies*, ed. Robert Sholl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 206–231 and also 'Messiaen's Mimesis' and 'Knowledge and Subjectivity in Maritain, Stravinsky, and Messiaen', in *Jacques Maritain and the Many Ways of Knowing*, ed. Douglas Ollivant (Washington, DC: American Maritain Association, 2002), pp. 284–302.

primary themes in each that concern the nature of the human experience of music and music as a means of mediating or negotiating time. Messiaen's *Quatuor* is dedicated to the Angel of the Apocalypse, who raised a hand towards heaven saying: 'there shall be no more Time'. In this essay I am not concerned with the Apocalyptic programme or the circumstances surrounding the first performance. Instead, I investigate two things: first, some theological and philosophical issues regarding the end of time, and in particular how the cessation of time might be conceived in human terms and described, in Eliot's words, as the 'still point of the turning world'. Second, I discuss whether we might dare to abandon Messiaen's Christian programme altogether and, if we do, what meaning, if any, does the music have. There is no record of T. S. Eliot and Messiaen having met (though it is likely they were aware of each other's work), so this essay is speculative. But, at some point we have to put away the musicology and face the music. When we do, we have to listen carefully to what the music says to us on a deep and personal level, freed from his verbal accoutrements and from our conscious analysis.

This section ends with Stephen Schloesser's essay entitled 'The Charm of Impossibilities: Mystic Surrealism as Contemplative Voluptuousness'. In his *Technique of My Musical Language* (1944) Messiaen declared: 'One point will attract our attention at the outset: the *charm of impossibilities* ... at once voluptuous and contemplative'. Calling for the hastening by prayer of the coming of the 'liberator' who would be 'both a great artisan and a great Christian', Messiaen invoked lines by two writers. First, Pierre Reverdy, a poet whose work and thought were essential to the invention of post-First World War surrealism. Second, Ernest Hello, a writer whose work and thought, central to nineteenth-century Catholic Revivalism [*renouveau catholique*], aimed at carrying out the mission of Dom Prosper Guéranger's monumental *l'Année liturgique* – namely, to penetrate beyond the *historique* and the *théologique* into the *mystique*. Was Messiaen's invocation of the nineteenth-century *mystique* and the twentieth-century *sur-réaliste* an arbitrary juxtaposition of two personal interests, or is there a serious internal connection between them? Schloesser argues for a connection by setting out the context of Jazz Age Catholicism and then reading within it the figures that Messiaen invoked as his primary influences in the 1944 text: his mother, Cécile Sauvage (poetess); William Shakespeare (dramatist of the magical); Paul Claudel (symbolist poet and icon of the *renouveau catholique*); Paul Reverdy and Paul Éluard (surrealist poets); Ernest Hello (nineteenth-century Catholic Revivalist; symbolist writer; author of *contes extraordinaires*, short stories of the macabre in the vein of Edgar Allan Poe); Benedictine monk Dom Columba Marmion (twentieth-century Catholic revivalist; heir to the *mystique* tradition of Dom Guéranger); and a figure that Messiaen does not mention but perhaps should have: Charles Tournemire, symbolist musician and composer of *l'Orgue mystique*, inspired by and modelled on Guéranger's *l'Année liturgique*.

In the final part of this collection, four writers discuss theological issues in specific works by Messiaen. Nigel Simeone documents the genesis of *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum* from its commission by the French Ministry of Culture

to its private premiere in La Sainte-Chapelle in Paris (6 May 1965), and its public premiere in Chartres Cathedral (20 June 1965). Although the work ended up being for an orchestra of woodwinds, brass and metallic percussion without text (although all five movements have epigraphs taken from the Bible and the title comes from the Nicene Creed: ‘And I look for the resurrection of the dead’), Simeone presents evidence that Messiaen was considering writing a mass, a *De Profundis* or even a requiem to fulfill this commission. It is interesting to have insights into the mundane life of Messiaen as well as his spiritual life as he pondered how to write a piece that was to be in honour of the dead of the two world wars, just as it is also of interest to see something of the reception history of one of his pieces written for ‘vast spaces: churches, cathedrals, even in the open air and on mountain tops’.

Robert Sholl discusses the influential organ work *Messe de la Pentecôte* in the context of the avant-garde. Messiaen’s interest in the Surrealist movement in the 1940s was perhaps unsurprising. Surrealism represented a radical modernist aesthetic that attempted to re-integrate aesthetic experience into life through the politicization of art. At the vanguard of the revolutionary avant-garde aesthetic, Messiaen’s students (including Berio, Boulez, Stockhausen and Xenakis), unwittingly inherited his spirit of confrontation and regeneration. Even as they searched for autonomy and authentic expression down supposedly secular paths, their work entailed a reaction to and a continuation of Messiaen’s theological, aesthetic and compositional preoccupations. The search for a non-ideological and transcendental autonomy without God (for Boulez, Berio and Xenakis at least), would founder on its own epistemological rocks. For an ardent Catholic such as Messiaen, faith was his means of politicization and also a means to re-orientate such avant-garde politics. Yet, by attempting to redirect the search for the absolute in Western music towards God, Messiaen also revealed that theological concerns were inextricably connected to the bedrock of avant-garde thought. This study examines these concerns in relation to a small compositional period in Messiaen’s output (1948–53). It investigates how Messiaen’s music of this period engaged with and transformed the radical aesthetic of the avant-garde, and how it afforded him the impetus to renew and refresh his musical language.

Luke Berryman’s essay acknowledges the need to reassess Messiaen’s frequently misconstrued late works. Even today, innovative musical approaches to a familiar theological programme in his final organ work, *Livre du Saint Sacrement* (1986), remain largely unrecognized. New ideas are especially abundant in the last movement, ‘Offrande et Alleluia final’, as evidenced through critical comparison with finale toccatas serving similar programmatic purposes in the earlier organ cycles. These experiments make the *Livre* of special interest within his output, yet scholars frequently overlook it, perceiving it as either a series of disconnected written-out improvisations, or as an arbitrary summation to the organ oeuvre. A close examination of the music, and the circumstances in which it was being composed, reveals that the *Livre* is not, as writer Paul Griffiths has suggested, a ‘garland of mementoes’. Neither is it a summation, as many scholars often suppose. In fact in *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, far from simply revisiting his familiar

techniques (which had been exemplified on a grand scale in his monumental opera *Saint François*), Messiaen appears to discard many of them in favour of new ventures. By comparing Messiaen's approach to his programme in the final movement of the *Livre*, 'Offrande et Alleluia final', with toccata movements serving similar programmatic purposes and standing in similar positions in their respective organ cycles ('Dieu parmi nous', 1936; and 'Le vent de l'esprit', 1949), Berryman begins to elucidate the purposes and outcomes of these experiments. It becomes apparent that the *Livre* does not tally with musicologist Christopher Dingle's commonly accepted portrait of Messiaen in the 1980s as a contented old man who is 'at peace with the world'. Only once we have finally rejected this image will we be able to approach an understanding of Messiaen's untamable desire for musical experimentation. In his final works it seems that, far from being contented, Messiaen may even have been questioning the success of some of his older techniques and continuing to search for new methods of expressing his personal theology.

In the last essay, Cheong Wai Ling discusses the 'invisible temple' of *Sept Haïkai*. If Messiaen's claim to have given 'Gagaku', the fourth movement and centerpiece of *Sept Haïkai*, a 'Christian dimension' proves intriguing, 'Miyajima et le torii dans la mer', the following piece of the set, may strike us as even more perplexing in makeup. Apart from the use of an octachordal soundband to imitate the shō playing of gagaku music, 'Miyajima et le torii dans la mer' is deprived of all other Japanese musical elements. Instead, there is a rich display of French birdsong, Greek rhythm and, most unexpectedly, what Messiaen refers to as the 'theme of chorale'. Even though the torii (a traditional Japanese gate) of Miyajima – unlike any other torii in that it is set up in the sea rather than on land – is commonly construed as a gateway that leads to the Shinto shrine, Messiaen takes a different perspective and views through the torii not the Shinto shrine but rather the open sea. This explains his conception of the torii as leading to what he calls 'an invisible temple', which he remarks emphatically is 'the true temple'. The idea of an invisible temple and, by extension, an invisible God might have led Messiaen to arrive at the unexpected but nonetheless symbolic intrusion of a chorale. Cheong argues that Messiaen's use of such non-Japanese elements as French birdsong, Greek rhythm and, above all, the 'theme of chorale' tells of a hidden programme, a metaphor that is shrewdly withheld from his copious commentaries on the music.

Finally, one excellent essay from the Boston conference was not included in this collection since it was already committed for publication elsewhere: David Butler Cannata, 'Messiaen Reads the Infancy Gospels: The Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus as Christology', in *Quomodo cantabimus canticum? Studies in Honor of Edward H. Roesner*, eds David Butler Cannata, Gabriela Ilnitchi Currie, Rena Charnin Mueller, and John Louis Nádas (American Institute of Musicology, 2008), pp. 235–77.