MESSIAEN’S MUSICAL LANGUAGE: TECHNIQUE AND
THEOLOGICAL SYMBOLISM IN *LES CORPS GLORIEUX*,
“COMBAT DE LA MORT ET DE LA VIE”

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One of the most important ways to understand Olivier Messiaen’s musical language is through the lens of the theological ideas that many of his works convey. He considers expressing his Christian faith to be the primary purpose in his music. Through his idiosyncratic technique, Messiaen gives power and life to his religious music that he combines with his interest in literature, musical analysis, poetic imagery and symbolism, his love for theatre, and his compositional and organ abilities. The abundant studies of Messiaen’s works deal with the intricacies of his musical language, yet most of these studies barely discuss his theological ideas. Nevertheless, technical analysis of his music poses immense challenges, especially in the domains of melody and harmony.

Although my approach is unconventional and do not follow any existing system, I base my technical and theological analyses mainly from Messiaen’s technique, his commentaries and his references to the Scriptures. The *Combat de la mort et de la vie* is the heart of *Les Corps glorieux* in both technical and theological aspects. It is an intricate musical artwork where Messiaen demonstrates his melodic and harmonic developments using his idiosyncratic language, and through symbolism portrays the most complex of all drama according to Christian theology—the story of Jesus Christ's Passion and Resurrection. My research can relate directly to a more informed and convincing performance of the work, and can contribute a different perspective to the study, understanding, and appreciation of Messiaen's theologically inspired works.
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By

Lerie Grace Dellosa
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The works of Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) are complex to understand mainly because of his unique musical language. Among the most important aspects to consider is the inspiration of theological ideas that he intends to convey in many of his works. In his conversations with Claude Samuel, he openly expresses his highest aspiration to his religious faith: “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 and most valuable.”¹ Although many of Messiaen’s works reflect his meticulous interest in birds, his intricate rediscoveries in rhythm and his devotion to human love, he favors the theological message in his music as his primary purpose.² Among the religious themes in his works are the mysteries of the Holy Sacrament and the Trinity, the life to come based on the book of Revelation, and on Jesus Christ’s Nativity, Transfiguration, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension.

There is a never-ending search to understand the musical language of Messiaen. Studies on him and his works in the areas of musicology, music theory and performance practice, among others, abound.³ Discoveries of his compositional techniques are frequent, partly

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³ There is a vast amount of both primary and secondary sources written about Messiaen and his works in the form of books, journal reviews and articles, commentaries, interviews, lectures, and dissertations. An extensive reference catalogue attests to all these sources that relate to him and his works. Vincent P. Benitez, *Olivier Messiaen: A Research and Information Guide* (New York: Routledge Music Bibliographies, 2008), xiii.
because of the two major treatises about his works that he wrote himself.⁴ Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone state in the introduction to their book, *Messiaen*, that:

> Of the leading composers of the twentieth century Messiaen is without doubt one of those about whom most remains to be discovered. . . . our knowledge of him is still largely conditioned by what he said about himself.

> In fact Messiaen’s publications conceal as much as they reveal. Read carefully, his accounts of the music are more descriptive than explanatory, telling us what is in the music but seldom why it is there, or what complexities went into its making. We know little of how individual works were conceived.⁵

> Much of the analysis of Messiaen’s works deals extensively with the intricacies of his technical language, yet these studies discuss the theological ideas that his music conveys far less often. Vincent Benitez, author of the extensive catalogue of studies done on Messiaen, *Olivier Messiaen: A Research and Information Guide*, expresses his desire to “see more sophisticated attempts to comprehend and tie his spiritual world together with his vast assemblage of musical techniques.”⁶ In his book, *Messiaen’s Musical Techniques: The Composer’s View and Beyond*, Gareth Healey sees that recent studies on Messiaen that include the “non-musical spheres such as religion and birdsong, [which] have greatly enriched understanding of his deep engagement with his chosen sources. An equivalent comprehension of the inner workings of Messiaen’s musical techniques is indispensable for a rounded picture of the composer.”⁷

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⁴ Messiaen wrote two major treatises about his works: *Technique de mon langage musical*, vols. 1 and 2 (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1944) and *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d’ornithologie*, vols. 1-7 (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1994-2002). In the *Technique*, volume 1 has the text and volume 2 has the corresponding numbered musical examples.


Nevertheless, the technical analysis in itself poses immense and perhaps unprecedented ventures into understanding Messiaen’s musical language and its relation to theology. Benitez realizes that technical analyses of rhythm are abundant but two areas are not as much explored: melody and harmony. He then asks, “What exactly constitutes Messiaen’s melodic/harmonic world? Are there any underlying relationships behind the sound/color phenomena that permeate his work?” Correspondingly in this regard, Healey sees the issues in analyzing the harmonic elements in Messiaen’s music:

Harmony . . . poses by far the greatest challenge to the analyst. The rhythmic aspect of Messiaen’s music, while certainly complex, is comprehensively explained in the two treatises . . . Messiaen clearly defines his ideas and the interrelationships between them.

However, harmony is a different matter. In general, Messiaen’s chords exhibit far freer construction than his rhythms . . . correctly identifying conceptually unconnected constituent elements is problematic . . . The need for judgement is far more pertinent to the harmonic domain than the rhythmic, as an analyst is called upon to make sense of a disconcertingly diffuse array of notes and tie them to specific techniques.

A central premise . . . is the vital role played by the element of interpretation. The labelling of chords given in Messiaen’s Traité in pitch-class set terms is only a starting point . . . and if a chord cannot be classified . . . it can be assumed that the range of possibilities is too great or that Messiaen is composing in a free manner.9

One of the major challenges in analyzing Messiaen’s music concerns his own commentaries. Healey compares this issue to the points that Hill and Simeone raise:

over-reliance on Messiaen’s own comments on his music (whether included in his writings or passed on verbally to his pupils) is one of the primary drawbacks to independent assessment of his work. The seemingly impenetrable nature of its construction results in a dependence on authoritative statements regarding technical matters, and an analyst can easily feel shackled to the composer’s writings. The fundamental reason for this situation is an idiosyncratic language, which may in theory

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9 Healey, Messiaen’s Musical Techniques, 163-164.
appear to be strictly defined, but which in practice is manipulated in such a way that boundaries between techniques become blurred.\textsuperscript{10}

Messiaen’s own commentaries on his Les Corps glorieux (The Glorified Bodies, 1939) explain his theological views, provide biblical references, and also include specific information on technical elements for each movement.\textsuperscript{11} In the Combat de la mort et de la vie (Combat of Death and Life), which is the middle movement, he provides additional theological information and a summary of the analysis of the form of each section.\textsuperscript{12} One may see this information as sufficiently enlightening into understanding the work in its theological and technical aspects. However, serious analysts face this question: how do the technical elements relate to Messiaen’s theological concepts?

Scholars agree that Les Corps glorieux is one of Messiaen’s theological works. Stephen Schloesser claims in his book, Visions of Amen: The Early Life and Music of Olivier Messiaen that it "would take the 'theological' even further beyond the vague 'mystical’" and adds, “Messiaen's Glorified Bodies takes his self-identity as a 'theological' composer to new lengths.”\textsuperscript{13} Schloesser believes that it is Messiaen's "eschatological masterwork” and identifies in the middle movement that the "imagery of the 'combat of death and life' is explicitly eschatological."\textsuperscript{14} In his chapter on “Organ Music I” in the Messiaen Companion, John Milsom sees the middle movement of Messiaen’s Les Corps glorieux as an “overtly programmatic central movement.”\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{10} Healey, Messiaen’s Musical Techniques, 163.
\textsuperscript{11} Olivier Messiaen, Les Corps glorieux, LP jacket notes to an original sound recording by Ducretet Thomson (DUC 4 and 5, XTDX 109, 110, 111; Recorded on June 27, 1956).
\textsuperscript{12} Messiaen includes a summary-analysis of the form is his 1956 LP recording notes and in his 1944 treatise.
\textsuperscript{14} Schloesser, Visions of Amen, 268, 419.
Milson recognizes Messiaen’s masterful use of the organ where “the weight of sound [is] achieved more by the density and dissonance of the chording than by volume alone” and therefore warns that “to analyse such music only in terms of the technical resources it uses—its modes and rhythms, for example—is to risk underestimating the sheer physical impact of its accumulated noise and confusion.”

Messiaen’s programmatic works are intricately enigmatic and thus can be very intense. One of Messiaen’s most devoted students, Jon Gillock, writes about his own perception on the theological representations in the Combat de la mort et de la vie with the intent to suggest ways to understand the piece in performance. In his book, Performing Messiaen’s Organ Music, Gillock includes Messiaen’s valuable commentaries to his organ works together with other related information, which I find very helpful in this research. However, references to technical aspects of Messiaen’s language in his own discussions are very minimal, as Gillock himself admits: “The given analyses are in no way intended to be musicological or theoretical examinations of compositional techniques. They are purely for illuminating some of the details that one must struggle with to arrive at an interpretation.”

My work develops from Gillock’s discussions where I see his intentions build upon Messiaen’s own commentaries in his interpretation of the Combat de la mort et de la vie. However, I see that Gillock presents an analysis of the form that is inconsistent with what Messiaen specifies. Messiaen divides the first part into five different sections but Gillock has

17 Jon Gillock, Performing Messiaen’s Organ Music (Bloomingdale: Indiana University Press, 2010), xxi, 115-122. Although I may agree with Gillock’s programmatic interpretations, I find his book as a very helpful resource, since he includes all of Messiaen’s commentaries about his organ works.
seven of A or B sections wherein the last B section comprises more than two sections of Messiaen’s.\textsuperscript{18} Also, Gillock’s programmatic interpretation hardly refers to the Biblical accounts of Jesus’ Passion story in the Gospels.\textsuperscript{19} Gillock interprets the two contrasting ideas in the first part as “the \textit{Combat}—a battle between Christ and himself.”\textsuperscript{20} Since these two contrasting ideas progressively intensify in the music, Gillock’s portrayal would be contrary to the idea of Jesus’ submission to His Father’s will before He was arrested and crucified.\textsuperscript{21} Gillock portrays Jesus who is still battling against Himself: “The \textit{jousting} part of the toccata is now greatly extended: \textit{the battle within Jesus is more and more fierce}!”\textsuperscript{22} How then can Gillock’s programmatic interpretation agree with Messiaen’s own commentaries on the work? Is the \textit{Combat de la mort et de la vie} truly a religious work based on the Scriptures?

Messiaen regards his commentaries as integral into understanding his work. He believes that one should not ignore his commentaries apart from his work, otherwise he expresses that:

“These quotations are of the greatest significance; I’d go so far to say that, if that were the case, I might just as well pack up; I wouldn’t compose any more music. These quotations are inseparable from the origins of my organ pieces and of most of the works I’ve written which have a religious content. Generally speaking, I’ve allowed my thoughts to revolve around a specific subject . . . but above all in the Holy Scriptures. I’ve tried to find everything which has to do with the subject I’ve chosen and then have tried to translate it into music—not just into notes, not just into sounds and rhythms, but into sound-colours as well, into colours. And, of course, I require the interpreting artist to make a close study of all these things, of all the ideas I want to express—

\textsuperscript{18} Gillock, \textit{Performing Messiaen’s Organ Music}, 115-119.
\textsuperscript{19} Gillock’s programmatic interpretation mainly depicts Jesus’ physical and emotional state during His walk to Calvary, carrying His cross and stumbling a few times. The Scriptures did not say anything about Jesus’ walk except that Jesus was led to be crucified, He carried His own cross, and a man named Simon was asked to carry it behind Jesus. Gillock, \textit{Messiaen’s Organ Music}, 115-122; Matthew27:32; Luke 23:26.
\textsuperscript{20} Gillock, \textit{Messiaen’s Organ Music}, 116.
\textsuperscript{21} Matthew 26:39 records Jesus’ prayer of submission to accept His Father’s will: “My Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me. Nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.”
\textsuperscript{22} Gillock, \textit{Messiaen’s Organ Music}, 120.
indeed, I even ask that he believe in them to a certain extent, in order to be able to convey them to the listener.”

A close study of Messiaen’s works requires critical analysis that does not conform to traditional analytical processes. His two treatises clearly demonstrate that he does not follow the conventions of traditional theory. How then could one fully understand his works? Healey observes that “Messiaen’s analyses of his own works disclose a vast amount of information and in many cases only the composer himself could have supplied such detail of technical thought-processes and programmatic imagery.” Although Messiaen writes a lot about his compositional elements generally, there is not much information about his compositional practice in relation to specific works, as Hill and Simeone write: “we know little of how individual works were conceived or how they evolved, and almost nothing of Messiaen’s working practices, let alone the creative decisions that he took during the course of composing.” Healey suggests a multifarious approach to the analysis of Messiaen’s works: examination of a work or particular movement leaves many questions unanswered, and an all-embracing approach to Messiaen’s language is required. Further developments in Messiaen analysis therefore lie in an amalgam of strategies favouring no single methodology. . . . The absence of any substantive rhythmic, melodic or harmonic material precludes detailed study.

My analysis of the Combat de la mort et de la vie is therefore unconventional and does not follow any existing system of analysis. My initial attempts to analyze the technical elements in this work include traditional tonal and atonal techniques, which I realize do not adequately address the complexities of Messiaen’s language. To guide me in my technical analysis, I then

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24 Healey, Messiaen’s Musical Techniques, 111.
25 Hill and Simeone, Messiaen, 1.
26 Healey, Messiaen’s Musical Techniques, 164-165.
refer mainly to Messiaen’s two-volume treatise, *The Technique of My Musical Language*, which relates to his musical language in his early works. He assures in the preface that his aim is to “[take] the reader’s hand, searching with him . . . to a better understanding which he will be able to find afterwards.”²⁷ There are other commentaries of Messiaen available from other sources that refer to this movement, in the form of his program notes to a recording, journal entries, and conversations. Furthermore, abundant reference sources and dissertation research on Messiaen help me to understand his family and musical background, compositional traits, preferences and other related information.

I realize that identifying the toccata style of the *Combat de la mort et de la vie* is one of the most important factors in my analysis of both the technical and theological aspects in the movement. Elements in the melodic and harmonic domains relate directly to the two main characteristic elements of a French organ toccata: the theme and toccata figurations. Understanding the structure of the first part as a toccata also relates in a way to the organization of other twentieth-century toccatas. In the process of my analysis, I will identify some insignificant melodic and harmonic patterns within the musical elements. Although such features may seem not worth mentioning from the perspective of traditional theoretical analysis, they often are relevant and can relate specifically to Messiaen’s theological representations.

The main basis of my theological interpretation and analysis is from the Scriptures, which I see as Messiaen’s primary source of inspiration in this movement. He specifically

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mentions the Gospels and Psalm 138 in relation to the *Combat de la mort et de la vie.*

In certain passages, I will cite specific Biblical verses that correspond to symbolic representations and analogies to technical elements. Messiaen’s reference to Psalms, which is the Biblical book of poetry, relates in a way to his interest in literature and poetry where the use of symbolism is a very important factor. I see that his specific reference to Psalm 138 relate to his use of number symbolism.

Messiaen did not provide specific details in his use of theological symbolism in the *Combat de la mort et de la vie.* My theoretical and theological analyses are in no way authoritative as his given commentaries to the movement; however, I see that my interpretative analysis will relate directly to a more informed and convincing performance of the work. An extensive technical analysis with a conscious awareness of the theological ideas related to the work will contribute a different perspective on the study and appreciation of Messiaen’s theologically-inspired works. As the central movement of *Les Corps glorieux,* in both formal and theological sense, the *Combat de la mort et de la vie* is in a good position to kindle an interest to do further research on the rest of the other movements.

Chapters in this dissertation are organized within three main categories: relevant musicological information regarding the understanding of Messiaen’s musical language, technical analysis of the *Combat de la mort et de la vie,* and lastly, theological interpretations of Messiaen’s symbolism in the movement that are built upon my technical analysis. Chapter 2 provides a glimpse of contextual aspects of Messiaen’s world that would have influenced his musical language. It looks into his family background of poetry, literature, and religion and

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discusses some of Messiaen’s teachers at the Paris Conservatoire who influenced his skills and preferences as a musician. In light of Messiaen’s position as the organist at La Trinité, this chapter looks into his main responsibilities and performance opportunities that would have heightened his interest in integrating theological ideas in his music. Messiaen’s synesthesia closely associates sound and color. An understanding of how this aspect affects his compositional technique is integral in analyzing his use of melody and harmony. Lastly, this chapter briefly cites Messiaen’s charm of impossibilities that includes his set of seven modes of limited transpositions, which directly relate to sound and color.

Chapter 3 covers aspects related to the Combat de la mort et de la vie. A very brief overview of Les Corps glorieux provides a better outlook on its placement and significance among the other movements. Messiaen’s commentaries on the Combat de la mort et de la vie, together with his descriptions of the form of the piece are crucial to my analysis of the movement. A very brief discussion about the characteristic elements in a French organ toccata, which also mentions relevant innovations in organ building in nineteenth-century France, relates to the main elements in the movement that will be discussed in the following chapters.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 are my analyses of technical elements of the Combat de la mort et de la vie. Chapter 4 discusses the form and structure of the movement. I take Messiaen’s given analysis of the form of this movement into account. Chapter 5 discusses his use of toccata figurations in the first part of the movement. I identify and discuss different kinds of figurations as they relate to the modes and other technical aspects of Messiaen’s language. Chapter 6 identifies the characteristic elements of the first statement of the theme. I discuss each
subsequent theme statement and significant fragmented appearances in sections within the two parts of the movement.

Chapter 7 begins with a discussion of the significance and use of symbolism in Messiaen’s music, particularly in his religious works. The rest of the discussions contain my theological interpretation based on technical analysis from the previous chapters, with discerning consideration given to other aspects that may have influenced his theological views. I begin with two main discussions—the toccata figurations and the theme—as Messiaen’s treatment of each is significantly contrasting; then I discuss the movement’s form. Additional technical analysis in this chapter shows the connection between Messiaen’s musical technique and its theological representations. I treat the discussions about the first and second parts of the movement by various sections. There are references to number symbolism, which are based on elements that involve numbers: intervals, number of notes, durations, and measure numbers. To support my reading, I refer to specific verses in the Scriptures that may relate to Messiaen’s music. Since he prefers to quote Latin texts for his Scripture references, I therefore quote Biblical verses from the Douay-Rheims-Challoner Revision 1752, which is an early English version that was based on the Latin Vulgate.29

Chapter 8 presents my general impressions on Messiaen’s musical language. I present a few ideas for further research in relation to Les Corps glorieux and other theologically-related works of Messiaen. Lastly, I share my thoughts on the overall extreme contrasts in the Combat

de la mort et de la vie and ponder on how they may relate to Messiaen’s theological message that leads to the primary purpose of his music.

Many aspects of Messiaen’s technique are unique to his language and are indispensable in the analysis of his works. This dissertation provides an Appendix that has a glossary of important aspects of Messiaen’s musical language, which includes modes, pitch elements, color associations, rhythm, melody, chords, development, and form. Each technical aspect is numbered for ease of reference throughout the body of this dissertation. I indicate reference numbers to point the reader to these technical aspects as they are encountered throughout the chapter discussions, and I italicize the corresponding technical vocabulary.
CHAPTER 2

MESSIAEN’S WORLD IN RELATION TO HIS MUSICAL LANGUAGE

2.1 Poetry and Literature

Olivier Messiaen’s life was submerged into poetry and literature even before he was born. He especially believed that the poems of his mother written while pregnant with him had set his destiny: “My mother, Cécile Sauvage, was a great poet of motherhood: she left (among other works) a book of verse L’Ame en bourgeon (“The Soul in Travail”) which was dedicated to me before my birth and which influenced my future.”1 Olivier’s mother wrote volumes of poetry during her lifetime. His father, Pierre Messiaen, was an English teacher, editor, and literary historian; he translated the complete works of Shakespeare.2

Literature was a constant companion to Olivier’s early childhood. Schloesser mentions that since Messiaen did not have many friends around to play with, “literature and music—and opera, the hybridization of those two—became Olivier’s enduring companions.”3 In addition, Olivier’s mother also introduced him to literature and poetry by other writers, such as those by Keats and Tennyson, and also encouraged him to explore drama and provided many details to fairy tales.4 Shakespeare was very much a part of Olivier. He delighted in the plays of Shakespeare, regularly staging, reciting and acting out all the parts to his younger brother Alain, and by using his toy theatre with woodcut-characters.5 In his conversations with Samuel, he expressed that “Shakespeare is an author who develops the imagination powerfully. I was

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2 Samuel, Conversations with Olivier Messiaen, 1; Schloesser, Visions of Amen, xiv.
3 Schloesser, Visions of Amen, 37.
4 Schloesser, Visions of Amen, 37-38; Hill and Simeone, Messiaen, 14.
5 Hill and Simeone, Messiaen, 13-14.
inclined towards fairy-tales, and Shakespeare is sometimes a super-fairy-tale; it’s this aspect of Shakespeare above all that impressed me.”6

2.2 Christian Faith

Though both parents of Olivier shared a common interest in literature and poetry, their religious beliefs differed. His father was Catholic but his mother was an unbeliever.7 Olivier shared his faith with his father: “I’ve the good fortune to be a Catholic. I was born a believer, and it happens that the Scriptures struck me even as a child. So a number of my works are intended to bring out the theological truths of the Catholic faith. This is the first aspect of my work . . . perhaps the only one which I won’t regret at the hour of my death.”8

Olivier Messiaen was most impressed by the theological truths he found in his Catholic faith. However, he associates his attraction to the plays of Shakespeare with Biblical truths: “It’s certain that in the truths of the Catholic faith I found this attraction of the marvelous multiplied a hundredfold, a thousandfold, and it’s no longer a matter of theatrical fiction but of something real. I chose what was true.”9 Samuel, with whom Messiaen had these conversations, asked why he had not written any music for theatre and instead used the marvels and mysteries from the theatre settings into works related to his Catholic faith. Messiaen answered, “I have sought to express the marvels of the Faith. . . . I would add that most of the arts are unsuited to the expression of religious truths: only music, the most immaterial of all, comes closest to it.”

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6 Samuel, Conversations with Olivier Messiaen, 6-7.
7 Schloesser, Visions of Amen, xiii.
8 Samuel, Conversations with Olivier Messiaen, 2.
9 Samuel, Conversations with Olivier Messiaen, 6-7.
regards to religious music, he believed it was also capable of depicting the violence recorded in
the Scriptures: “It exists and I’ve expressed it such as it is.”

2.3 Paris Conservatoire

Messiaen began his musical training at the Paris Conservatoire in 1919, when his family
moved to Paris because of his father’s new teaching position; Messiaen was eleven at that
time. When he was about sixteen or seventeen years old, his harmony teacher, Jean Gallon
(1878-1959), sensed that he needed to develop his improvisational skills. Gallon introduced
Messiaen to Marcel Dupré (1886-1971) to study organ and improvisation.

Aside from his studies in organ and improvisation, Dupré passed on to Messiaen the
French traditions in virtuosic organ technique, registration, improvisation and the use of
plainsong, among others. Messiaen spoke highly of his teacher: “Marcel Dupré was the
greatest of all organ virtuosi, perhaps even the greatest of all the virtuosi who have ever
existed; he was the Liszt of the organ. His music reflects this extraordinary virtuosity; he wrote
pages of extreme difficulty and of great brilliance in toccata-style and he was the initiator of the
ultra-staccato style.” Part of Messiaen’s training at the Conservatoire was improvising with
modal accompaniment to plainsong melodies, and it was in Dupré’s improvisation classes that
he mastered the use of his modes. Dupré also introduced the use of Greek meters in his
improvisations. However, it was Messiaen’s music history teacher, Maurice Emmanuel (1862-

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10 Samuel, Conversations with Olivier Messiaen, 7-8.
11 Hill and Simeone, Messiaen, 16.
12 Samuel, Conversations with Olivier Messiaen, 4.
13 Messiaen, Music and Color, 111; Samuel, Conversations with Olivier Messiaen, 70.
14 Samuel, Conversations with Olivier Messiaen, 81.
15 Michael Murray, French Masters of the Organ (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 188.
1938), an expert in Greek meters and music, who influenced him the most in these areas.\textsuperscript{16} These two teachers, Dupré and Emmanuel, “set the young composer in search of unconventional modalities.”\textsuperscript{17} Other musical traits and values that Messiaen would have learned in the Conservatoire were Dupré’s philosophies in teaching, where he emphasizes the importance of melody, the use of musical symbolism and the mission to express himself in music:

> Among the constituents of music—melody, rhythm, modality, harmony—it is melody, he would assert, that conveys the greatest ‘emotive force.’
>
> Dupré would often speak of musical symbolism, saying that the use of leitmotif seemed a common, if unconscious, tendency among certain great Germans. . . . Wagner . . . Beethoven . . . Bach . . .
>
> Dupré would speak of the mission of the artist . . . the ‘supreme level’ to which interpreters might attain is ‘to regard their life not as a commercial enterprise, but as an artistic evangelism.’ . . . the ‘essential mission of music is to express feelings.’”\textsuperscript{18}

One of Messiaen’s composition teachers was Charles-Marie Widor (1844-1937), who was the organist at Saint Sulpice. Widor and Dupré were both organists at Saint-Sulpice; Widor was the organist for almost sixty-four year, and Dupré was his assistant who later succeeded him as organist.\textsuperscript{19} Saint-Sulpice has one of the most magnificent organs in Paris built by Aristide Cavaillé-Coll (1811-1899); it is his monumental organ built in 1862 of symphonic magnitude. Adolph Hesse (1809-1863) describes this organ as “the most perfect, the most harmonious, the largest, and truly the masterpiece of modern organ building.”\textsuperscript{20} Messiaen would have had many

\textsuperscript{16} Samuel, Conversations with Olivier Messiaen, 39.
\textsuperscript{18} Marcel Dupré, MS “Philosophie de la Musique,” Lessons III and IV in Michael Murray, Marcel Dupré: The Work of a Master Organist (Westford, MA: Murray Printing Company, 1985), 120-121.
\textsuperscript{20} Orpha Ochse, Organists and Organ Playing in Nineteenth-Century France and Belgium (Bloomingdale: Indiana University Press, 1994), 74-75.
opportunities to listen to Widor and Dupré at this church, hear the magnificent power and myriad timbres of the organ, and “to the formidable technique and brilliant toccatas for which Widor and Dupré were famous.” Messiaen emulated the symphonic and virtuosic toccatas of Widor and Dupré in a number of his works. The *Combat de la mort et de la vie* is one of Messiaen’s earliest organ works that integrated the toccata style, along with the *Diptyque* (1930) and *Dieu parmi nous* from *La Nativité* (1935).

2.4 La Trinité

Messiaen served as organist of La Trinité for sixty-one years, from 1931 to until his death in 1992. La Trinité has one of the most magnificent organs originally built by Cavaillé-Coll in 1869. The organist post at La Trinité became vacant in 1931, a year after Messiaen graduated from the Paris Conservatoire. He applied for the post and was granted the appointment as the titulaire organist at the age of twenty-two. His recommendations came from Conservatoire professors, among them were Widor, Dupré, and Emmanuel and Charles Tournemire (1870-1939). In Tournemire’s recommendation letter, he referred to Messiaen as a “Christian organist of the highest order: transcendent improviser, an astonishing performer, and a biblical composer.”

Messiaen saw music as one of the arts best suited to express religious truths. Each week, he provided music for three Masses and Vespers, and additionally for funerals and

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22 Messiaen, *The Technique*, 1:73.
24 Ochse, *Organists and Organ Playing*, 82.
26 Samuel, *Conversations with Olivier Messiaen*, 7.
weddings. He played either plainsong, classical and romantic repertoire, or his own music, depending on the particular time of the Sunday Mass. For Vespers, he improvised between the Psalms and during the Magnificat.\textsuperscript{27} It was in these opportunities for improvisation that Messiaen freely expressed his own views based on the given texts. He depicted his passions and fascination of the intangible into his music: “the truths I express, the Truths of the Faith, are startling; they are fairytales, in turn mysterious, harrowing, glorious and sometimes terrifying, always based on a luminous, unchanging Reality.”\textsuperscript{28}

2.5 Sound-Color Synesthesia

Messiaen closely associates sound and color in his music since he was born with a rare sound-color type of synesthesia. He claims that “when I hear music, and equally when I read it, to see inwardly, in my mind’s eye, colours which move with the music, and I sense these colours in an extremely vivid manner.”\textsuperscript{29} Messiaen literally sees colors and translates them into music: “for me certain complexes of sound and certain sonorities are linked to complexes of colour, and I use them in full knowledge of this,” and he adds, “juxtaposing them and putting them in relief against each other, as a painter underlines one color with its complimentary.”\textsuperscript{30} Messiaen refers to complimentary colors as having a real color and another that compliments it, analogous to sound with a fundamental note and its harmonics. He concludes, “The phenomenon of natural resonance . . . one acts on our ear, the other on our eyes. . . . so it’s

\textsuperscript{27} Samuel, \textit{Conversations with Olivier Messiaen}, 5.
\textsuperscript{28} Samuel, \textit{Conversations with Olivier Messiaen}, 6.
\textsuperscript{29} Samuel, \textit{Conversations with Olivier Messiaen}, 16.
\textsuperscript{30} Samuel, \textit{Conversations with Olivier Messiaen}, 17.
understandable that color interests me as well as sound.”31 The association of sound and color is central to understanding Messiaen’s approach to his music that in the Preface of his book, *Music and Color*, Samuel writes, “his mysterious resonances with the world of color—so dear to my interlocutor that he decided to incorporate it in the book’s title.”32

2.6 Charm of Impossibilities

One of the most important aspects in Messiaen’s musical language is what he calls “the charm of impossibilities” that comprises his *seven modes of limited transpositions* (see Appendix 1.1) and *nonretrogradable rhythms* (see Appendix 2.4).33 The most basic foundation of his harmonic language are his modes.34 The use of these modes is among his earliest technical elements, dating back to around 1927.35 What makes these modes special is the fact that they can only be transposed a limited number of times. His modes divide the twelve-note chromatic system into smaller symmetrical groups.

Messiaen’s modes relate directly to his synesthesia: “My passion for the sound-color relationship drove me to work with these modes of limited transpositions . . . first and foremost it is a color phenomenon. Each mode has a precisely definable color, which changes every time it is transposed.”36 In reference to the power and ability of his modes, he explains the

34 Messiaen’s harmonic language also consists of his created modes, such as: chords of resonance, revolving chords, and chords of total chromaticism. Messiaen, *Music and Color*, 64.
relationship in his conversations with Samuel: “I would go as far as to say that I use them as colours. They are not harmonies in the classical sense of the term. They are not even recognised chords. They are colours and their power springs primarily from the impossibility of transpositions and also to the colour linked with this impossibility. The two phenomena are simultaneous.”

The color associations that Messiaen relate to his modes vary according to their register and combinations. When modes are transposed at the octave they are the same colors, but lighter in shade in higher registers and darker in lower registers. Colors are more complex when modes are combined together, and Messiaen sees them as similar to harmonious colors from stained-glass windows in churches. He was always attracted to the beauty of stained-glass windows since his childhood and expressed that: “color representations have been a part of my universe;” and specifically referring to stained-glass windows, he said, “when one looks at them on a sunny day . . . they glitter like precious stones!”

Among the seven modes of limited transpositions, Messiaen uses two modes the most frequently: “two main modes are linked for me to very precise colourings: Mode No. 2 revolves around certain violets, blues and violet-purple, whilst Mode No. 3 corresponds to an orange with red and green pigments, patches of gold and also a milky white with iridescent opal-like reflections.” Messiaen’s preference to the use of Mode 2 relates to his favorite color, which is violet. It is a complex color, with the blending of blue and red, and may vary in nuances

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37 Samuel, Conversations with Olivier Messiaen, 23.
39 Messiaen, Music and Color, 44.
40 Samuel, Conversations with Olivier Messiaen, 19.
between purple and hyacinth-blue. There is a great importance in these two violets. As Messiaen tells Samuel, “in the Middle Ages, in symbolism and in stained glass, the one [purple] represented the Love of Truth and the other [hyacinth-blue] the Truth of Love. And this reversal of terms is certainly not just a play of words but corresponds without doubt very closely to these nuances of violet.”

Messiaen’s nonretrogradable rhythms (see Appendix 2.4) are rhythmic palindromes that directly relate to his seven modes of limited transpositions. He refers to both of these techniques as his “charm of impossibilities” that he sees as a “sort of theological rainbow which the musical language, of which we speak edification and theory, attempts to be.” He explains, music should be able to express some noble sentiments (and especially the most noble of all, the religious sentiments exalted by the theology and the truths of our Catholic Faith). This charm, at once voluptuous and contemplative, resides particularly in certain mathematical impossibilities of the modal and rhythmic domains. Modes which cannot be transposed beyond a certain number of transpositions . . . rhythms which cannot be used in retrograde. . . . Immediately one notices the analogy of these two impossibilities and how they complement one another, the rhythms realizing in the horizontal direction (retrogradation) what the modes realize in the vertical direction (transpositions).

All these musicological aspects in Messiaen’s musical world—poetry and literature, his Christian faith, his studies at the Paris Conservatoire and responsibilities at La Trinité, his synesthesia and charm of impossibilities—definitely influence the technical and theological aspects of his musical language collectively. Messiaen’s Christian faith traces back from his family background that is very rich in literature and poetry. His position as organist at La Trinité gives him opportunities to use and develop the musical skills and knowledge he learned from

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41 Samuel, Conversations with Olivier Messiaen, 20.
42 Messiaen, The Technique, 1:21.
the Paris Conservatoire. Religious texts and themes during services are inspirations to his
improvisations and theologically-inspired works, which also reflect his devotion to the
Scriptures and love for theatre. Messiaen’s sound-color synesthesia and his charm of
impossibilities provide him with different perspectives on his improvisations and compositions
that altogether lead to his unique musical language.
CHAPTER 3

ASPECTS RELATED TO THE COMBAT DE LA MORT ET DE LA VIE

3.1 Introduction

Messiaen refers to Les Corps glorieux as one of his “three best organ works.”¹ He indicates in his Technique that it is very characteristic of his musical language.² In his book, The French Masters of the Organ, Michael Murray believes that “Les Corps glorieux crowned the decade that saw Messiaen progress from student to acknowledged master.”³ Messiaen finished writing this work on August 25, 1939, just before he was called up for military service in September, and he recalls that it was “the last work I composed as a civilian. It was just being finished when I was called up.”⁴ The earliest known performance of Les Corps glorieux was by Messiaen himself, playing for his students on July 22, 1941 at La Trinité. The Combat de la mort et de la vie was first performed in public on December 28 of the same year at the Palais de Chaillot. Messiaen had the entire work published by Leduc in early June 1942.⁵

3.2 Overview of the Seven Movements of Les Corps glorieux

Messiaen divides the seven movements of Les Corps glorieux into three books: the first three movements are in the first book and the last three movements are in the third book. The fourth movement, which is the Combat de la mort et de la vie, constitutes the entire second

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¹ Samuel, Conversations with Olivier Messiaen, 78. The other two are the Messe de la Pentecôte (1950) and the Livre d’Orgue (1951).
² Messiaen, The Technique, 1:71 and 73
³ Michael Murray, French Masters, 193.
⁵ Hill and Simeone, Messiaen, 114-117.
book. Messiaen adds a subtitle to Les Corps glorieux: “Sept Visions brèves de la Vie des Ressuscités pour Orgue” (Seven Short Visions of the Life of the Resurrected for organ), with each movement representing a theological concept on the resurrection. In his commentaries about the movements, Messiaen points out that three movements describe the properties of the resurrected glorified bodies: (I) subtlety, (V) strength and agility, and (VI) joy and clarity; these movements feature superimposed Greek rhythms. The other three movements, (II) waters of grace, (III) angel with incense, and (VII) mystery of the Holy Trinity, describe what surrounds the resurrected glorified bodies; these movements feature superimposed modality/tonality. The central movement, which has two very contrasting parts, depicts the (IV) combat in the death and life of Christ and contemplates on the glory of His resurrection.

There are other symmetrical relations within the movements of Les Corps glorieux, aside from its organization of seven movements in three books. Both the first and last movements use plainsong material and center its tonality on the key of D. Though the first movement is monophonic in texture and the last movement is polyphonic with three voices, the melodic material in the first movement and the middle melodic material in the last movement are both modal, with abundant use of descending augmented fourths and alternations of mostly Mode 2 transpositions between phrases. The middle movements from the first and last books (III and V), share a similar melodic material.

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6 Olivier Messiaen, Les Corps glorieux, bks. 1, 2, and 3 (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1942), front cover.
7 Movements: (I) has the amphimacer and third Greek epitrite; (V) has amphimacer, second and third epitrites; and (VI) has Cretian or amphimacer rhythms. Messiaen, Les Corps glorieux (Ducretet Thomson jacket notes) quoted in Gillock, Messiaen’s Organ Music, 100, 122, and 128.
8 Messiaen refers to the melody as “in the style of certain Hindu ‘ragas’ ” and Johnson indicates that it is “derived from the jāti ‘śādjī’.” Messiaen, Les Corps glorieux (Ducretet Thomson jacket notes), quoted in Gillock, Messiaen’s Organ Music, 109; Robert Sherlaw Johnson, Messiaen (Berkley: University of California Press, 1975), 51.
3.3 Messiaen’s Commentaries and Analysis

Messiaen not only expresses his theological views in his music but also through his commentaries, which he insists upon including with performances of his works. Schloesser writes, “Messiaen did in fact live out a quasi-literary career: he quoted or wrote textual epigraphs for a great many of his works (placing him squarely in the symbolist lineage) . . . he wrote out detailed explanations or commentaries on his own work.”9 These attributes likely stem from his family’s literary background. Considering his unique musical language and a very strong desire to convey his religious truths though his music, it was natural for Messiaen to complement his music with words.

His writings contain commentaries on both the theological and technical aspects accompanying each movement of Les Corps glorieux. In every score, Messiaen quotes a verse or two from the Scriptures written below the title of the movement, except for the fourth and seventh movements.10 In these two other movement, he quotes from the Mass for Easter Day in the fourth movement, and from the Mass for Trinity Sunday in the last movement. Accompanying a recording of this work in 1956, Messiaen includes program notes with substantial commentaries about his theological views and descriptions to musical elements present in each movement. He explains his views about the life of the Resurrected, describes his understanding of the qualities of glorified bodies, and focuses on the Resurrection of Christ, which is the work’s central idea:

10 Scripture References in the other movements are: (I) First Corinthians 15:44 and Matthew 22:30; (II) Revelation 7:17; (III) Revelation 8:4; (V) First Corinthians 15:43; and (VI) Matthew 13:43. Messiaen, Les Corps glorieux, bks. 1, 2, and 3. Messiaen, Les Corps Glorieux, Facs. 1, 2 and 3.
The life of the resurrected is free, pure, luminous, highly colored. The timbres of the organ reflect these characteristics. The bodies of the resurrected are immortal.

. . . The Resurrection and the glory of the resurrected have for a foundation and model, the Resurrection of Christ, whose first, sublime moment is evoked in the Combat of Death and Life.

The life of the resurrected is above all a life of contemplation and prayer: their prayer is symbolized by incense in Revelation . . . they ponder and finally comprehend the greatest mystery of our faith, God in three persons (The Mystery of the Holy Trinity).11

The Combat de la mort et de la vie is the center of seven movements in terms of its theological concept, and not just in terms of its placement. Its two parts portray the greatest of all contrasts, that between the death and life of Jesus Christ. The first part is a loud, fast, and strongly dissonant toccata with a slow melodic theme; the second part is extremely soft, slow and very long. Though obviously contrasting in technical and theological elements, both parts share only one theme. Messiaen describes the contrast between the two parts of this movement in relation to his views on the resurrected life of Christ:

A long prayer in two parts. The first part, boisterous and agitated, is the actual Combat, that is to say the sufferings and cries of the Passion of Christ (death is the implied outcome of his Passion). The second part is Life. One would have it swelling, rapid, and strong: it is, on the contrary, soft, calm, serene. It represents the most important, the most moving, the most secretive moment of the life of Christ. This moment is not related in the Gospels—of it we know only the following: the quaking of the earth, sudden light, the angel who rolls the stone from the entrance [of the tomb], multiple appearances of the resurrected Jesus in different places. But in Psalm 138 (139), applied by the Church to Christ in the Introit of Easter, we have described in advance this sublime instant when Jesus rises, living, luminous, first-born from among the dead, and, in the sunny peace of his resurrection, addresses this testimony of love to his Father: “I am again with you.”12

11 Messiaen, Les Corps glorieux (Ducretet Thomson jacket notes), quoted in Gillock, Messiaen’s Organ Music, 99-100.
12 Messiaen, Les Corps glorieux (Ducretet Thomson jacket notes), quoted in Gillock, Messiaen’s Organ Music, 115. In Messiaen’s commentary in the French language, he begins to describe Les Corps glorieux as “Longue pièce en deux parties,” that is, a long piece instead of a long prayer; also, his Scripture reference is Psalm 138.
Of all the movements of Les Corps glorieux, Messiaen cites the Combat de la mort et de la vie most frequently in his two-volume treatise, The Technique of My Musical Language.

There are significant musical techniques in the movement that Messiaen identifies and explains. He provides substantial information about this movement in the chapter on form and describes each section by referring to the tonic keys of theme statements:13

Analysis of this piece:

a) First element of the development. Theme in C minor, in one voice: followed by a contest of chords alternated tumultuously.

b) Theme in E minor, in two voices in canon. Then a new tumult of chords.

c) Theme in A\textsuperscript{b} major, in three voices in canon. Theme in D minor in the bass, then the tumult of chords.

d) A wave of chords falls in contrary movement over an ascent of the theme in the bass. A long development by elimination . . .

e) The theme is cut in two and continues to be developed by elimination in great fortissimo cries. This last element of development is an understood dominant pedal in F-sharp major.

f) A large binary sentence . . . very slow and very long, in which one hears at last, in a state of repose, the principal key, F-sharp major, and especially the complete theme from which the sentence is issued.14

In his program notes to a recording of Les Corps glorieux, Messiaen provides a summary of the form with more descriptive words that relate to the theological character of each section, and with more detailed descriptions to elements in the second part of the movement:

Summary of the form:

(a) The “unrivaled theme” in C minor, for one voice, in the lowest register of the Basson 16’ alone. Wrestling of riotously alternating chords.

(b) Theme in E minor, for two voice in canon. Another uproar of chords.

(c) Theme in A\textsuperscript{b} major, for three voices in canon. Theme in D minor in the bass, then the uproar of chords.

(d) A wave of chords falls in contrary motion over an ascent of the theme in the bass. Development by fragmentation.

(e) The theme cuts itself into two and continues to fragment itself in great shrieks of the full organ. A great silence implies the death and Resurrection.

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13 Messiaen, The Technique, 1:41.
14 Messiaen, The Technique, 1:41.
(f) Grand phrase, very slow, very long, on the unrivaled theme, in the luminous key of F# major, with the color of a “mode of limited transpositions” and the infinitely serene dialogue of two Flûtes of different qualities over the background of the pianissimo Voix celeste.15

3.4 French Organ Toccata Elements

The first part of the Combat de la mort et de la vie has characteristic elements of a French organ toccata. Messiaen utilizes three of its most characteristic elements: virtuosic moto perpetuum figurations on the manuals, theme stated in the pedal parts, and a form with three main sections that correspond to a well-defined organ registration.16 The perpetuum figurations display the performer’s virtuosity, brilliance, utmost technical demand and endurance. Theme statements in the pedal parts free the hands to do the fast toccata figurations on the manuals. Having a form in three main sections allows a different treatment or material in the middle section before the return of the theme at the end of the toccata.

Messiaen remarkably distinguishes the two main contrasting musical elements in the Combat de la mort et de la vie—toccata figurations and theme statements—by his use of Modes 2 and 3. He distinguishes these two modes distinctly even when he uses complex chords: “colours are complex, and are linked to equally complex chords and sounds. . . . The two main modes are linked for me to very precise colourings: Mode No. 2 . . . [and] Mode No. 3.”17 Identifying the use of these two modes in the Combat de la mort et de la vie helps to differentiate the toccata figurations from thematic passages. These two main elements directly

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15 Messiaen, Les Corps glorieux (Ducretet Thomson jacket notes), quoted in Gillock, Messiaen’s Organ Music, 115.
16 The concept of these three most characteristics elements of a French organ toccata was part of my earlier research about the French organ toccata tradition that I trace from Charles-Marie Widor through Jean Guillou.
17 Samuel, Conversations with Olivier Messiaen, 19.
relate to the harmonic and melodic domains respectively. Harmonically, Messiaen constructs the movement almost entirely from his two chosen modes and utilizes his strong association of sound and color in relation to his theological ideas. Melodically, all the statements of the theme throughout the movement are in Mode 2. Statements in the first part are in various transpositions while in the second part are all in the first transposition of Mode 2. The various toccata figurations are generally in Mode 3.

Organ registration in nineteenth- and twentieth-century France helps to define sections within the form. Cavaillé-Coll’s innovations in organ building made it possible to combine organ sounds—the foundations, reeds, mutations and mixtures within and between manual divisions, which immensely transformed the traditions in French Romantic and symphonic organ registration. “His instruments,” as Ochse Orpha believes, "more than any others, determined how nineteenth-century French organ music sounded. . . . Cavaillé-Coll contributed in many ways to the organ profession. . . . inspired those who composed and played, and thrilled those who listened.”18 The organ at La Trinité retains some of Cavaillé-Coll’s original stops, even though it went through various rebuilding constructions. The Basson 16’, in particular, was a favorite of Messiaen, which he insisted to “remain as originally built by Cavaillé-Coll.”19 In comparison with other large organs in France built by Cavaillé-Coll, Messiaen believes that “the organ of La Trinité equals them in power.”20

18 Orpha, Organists and Organ Playing, 225.
20 Gillock, Messiaen’s Organ Music, 354. Messiaen compared the organ at La Trinité to the great organs in St-Sulpice and Notre Dame of Paris, and St-Ouen of Rouen.
4.1 Two Main Parts

The *Combat de la mort et de la vie* is in two parts. The first part has loud and fast toccata figurations with slow statements of the theme, while the second part is very soft, extremely slow and very long. Both parts share the same theme. Thematic passages in the first part are mainly on the *Positif* at the beginning and almost halfway to the end are on the *Pédale*; those in the second part alternate between the *Grand-Orgue* and the *Positif* throughout. All thematic statements and fragments help define the structure of the movement. Messiaen discusses the form of the *Combat de la mort et de la vie* in his *Technique* and defines it as sonata form. However, his use of the form is very different from traditional practice.

Messiaen’s *sonata form* has two main parts (see Appendix 6.1), a modulating and a terminal development. He sees the development in his sonata form as the most important part and considers the recapitulation as obsolete. He therefore places the development before the exposition and refers to these sections as the modulating and terminal developments respectively.¹ The modulating development in the *Combat de la mort et de la vie* is the first part, where theme statements are in different keys and in different transpositions of Mode 2; the terminal development is the second part, where all the statements of the theme are in the first transposition of Mode 2 and in F-sharp major, which is the principal key of the movement.

Referring to other works of Messiaen that use sonata form, Healey thinks that Messiaen’s different alteration of the traditional sonata form relates to his theological intentions: “it is

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¹ Messiaen, *The Technique*, 1:40-41.
possible that such a structure was planned as a reversal of the sonata concept. If so, it is Messiaen’s most extreme manipulation of established forms. It is possible that the form is a result of theological considerations.”² In the Combat de la mort et de la vie, I see that Messiaen seeks to establish an analogy between the reversed concept in the structure of the movement in relation to his theological views on Jesus’ death and life.

4.2 Three Major Sections in the First Part

As with most French Romantic organ music, the form generally relates to organ registration.³ Dynamic markings of ff, fff, and ffff in the first part of the movement suggest three main sections.⁴ These changes in dynamics are very decisive as they relate to organ registration (see Table 4.1 on the next page, in which the organ registration is based on the score published by Alphonse Leduc in 1942. Registration changes between sections are marked in bold. Change made by Messiaen in his own score is marked with an asterisk. Messiaen’s descriptions to each section, mode transpositions of theme statement, key relations and the use of different keyboards, aside from obvious dynamic changes, altogether support the divisions between the three main sections (see Table 4.2 on the next page, in which Messiaen’s descriptions and tonic keys are from The Technique of My Musical Language, and the dynamic markings are as marked on the score published by Leduc).

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² Healey, Messiaen’s Musical Techniques, 123.
³ This generalization is based on my own studies and performances of French Romantic organ music.
⁴ Dynamic markings in the last main section of the first part range from the loudest to the softest thus far in the movement. They are marked ffff, decrease gradually to mf then abruptly swell back to ffff.
There are three subdivisions in the first main section: theme statements in one voice, two-voices and three-voices in canon. All these thematic statements are on the Positif (except for the last note of the first statement in C minor, which is on the Pédale). Thematic statements in the second main section are on the Pédale, which are very typical of French organ.toccatas. In the third main section, the theme briefly returns to the manual keyboard, which is on the Grand-Orgue, then completes the statement with following series of fragments on the Pédale.

Table 4.1

Organ Registration in the First Part of the Combat de la mort et de la vie

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dynamics</th>
<th>Grand-Orgue</th>
<th>Positif</th>
<th>Récit</th>
<th>Pédale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ff</td>
<td>Fonds 16', 8', 4' GR</td>
<td>*Basson 16'</td>
<td>Fonds 16', 8', 4' Anches 16', 8', 4' Plein Jeu</td>
<td>Fonds 32', 16', 8', 4' Tirasse GR</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2

Sections in the First Part of the Combat de la mort et de la vie

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mm. Nos.</th>
<th>Messiaen’s Descriptions</th>
<th>Organ Keyboard</th>
<th>Messiaen’s Tonic</th>
<th>Mode 2 Transpositions</th>
<th>Messiaen’s Dynamic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>a) one voice</td>
<td>Positif</td>
<td>C minor</td>
<td>first</td>
<td>ff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-19</td>
<td>b) two voices in canon</td>
<td></td>
<td>E minor</td>
<td>second</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29-32</td>
<td>c) three voices in canon</td>
<td></td>
<td>A major</td>
<td>third</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33-37</td>
<td>d) theme in the bass</td>
<td>Pédale</td>
<td>D minor</td>
<td>third</td>
<td>****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-48</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(dominant pedal in F#)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49-50-58</td>
<td>e) theme is cut in two</td>
<td>Grand-Orgue Pédale</td>
<td></td>
<td>second</td>
<td>fffff</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5 In my previous research about the French organ toccata tradition, I present the idea that one of the most characteristic elements in French organ toccatas is the statement of the theme in the pedal lines.
4.3 Binary Sentence in the Second Part

The second part of the movement is a traditional large binary sentence with two main sections (see Appendix 6.2). Each section begins with the statement of the theme followed by its commentary that Messiaen defines as “a melodic development of the theme.” The first section states the theme twice and a melodic development follows, beginning in m. 65, which leads to a cadence on a tritone on C# and G, in m. 78 (see Fig. 4.1). As is typical in the first of the binary sentence, the harmonic progression moves toward the dominant of the principal key, which is C# in the key of F-sharp major. According to Diane Luchese, Messiaen’s use of “the pitch a tritone away from the tonic functions as a substitute dominant.”

![Figure 4.1 Cadence on the dominant in the second part, mm. 77-78.](image)

The second section in the second part of the movement states the theme once, beginning in m. 79, then proceeds to a melodic development similar to the first section, except it ends on the principal key of the movement. At the final cadence, in m. 98, is a chord with its outer notes on C-F# that functions as a substitute dominant to the key of F-sharp major (see Fig. 4.2). The low notes of this chord realize the C major triad in wide-interval position, and the

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higher notes realize the notes of the F# major triad in first inversion and closed position. In fact, there is the presence of all the notes of the C and F# major scales within this measure (see Fig. 4.2, in which the notes of the C and F# chords are in boxes, notes of their corresponding scales are in connected brackets, numbers with carats identify each note within their respective scales, and common notes are connected with dashed lines). The three descending parallel fifth intervals in the pedal accompaniment realize almost all the notes of the C major scale in succession, and the following chord after the substitute dominant chord also realizes most of the notes of the C major scale. The presence of all the notes of the C major scale at this cadence implies the use of the chord on the dominant (see Appendix 4.3). All the notes in m. 98 can also be seen as a superposition of two mode transpositions (see Appendix 1.7), which are in the first and second transpositions of Mode 2 (see Appendix 1.2). There is the presence of all the twelve chromatic notes in this measure. The final chord in F# major has the added sixth note (see Appendix 4.1) on D#, which is seen throughout the second part of the movement.

Figure 4.2 Final cadence in the second part, mm. 98-100.
Messiaen’s use of substitute dominants on tritone intervals in the cadences at the end of each section in the second part demonstrates his reference to both tonality and modality. The cadence at the end of the first section on a tritone on C# and G, in m. 78, has a tonal dominant function in relation to the principal key of F-sharp major. At the final cadence, the tritone chord on C and F#, in m. 98, has a modal dominant function in relation to the F-sharp major, based on the first transposition of Mode 2 (see Appendix 1.2). Tritone intervals are abundant in Messiaen’s works since his seven modes of limited transpositions divide an octave symmetrically into smaller groups, which result in tritone relations between the notes of the mode (see Fig. 4.3). Mode 3 is the only mode with other notes not in tritone relations.

Figure 4.3 Tritone relations in the seven modes of limited transpositions.
4.4  Theme-Related Designs

There is a strong cohesiveness in the structure of the movement between each statement of the theme and the following section in the movement. As Healey observes, “Messiaen’s reference to themes for the purpose of determining the form of a movement shows considerable consistency of approach. The primary theme of a piece . . . is reiterated with the small variants—either to the theme itself, or to the surrounding material, or occasionally to the texture as a whole.”8 The notes of the theme form a diminished seventh chord, and the note that does not belong to this chord is usually its beginning note that points to the key of the following section (see Table 4.3).

Table 4.3

*Diminished Seventh-Chord Notes in the Statements of the Theme*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure numbers</th>
<th>TONIC KEY</th>
<th>First note</th>
<th>Chromatic notes of the scale</th>
<th>MODE 2 transposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 - 4</td>
<td>C minor</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-14</td>
<td>E minor</td>
<td>A♭</td>
<td>C♭</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29-30</td>
<td>A♭ major</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33-37</td>
<td>D minor</td>
<td>F♯</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49-50</td>
<td>dominant of F♯ major</td>
<td>E♯</td>
<td>C♯</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59-61 79-81</td>
<td>sixth of F♯ major</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>B♯</td>
<td>D♯</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the three statements of the theme on the *Positif*, the beginning notes on E, A♭ and D point to the tonic keys of the succeeding sections on E minor, A♭ major and D minor, which

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begins in mm. 13, 29 and 33 respectively. The statement of the theme on the Pédale, which begins on F# in m. 33, points to the F-sharp major key of the second part. Messiaen did not specify the keys of the theme that begin on E# in m. 49 and on G in m. 59. However, he mentions about the dominant function of the last statement in the first part, which begins on E#, and the added-sixth function of the first statement in the second part, which begins on G. Both of these beginning notes are the adjacent semitones to the tonic note on F#.

The last melodic fragment at each end of the first and second parts of the movement also point to the tonic keys of theme statements within the movement. In mm. 56-58, which has the last melodic descent in the first part, the notes are in retrograde and a semitone higher in relation to the keys of each statement of the theme in the first part (see Fig. 4.4, in which the dashed slur connects the common C# notes and the dashed line with an arrow demonstrates the retrograde relation of half-tone related notes). Similarly, in mm. 98-100, the notes point to the keys of all the statements of the theme throughout the movement (see Fig. 4.5, in which the dashed slur connects the common F# notes). Notes that relate to the keys in the first part are a semitone higher and the dominant note that relates to the second part is on the same note.

![Figure 4.4 Last melodic descent and keys of theme statements.](image)

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Figure 4.5 Last melodic ascent and keys of theme statements.
CHAPTER 5
ANALYSIS OF THE TOCATA FIGURATIONS

5.1 Introduction

There are three toccata sections in the first part of the Combat de la mort et de la vie. Each is a pedal group (see Appendix 5.3) that has the same pitch content each time it begins, and these figurations repeat and transpose within each section. Each section, mm. 3-13, 18-29, 34-48, is slightly longer than the preceding—first eleven, then twelve, then fifteen measures, illustrating a development by expansion. The last group also intensifies because it is supported with notes in octaves and with the addition of more organ stops. Figurations in the first and second toccata sections are played between two manuals, on the Grand-Orgue and Récit, and marked Plus vif, agité et tumultueux (more lively, agitated and tumultuous); figurations in the last section are mostly on the Grand-Orgue and marked Plus vif. All these figurations are characteristically ametrical rhythms (see Appendix 2.1). Messiaen marks staccato at the beginning of all three toccata sections, and reiterates in a few instances with staccato sempre.¹⁰

Messiaen’s harmonic language in the toccata passages consists mainly of his seven modes of limited transpositions and some of his special chords, which he refers to as chords of resonance, chords in fourths, or clusters of chords (see Appendix 4.4 - 4.6). There are familiar major, minor, and diminished chords in some of these figurations, but he writes that “they are precisely blended with those modes that color them.”¹¹ Each of the toccata figurations are a realization of either one or two transpositions of Mode 3. He refers to a combination of two mode transpositions as a modulation of a mode to itself (see Appendix 1.5).

¹⁰ Messiaen, Les Corps glorieux: IV-Combat de la mort et de la vie.
¹¹ Messiaen, Music and Color, 49.
Some toccata figurations feature a scale in which Messiaen selects notes from two mode transpositions and combine them in a regularly ordered sequence to form what I refer to as a “newly derived” scale. Although at first this procedure might recall serial procedures, but Messiaen explicitly disassociates his compositional approaches from 12-tone technique: “Some of my works comprise tone-rows, but they project nothing like the sound one expects from serial writing, nor do they have the ‘serial spirit.’ They remain colored because, driven by my love of color, I treat them as colors.” An important characteristic in the newly derived scales is having the common notes between each transposition that connects the ordered sequence of notes, which is a procedure that is similar to that found in the small groupings within his modes of limited transpositions (see Appendix 1.1).

5.2 Alternating Chords

Most toccata figurations in alternating hands consist of chords that range from two to five notes in each hand. These alternating figurations utilize irregular rhythmic groupings that range from three to six sixteenth-note values and alternately shift between the hands in irregular patterns. Each toccata section begins with alternating toccata figurations with dominant seventh chords in the left hand and half-diminished seventh chords in the right hand, yet the use of these chords relate directly to mode transpositions (see Fig. 5.1). In m. 3, the first seven chords are in the second transposition and the last three chords are in the third transposition. Likewise, the figurations in m. 9 are in two transpositions but in the first and second transpositions respectively.

12 Messiaen, Music and Color, 49.
Among the special chords in the toccata figurations are Messiaen’s *chords of resonance* (see Appendix 4.4). In m. 3, the last three chords in the left hand share a common lowest note on D♭-C♯-D♭ (see Fig. 5.2). Similarly, chords of resonance in m. 9 share a common lowest note on A♭-G♯-A♭ in the left hand on the *Récit*, but continue to m. 10 with common top notes on F that alternate with the right hand chords on the *Grand-Orgue* with common top notes on G (see Fig. 5.3). Other alternating figurations have connections of *chords in fourths* (see Appendix 4.5), which alternate with *clusters of chords* (see Appendix 4.6) in the left hand (see Fig. 5.4). In mm. 5 and 6, the right hand has successions of chords with fourth intervals with added notes, followed by a series of parallel perfect fifth intervals.

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13 Left-hand chords in m. 3 are identical to the left-hand chords in mm. 4, 7 and 8 in the first toccata section, mm. 18 and 19 at the beginning of the second toccata section, and mm. 34 and 35 at the beginning of the last toccata section. The alternating figurations in mm. 9, 22-24, and 36-38 are transpositions of the figuration in m. 3.

14 Similarly, mm. 20 and 21 have right hand chords in fourths followed by series of perfect fifth intervals and alternating with seventh chords in the left hand.
5.3 Fan-like Movements

There are long descending and ascending series of sixteenth-note trichords in contrary directions that forms at the end of each toccata section. Healey refers to these series of chords in contrary directions as “closed fan-like movements” because the direction comes together to a closer point; such contrary movements are very common in Messiaen’s music. The beginning fan-like movements in each toccata section realize all the notes of one mode transposition, and the last fan-like movements consistently realize a derived scale from a combination of the second and fourth transpositions of Mode 3. However, the combination of notes is different in each derived scale.

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Each voice line in the fan-like movements realizes the notes of a mode transpositions or notes of a derived scale from two mode transpositions in ordered sequence. In m. 11, each voice realizes all the notes of the first transposition of Mode 3 (see Appendix 1.3 and Fig. 5.5). With a derived scale from two mode transpositions, each voice in m. 12 realizes a sequence of notes from the second transposition on [A-B-C-D♭-E♭-F] and continues with notes on [F-G♭-G-A] from the fourth transposition (see Figs. 5.6 and 5.7). Likewise, the last fanlike movement in the third toccata section, in mm. 43-44, realizes notes from the second and fourth transpositions, but with a different combination: [F-G-A♭-A-B] and [B-D♭-D-E♭-F] respectively (see Figs. 5.8 and 5.9).

Figure 5.5 Notes in Mode 3 transpositions in each voice, m. 11.

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16 Similarly, the fan-like movements in the second toccata section are in the first transposition in m. 26 and in the fourth transposition in m. 27.
17 The resulting notes in combinations of two transpositions could possibly be interpreted as a transposition of Mode 7, but the notes do not realize each note of the transposition in ordered sequence and skips a few notes. Therefore, Mode 3 is a more appropriate designation in this instance; similarly so in each toccata section.
18 The resulting derived scale of the last fan-like movement in the second toccata section are on the notes [D♭-E♭-F-G] and [G-A-B♭-B-D♭] from the second and fourth transpositions respectively.
Figure 5.6 Derived scale from two Mode 3 transpositions used in m. 12.

Figure 5.7 Notes of derived scale in each voice, m. 12.
Figure 5.8 Derived scale from two Mode 3 transpositions used in m. 43-45.

Figure 5.9 Notes of derived scale in each voice, mm. 43-45.
5.4 Distinct Figurations

There are a number of aberrations from the typical pattern in the last toccata section. Starting in m. 40, Messiaen uses different technical approaches from the rest of the toccata figurations. The only instance when a series of chords moves in parallel motion is in mm. 40-41 (see Fig. 5-10). The resulting series of hexachords or clusters of chords (see Appendix 4-6) is the longest in the entire movement, cascading to almost three octaves from the highest to the lowest note. Each voice line realizes the notes from the fourth transposition of Mode 3 (see Appendix 1.3). Messiaen demonstrates a modulation of a mode to another mode (see Appendix 1-6) within the toccata figurations in the next two fan-like movements. These two fan-like movements, in mm. 41-43, are the only toccata figurations in Mode 2 while all the rest are in Mode 3.

![Figure 5.10 Parallel series of chords, mm. 40-41.](image)

The passage extending from the last fan-like movement, in mm. 43-45, demonstrates a harmonic development, which utilizes two procedures that Messiaen usually uses in his melodic development—interversion (see Appendix 5.4) and elimination (see Appendix 5.1). The order of the chords where both hands move to the Grand-Orgue, in mm. 44-45, are in varied combinations (see Fig. 5.11, in which dashed lines connect the chords that share the same pitches). All the chords in this passage continue to realize the derived scale of the last fan-like movement (see previous Figs. 5.8 and 5.9). The intervention of chords begins by repeating the
last two trichords in the right hand, then repeats the first five trichords in the right hand of the fan-like movement but transposed an octave lower to continue descending. The following five pentachords result from five trichords with added left-hand intervals that continue to realize the derived scale (see Fig. 5.12, in which dashed lines connect the common notes). Two pentachords in inversion result from the repeated notes in each row (see Fig. 5.13, in which dashed lines connect the chords in inversion). These five pentachords continue to develop through elimination by omitting the first pentachord in each repetition (see Fig. 5.11, in which repetitions are in brackets and the next omitted chord has an arrow).

Figure 5.11 Last fan-like movement and interversion of chords, mm. 43-45.
Three clusters of chords (see Appendix 4.6) with trills on each hand and oscillations on the Pédale, in mm. 46-48, immediately follow the interversion of chords (see Fig. 5.14). The duration of each sustained chord lengthens progressively. Oscillations on the Pédale articulate parallel tritone intervals that descend with each chord change and result in an open fan-like movement with the ascending clusters of chords on the manuals. This is the only instance in which the pedal joins in the fast sixteenth-note figurations. In these series of chord clusters, the notes of the first chord, that is, notes in both hands accompanied by pedal oscillations are in
the second transposition of Mode 2, the second chord is on the third transposition, and the last chord realizes a nine-note chromatic scale from E♯ to C♯.

Figure 5.14 Three Long-sustained chords with trills and pedal oscillations, mm. 46-48.

Figure 5.15 Common notes in three mode transpositions in mm. 45-48.

The notes in the pedal oscillations amazingly realize notes from three mode transpositions in ordered sequence (see Fig. 5.15, in which jagged lines connect the notes in the
pedal oscillations, the straight bold line connects the common notes in the derived scale, dotted and dashed lines connect common notes between the mode transpositions, and omitted notes are in boxes). Interestingly, the notes in the pedal oscillations continue to realize in succession the remaining notes that were not used in the derived scale in the last fan-like movement and in the *interversion* and *elimination* of chords in mm. 43-45 (see Appendix 5.1 and 5.4). Also, these same notes realize the notes of the first transposition of Mode 2.

Preceding the tritone intervals of the pedal oscillations is a tritone interval on repeated two-note thematic fragments on B-F, in m. 45; these two notes are the common notes in the derived scale from both mode transpositions in Mode 3 (see previous Fig. 5.8) and are also a semitone apart, respectively, from the omitted notes on C and F# from each mode transposition.
6.1 Distinguishing Elements of the Theme

The *Combat de la mort et de la vie* has only one theme. The first statement of the theme has thirteen-notes that begin with a melodic phrase of nine notes and end with repeated minor third intervals on increasing durational values (see Fig. 6.1). There are three distinct intervals within the theme: major third, minor third and augmented fourth. Messiaen treats these intervals like *leit motifs* in the thematic fragments and developments throughout the movement. The first three notes of the theme, on E-C-E♭, present contrasting major and minor third intervals. The fourth note on F♯, which is an augmented fourth above the tonic note C, forms a diminished triad with the preceding minor third interval. A sixteenth-note short value on A (see Appendix 2.3) creates a melodic upbeat and termination (see Appendix 3.4) in the theme that accents the descent on the augmented fourth and successive minor third intervals. The descending augmented fourth is Messiaen’s most preferred interval (see Appendix 3.2).1 Altogether, such elements—melodic contour with a descending augmented fourth interval, rhythmic upbeat and termination, and increasing durational values of notes at the end—give the theme a *chant-like* quality (see Appendix 3.3).

![Figure 6.1 Intervals in the theme in C minor, mm. 1-4.](image)

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Within the notes of the first statement of the theme, which Messiaen deliberately encloses within the first measure, is a diminished seventh chord that he associates with his Mode 2 (see Appendix 1.2). All the statements of the theme throughout the movement are in Mode 2. Theme statements in the first part are in three different transpositions and generally in the bass register. In the second part, all thematic statements are in the first transposition and in the treble register. Although Messiaen’s theme is based on his Mode 2, he refers to the thematic statements in his analysis of the *Combat de la mort et de la vie* by their respective tonic keys (see Chapter 3.3).\(^2\) As he explains, “the modes of limited transpositions are ‘in the atmosphere of several tonalities at once, without polytonality, the composer being free to give predominance to one of the tonalities or leave the tonal impression unsettled.’”\(^3\)

6.2 Theme Statements in the First Part

6.2.1 Theme on the *Positif*

There are three thematic statements on the *Positif* in the first part of the movement: solo voice, two-voice canon and three-voice canon. The *Combat de la mort et de la vie* begins with a monophonic statement that Messiaen describes as a “unique theme in C minor, for one voice, in the lowest register of the Bassoon 16’ alone.”\(^4\) This statement, in mm. 1-4, is in the first transposition of Mode 2. In the second statement of the theme in E minor, beginning in m. 13, the lower voice begins on A\(^b\) and the upper voice on E (see Fig. 6.2). The voices in the two-

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\(^2\) Messiaen, *The Technique*, 1:41.
\(^3\) Messiaen, *The Technique*, 1:64.
voice canon are separated by the duration of a quarter note and are both in the second transposition of Mode 2. The third statement of the theme in A-flat major, beginning in m. 29, is a three-voice canon in the third transposition (see Fig. 6.3). All three voices begin on D and are separated by the duration of an eighth note. Both outer voices continue with another statement on D, and the lowest voice continues with three ascending four-note thematic fragments while the highest voice descends to an interrupted chromatic scale. At the same time as this descent, the middle voice articulates a complete twelve-note chromatic scale.

![Figure 6.2 Theme in E minor and in two-voice canon, mm. 13-15.](image)

![Figure 6.3 Theme in A-flat major and in three-voice canon, mm. 29-30.](image)

6.2.2 Theme on the Pédale

The theme in D minor moves down to the Pédale in mm. 33-37 (see Fig. 6.4). It is marked **fff** with all three manual couplers of the organ engaged and with the notable addition of the Bombarde 16’ stop on the Pédale. Theme statements in the pedal lines are typical of
French organ toccatas.⁵ In mm. 40-45, a series of ascending thematic fragments demonstrates an elaborate melodic development through elimination (see Appendix 5.1). Messiaen refers to these fragments as “of eight notes, then of four notes, then of two notes” (see Fig. 6.5).⁶ The beginning notes of the three eighth-note theme fragments, on notes $F^\#$, $A$, and $E^b$, are the distinctive pitches of the first statement of the theme in C minor that form a diminished seventh chord with the tonic note. The theme in D minor, together with the three eight-note theme fragments, are in the third transposition of Mode 2.

![Figure 6.4 Theme statement in D minor, mm. 33-37.](image)

Figure 6.4 Theme statement in D minor, mm. 33-37.

![Figure 6.5 Theme fragments in D minor developed by elimination, mm. 40-45.](image)

Figure 6.5 Theme fragments in D minor developed by elimination, mm. 40-45.

Immediately following the three eight-note theme fragments are five four-note fragments, each of which begins with a descending minor third followed by an augmented fourth interval. Altogether, the notes in these four-note fragments complete the twelve notes of the chromatic scale. The melodic development ends with the two-note fragments on a tritone interval, on $F$ and $B$, which repeat through an entire measure and lead to pedal

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⁵ Earlier discussions on characteristic elements in French organ toccatas are in Chapter 3.4.

⁶ Messiaen, *The Technique*, 1:35; 2:19, Ex. 121.
oscillations in mm. 46-48. The notes in the pedal oscillations have a succession of three parallel
tritone intervals and are in the first transposition of Mode 2; although these notes are also in a
derived scale in Mode 3 (see previous Fig. 5.15 with the illustration on three mode
transpositions in the pedal oscillations).

6.2.3  Theme Divided between Two Keyboards

The theme returns to the manual keyboard at the end of the first part, where it begins
on the Grand-Orgue in m. 49, then continues with thematic fragments on the Pédale in mm. 50-55 (see Fig. 6.6). Messiaen demonstrates a *modulation of a mode to another mode* (see Appendix 1.6) in this statement. The theme, which is in the second transposition of Mode 2, begins in three-note octaves in parallel movements, but clusters of seventh chords in Mode 3 interrupt the theme before it continues on the Pédale. This is the last statement of the theme in the first part that is marked **ff**ff, which is the loudest dynamic yet heard in the movement.

*Figure 6.6 Theme statement divided between two keyboards, mm. 49-55.*
Messiaen demonstrates another melodic development through elimination (see Appendix 5.1) in the thematic fragments that continue on the Pédale. There are seven theme fragments in this development: first with two fragments on descending augmented fourth and minor third intervals in octaves, then with two fragments on descending minor third in octaves, and lastly, on a single-note on C♯ repeated three times, demonstrating the death of the theme. Messiaen describes this process of elimination as a “‘thematic death’ . . . which is achieved by the gradual elimination of a cell.” The decrease in dynamics, from ffff to fff and ff on the three repeated single notes, reinforces the idea of the thematic death.

Chords of resonance (see Appendix 4.4) on two C♯s support all the seven fragments of the theme on the Pédale in mm. 50-55. Messiaen describes this fragment as “borrowing its harmonies from the chord of resonance.” Although there are other chords interrupting the seven thematic fragments, these common C♯ notes in the highest register on the Grand-Orgue and in the lowest register on the Pédale bind the entire passage together. Messiaen also points out that “this last element of development is an understood dominant pedal in F-sharp major,” which is the key of the second part that he considers as the principal key of the movement.

6.2.4 Last Descent of the Theme

There is an eighth chord of resonance at the very last chord of the movement. However, preceding this chord is a very short unaccompanied theme fragment on the Pédale that interrupts the seventh and eighth chords of resonance (see Fig. 6.7). This fragment continues to

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7 Messiaen, Traité II, 402, quoted in Healey, Messiaen’s Musical Techniques, 171.
8 Messiaen, The Technique, 1:35; 2:19-20, Exs. 122-123.
9 Messiaen, The Technique, 1:41.
decrease in dynamics, from the previous \textit{ff} on the last repeated $C\#$ note to \textit{f}, and finally to \textit{mf} on the longest and softest note of the theme so far in m. 57. A variety of durational values constitute this fragment: sixteenth note, eighth note, quarter note, half note, and whole note. Although superimposed, Messiaen retains two distinct intervals of the theme in this thematic fragment: the augmented fourth and major third intervals. The last melodic descent is on a major third interval that ends on $C\#$, which reiterates the dominant of F-sharp major. The final note on $C\#$ on the \textit{Pédale} swells back to \textit{ffff} during a thirty-second-note outburst of octaves on the right hand. The eighth chord of resonance, which is the last chord in the first part of the movement, has a \textit{clustered chord} (see Appendix 4.6) on the left hand and has the same highest and lowest $C\#$ notes on the \textit{Grand-Orgue} and the \textit{Pédale}; all three distinct intervals of the theme are within its notes: major and minor thirds and an augmented fourth.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{last_theme_fragment}\caption{Last theme fragment in the first part, mm. 56-58.}
\end{figure}

6.3 Theme Statements in the Second Part

6.3.1 Theme and Commentaries in the First Section

The second part of the movement begins with the theme in the treble register, which is repeated twice with accompanying chords in the left-hand and bass notes on the \textit{Pédale} (see
Fig. 6.8). In his *Technique*, Messiaen quotes the first six measures of the second part, in mm. 59-64, in his discussion on *added notes* (see Appendix 4.1). He identifies the first nine-note phrase of this particular statement of the theme as “an ‘embellishing group’ on the D-sharp”. The note D# predominates throughout the melodic and harmonic lines in the second part, as it relates to its role as the added sixth-note in F-sharp major.

![Figure 6.8 Beginning theme statement in the second part, mm. 59-61.](image)

In a *binary form* (see Appendix 6.2), Messiaen refers to the melodic development of the theme as a commentary. Melodic developments in the second part of the movement utilize theme fragments and demonstrate Messiaen’s creative use of his *nonretrogradable technique* (see Appendix 2.4) in the melodic domain. The melodic development in mm. 65-66 features sequential theme fragments and two melodic palindromes, with changes in register that shift the contour of the melody to an ascending phrase (see Fig. 6.9, in which dashed slurs connect the notes in palindrome). There are three thematic fragments in this ascending phrase: two sequential three-note fragments on Bb-F#-A and Db-A-C, and a six-note fragment on the same notes as the beginning statement of the second part. The seven-note palindrome has G as the

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center note, which is the first note of the six-note fragment, and the 15-note palindrome has notes of a diminished triad, on D♯-F♯-A, as the central common notes.

Figure 6.9 Ascending melodic development, mm. 65-66.

There is another melodic development in the first section of the second part, in mm. 69-70, which features several similar and contrasting elements compared to the first melodic development in mm. 65-66 (see Fig. 6.10, in which dashed slurs connect common notes in palindrome). Though this phrase features a palindrome of notes, obviously this second melodic development contrasts in direction, where it begins on a high D♯ and descends to B♭, and the beginning and ending notes are the reverse of the first melodic phrase. Also, it features a modulation of the mode to itself (see Appendix 1.5), having notes in the first and second transpositions of Mode 2, and its seven-note palindrome has notes of a major triad, on G♯-D♯-B♯, as the central common notes.

Figure 6.10 Descending melodic development, mm. 69-70.
6.3.2 Theme and Commentaries in the Second Section

The second section in the second part of the movement is very similar to the first section, where it also begins with a statement of the theme. However, the theme is stated only once and the melodic development that follows, in mm. 82-84, expands to the longest of all melodic phrases (see Fig. 6.11, in which dashed slurs connect common notes in palindrome). Messiaen again utilizes sequential theme fragments and palindromes of notes in the melodic development as in the first section. Nonetheless, Messiaen states this phrase between two manual keyboards of the organ, beginning on the Positif and continuing on the Grand-Orgue. The first two thematic fragments, an eight-note and a four-note fragment, are on the Positif in which the first eight notes are taken from the opening theme of the second part; the succession of eight- and four-note fragments may recall the thematic fragments on the Pédale in the first part, in mm. 40-44. The following three thematic fragments continue on the Grand-Orgue exactly like the ascending first melodic development in the first section in mm. 65-66, except that it is transposed a minor third higher and ascends to the tonic note on F#, which is the highest melodic note in the entire movement so far.

![Figure 6.11 Longest melodic development, mm. 82-84.](image)

Similarly to the first section, there is another melodic development in the second section, in mm. 87-89, which features several similar and contrasting elements compared to the
melodic development preceding it (see Fig. 6.12, in which dashed slurs connect notes in palindrome, and the dashed line with arrows connects the interrupting notes). Unlike the descending melodic development in the first section, this phrase forms an inverted melodic arch before it ascends to the highest F# on the manual keyboard, then descends to a two-octave span toward another F#. This phrase has several palindromic properties with interrupting notes, which are G#, D and E#, that are in both the second or third transpositions of Mode 2, again demonstrating a modulation of a mode to itself (see Appendix 1.5); these interrupting three notes form a diminished triad.

Figure 6.12 Long melodic development, mm. 87-89.

The palindrome of notes in the melodic developments of the theme may be among Messiaen’s earliest demonstration of his nonretrogradable technique in the melodic domain, which is to become his trademark technique especially with regards to rhythm. In the first chapter in his Technique, he writes, “melody is the point of departure. May it remain sovereign! And whatever may be the complexities of our rhythms and our harmonies, they shall not draw it along in their wake, but, in the contrary, shall obey it as faithful servants.”

6.3.3  Last Melodic Ascent

The second part of the movement ends with a melodic ascent that gives a strong impression of the principal key of F-sharp major (see Fig. 6.13, in which a carat marks each numbered scale note). In this last melodic line in mm. 98-100, the notes C# - D# - E# - F# articulate the last four notes of an ascending F-sharp major scale. Similarly to the treatment of the last melodic descent in the first part of the movement, this last melodic ascent has superimposed distinct intervals of the theme within its notes, and also features varied durational note values, which are increasing in this last ascent. All the notes in this melodic line are in the first transposition of Mode 2 except for the note E#, which particularly gives the strongest impression of the principal key of F-sharp major. Within these notes is a diminished chord, on D#-F#-A, which refers back to the first statement of the theme in C minor, having exactly the same distinctive pitches.

Figure 6.13 Last melodic ascent, mm. 98-100.
CHAPTER 7
THEOLOGICAL SYMBOLISM AND INTERPRETATION

7.1 Messiaen’s Use of Symbolism in the *Combat de la mort et de la vie*

Messiaen sees power and life in his religious music. He believes that “music possesses a power that is superior to the image and the word because it is immaterial and appeals more to the intellect and to thought than the other arts. It even verges on fantasy and belongs to the world of dreams. What’s more, music, and color are closely linked.”\(^1\) Messiaen’s viewpoints speak of power in both aural and visual terms within the boundless sphere of imagination. Combined with his interest in literature, analysis, poetic imagery and symbolism, his love for theatre, and his compositional and organ skills, Messiaen’s musical resources abound and his music is powerfully impressive.

The truths of his faith fascinate and captivate him. Messiaen expresses that “it’s certain that in the truths of the Catholic faith, I found this attraction of the marvelous multiplied a hundredfold, a thousandfold, and it’s no longer a matter of theatrical fiction but of something real. *I chose what was true.*”\(^2\) Talking about his improvisations at La Trinité, he admits, “the truths I express, the Truths of the Faith, are startling; they are fairytales, in turn mysterious, harrowing, glorious and sometimes terrifying, always based on a luminous, unchanging Reality. I am perforce a hundred thousand degrees below each Truth.”\(^3\) Consequently, Messiaen’s religious musical expression comes alive in his colorful world of music and imagination:

*Conventional* religious music is on the first rung of the ladder. It has something theatrical about it, something of scenery and of all that contributes to external effect. It

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2 Samuel, *Conversations with Olivier Messiaen*, 7.
3 Samuel, *Conversations with Olivier Messiaen*, 6.
can be extremely beautiful . . . but its usual formula of large chords, like reinforced concrete, remains the symbol of those whose eyes cannot see.

*Mystical* music occupies a much higher rung. But beware the false ecstasies of a vaguely religious sentiment! There are few truly mystical musicians. Those who have written works of lasting worth are more closely related to:

*Living* music. Living through its subjects, living through its language. The word ‘life’ recurs constantly in the Gospels; our Catholic sacraments and liturgy are, above all, an organism of spiritual life, and all Christians aspire towards eternal life. The language of the musician-believer will thus try to express life. This life—inexhaustible and ever fresh for those who seek it—calls for powerfully original and varied means of expression. For us, audacious harmonies, glittering rhythms, sumptuous modes and rainbow timbres!⁴

There was a controversy over Messiaen’s theological works during the 1940s. Critics in the French musical press severely criticized certain traits of Messiaen’s music and what they perceived as his over-use of written commentary to explain his works’ theoretical and theological significance. They also generally questioned the appropriateness of his religious music.⁵ One of the works that Messiaen utilized to defend himself against these attacks in writing was his *Les Corps glorieux*:

I have been placed in the centre of this quarrel. . . . I have had only two stars shining in my darkness: my faith and my music. They have painted these with their vile colours. The stained glass window of rhythms and modes constituted precisely the qualities of *Les Corps glorieux*, and the absence of a tonal background or of strongly marked rhythms and metre was intended to bring me nearer to Him who is beyond space and time. And even if my music is the source of violent displeasure, even if my life is far, very far from the Divine Love that I adore, I nonetheless imbued my notes with a little celestial tenderness. I did that in my bitterness, in my unworthiness—but I am sure I did it!⁶

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⁵ Hill and Simeone, *Messiaen*, 144-145. The “war of words” against Messiaen in the middle of the 1940s was known as ‘Le Cas Messiaen.’

Despite severe criticisms, Messiaen strongly believes in his own faith and music. He points out some technical elements in *Les Corps glorieux* like rhythms, meter, tonal background and modes, but what he mainly expresses in his defense is his desire to be closer to God. His words in defense of *Les Corps glorieux* may relate to Psalm 138, which inspires the second part of the *Combat de la mort et de la vie*. Messiaen’s ways of expressing himself reflect the verses in this psalm that describes God’s power. Even though Messiaen feels unworthy, he claims that his music conveys his faith for the Divine Love that he adores.

In my interpretative analysis of Messiaen’s use of symbolism in the *Combat de la mort et de la vie*, I take into consideration his intellectual and artistic approach to his musical language. I gather my information from his unique technique and use of basic musical elements, his treatment of the organ as an instrument, and his given commentaries. His technique includes his modes, special chords, preferred intervals and development through elimination; basic music elements include melody, harmony, rhythm and form; treatment of the organ as an instrument includes the use of different keyboards and choices of registrations; and his commentaries use descriptive words such as “riotously,” “fortissimo cries,” “sunny peace,” and “secretive moment.” Although Messiaen’s commentaries describe his music, I see his choice of words also manifests symbolic literary and poetic features.

This music’s expression of theology goes beyond obvious analogy and imagery. I believe that Messiaen’s use of symbolism is also evident to the organist as a performer, to whom he conveys his message by engaging other physical senses tied to the act of performance. For

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example, he specifies passages to be played in a certain manner on different keyboards of the
organ. Other features of the organ instrument reinforce symbolism through intensification or
elimination, as utilizing the vents of nineteenth-century French organs and engaging the
keyboard couplers. Especially in one particular passage, Messiaen’s music seems to enact the
theological imagery to the performer’s playing position.

Through the process of my interpretative analysis, I show that Messiaen uses number
symbolism in the *Combat de la mort et de la vie*, which reflects his analytical mind, his tendency
towards the meticulous, his love of rhythm and symmetry. The use of number symbolism exists
through the centuries, in the Scriptures, in ancient civilizations, and in this dissertation I will
argue that he uses number symbolism in the *Combat de la mort et de la vie* as well. There is
power in the use of numbers, as Madeline Hsu writes, “in symbolism numbers are not merely
the expression of quantities, but idea-forces, each with a particular character of its own.”

9 Madeline Hsu, *Olivier Messiaen, the Musical Mediator: A Study of the Influence of Liszt, Debussy, and Bartok*

Messiaen particularly sees the power of prime numbers: “even as a child I loved prime
numbers, these numbers which by the simple fact of not being divisible into equal fractions,
emitted an occult power (for you know that divinity is not divisible . . . ).”

10 Samuel, *Conversations with Olivier Messiaen*, 47.

Messiaen’s choice of seven movements in *Les Corps glorieux*, with the *Combat de la
mort et de la vie* in the center, shows that he was thinking about numbers in this way. His other
pieces exhibit a similar concern for number symbolism. I also consider two other works that are
chronologically in close proximity to when he wrote *Les Corps glorieux*. Messiaen’s large organ
work preceding *Les Corps glorieux* is his *La Nativité du Seigneur* (1935). This organ work has
nine movements, corresponding to nine months of pregnancy that Messiaen describes as “to honor the motherhood of the Holy Virgin.” The famous *Quatour pour la fin du Temps* (1941), which was composed right after *Les Corps glorieux*, has eight movements. In its preface, Messiaen writes, “This *Quartet* comprises eight movements. Why? Seven is the perfect number, the Creation in six days sanctified by the divine Sabbath, the seventh day of this repose extends into eternity and becomes the eighth day of eternal light, of unalterable peace.”

In the *Combat de la mort et de la vie*, I see Messiaen’s use of number symbolism through its structural organization, harmonic and melodic development, and other meticulous details, such as in his choice of intervals, numbers of notes, durations, and measure divisions. He typically uses number symbolism in this movement in one of three ways: 1) he either alludes to the time or subject of a Biblical event by his division of measures, 2) he represents people by his use of intervals, and 3) he expresses related ideas through sums of combined durations and numbers of notes. Messiaen’s ideas of combining numbers in this movement may relate to his traits in symmetrical permutations where he believes that “the musician possess a mysterious power: by means of his rhythms, he can chop up Time here and there, and can even put together again in the reverse order.”

In my analytical and interpretative approach to Messiaen’s use of symbolism, I support my claims about symbolic representation in each section of the movement with three types of evidence: 1) Messiaen’s own descriptive commentaries, 2) specific features in the music, and 3)
close similarities with Biblical accounts of Jesus’ Passion story and Resurrected Life. Some of Messiaen’s descriptions and musical elements are simple to understand, but other meanings do not lie on the surface and need more critical reasoning. In such cases, I bring to bear my inquisitive thinking and logical reasoning in trying to understand the music. I take Healey’s suggestion: “examination of a work or particular movement leaves many questions unanswered, and an all-embracing approach to Messiaen’s language is required . . . analysis therefore lie[s] in an amalgam of strategies favouring no single methodology.”¹⁴ I have a number of substantial questions about the *Combat de la mort et de la vie* in the areas of performance and analytical theory where I believe that my interpretative theological analysis can provide some possible answers.

My principal question about the *Combat de la mort et de la vie* is about its use of one singular theme throughout its two very contrasting parts. The first part is generally loud and fast, portraying death (*mort*) and the second part is soft and slow, portraying life (*vie*); how do these two parts of the movement relate to each other beyond their use of one theme with obviously contrasting music? As a performer and analyst, among my questions are the unusual statements of the theme: 1) Why is the last note of the first theme statement in mm. 1-4 down on the *Pédale* when all the rest of the notes are on the *Positif*? 2) Why is the entrance of the theme on the *Pédale* in m. 33 unaccompanied when it is most typical of French organ toccatas to begin with the toccata figurations on the manuals before the entrance of the theme on the *Pédale*? 3) In the return of the theme on the manuals in mm. 49-50 why did Messiaen divide the statement with interrupting chords between the *Grand-Orgue* and *Pédale*? 4) Why is the

longest melodic phrase, in mm. 82-84, again divided between two keyboards, on the *Positif* and *Grand-Orgue*? 5) Why are there two toccata figuration passages in Mode 2 in mm. 41-43 when all the rest are in Mode 3? 6) Do the pedal oscillations on three tritone intervals in mm. 46-48 belong to the toccata figurations or thematic passages? 7) In his analysis of the movement’s form, why did Messiaen place the three-voice canon theme statement in A-flat major on the *Positif* and the theme in D minor on the *Pédale* together in one section, then have a separate section for the following thematic fragments on the *Pédale*? 8) Why is the theme at the beginning of the second part in D-sharp when Messiaen specifies a theme in the principal key of F-sharp major in the second part?\(^\text{15}\)

The principal basis of my theological interpretation of Messiaen’s use of symbolism in the *Combat de la mort et de la vie* comes from the Biblical references that he mentions in his own commentaries, particularly the Gospels and Psalm 138.\(^\text{16}\) I refer mainly to all the books of the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—that have similar accounts of the narrative story of Jesus Christ, though each varies in its treatment of details.\(^\text{17}\) All quotations from the Scriptures are from the Douay-Rheims-Challoner Revision 1752, which “was the standard English Bible for Roman Catholics well into the twentieth century;” and this translation was based on the Latin Vulgate, which was “the Bible of Western Europe for a thousand years.”\(^\text{18}\)

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\(^{15}\) Messiaen, *The Technique*, 1:41. The tonic note of all previous theme statements in the first part appears as the second and lowest note in the statement. Messiaen does not mention a theme statement in D-sharp.  
\(^{16}\) Messiaen, *Les Corps glorieux* (Ducretet Thomson jacket notes).  
\(^{17}\) Each book of the Gospels tells about Jesus Christ’s life on earth. However, “Each of these four has its own distinctive characteristics, each emphasizes certain aspects of the life and teachings of Jesus, each makes a unique contribution to the gospel narrative as a whole. . . . A complete picture of the gospel story can be secured only when the four accounts are properly blended together into one unified, chronological narrative.” “The Fourfold Gospel Narrative” in *The Mission Study Bible* (Harrah, OK: Mission Publishing Inc., 2014), 3.  
My choice to use this version would best relate to Messiaen’s use of the Latin Vulgate, since he prefers to use Latin texts when he quotes from the Scriptures. In his conversations with Samuel about another religious work, Messiaen mentions that “I treated this subject by using Latin texts I chose myself, texts drawn from the Gospel according to Saint Matthew,” adding, “I wanted to renew the tradition, but also to prove that Latin texts are beautiful and that their unintelligibility adds to their mystery.”19 The choice of words in different translations varies and it is critical to have the appropriate translation that influenced Messiaen’s own theological views. Also, there are differences in the Psalm numbering between versions of the Bible, and Messiaen’s reference to Psalm 138 affirms his use of the Latin Vulgate. The verses in Psalm 138 in the Douay-Rheims-Challoner Revision 1752 are found in Psalm 139 in most English versions of the Bible, such as the New King James Bible, the New American Standard Bible, and the New International Version (English versions of the Bible in the 1970s20).

In the *Combat de la mort et de la vie*, Messiaen demonstrates his symbolic representation of the greatest of all contrasts according to Christian theology: that between the death and life of Jesus Christ. I see Messiaen’s use of symbolism as conveying his theological beliefs, which are bound up with Jesus’ use of parables. Jesus used many parables throughout His earthly ministry, as Matthew 13:34 attests: “All these things Jesus spoke in parables to the multitudes.” In this chapter, I will discuss two examples of Messiaen’s use of symbolism. In the first part, Messiaen uses symbolism to narrate the most marvelous Passion story of Jesus Christ and to portray in great detail specific accounts in the Scriptures. Messiaen himself points out in

his own commentary on the piece: “The first part, boisterous and agitated, is the actual Combat, that is to say the sufferings and cries of the Passion of Christ (death is the implied outcome of his Passion).”\textsuperscript{21} In the second part, Messiaen uses symbolism to evoke a celestial atmosphere that represents Jesus’ Resurrected life that he describes as “on the contrary, soft, calm, [and] serene. It represents the most important, the most moving, the most secretive moment of the life of Christ.”\textsuperscript{22}

7.2 Main Aspects in the Movement

7.2.1 Toccata Figurations

The toccata figurations in the \textit{Combat de la mort et de la vie} may be said to represent the cruel crowds of people gathering together during the time of Jesus’ death. Messiaen’s commentaries are very suggestive about these passages: in his \textit{Technique} he describes them as “a contest of chords alternated tumultuously,” and in his liner notes to a recording he describes them as a “wrestling of riotously alternating chords” and “Another uproar of chords. Furthermore, in the score to guide the performer, he writes, \textit{“plus vif, agité et tumultueux”} (more vivid, agitated and tumultuous).\textsuperscript{23} Messiaen indicates \textit{staccato} in the score in all the toccata sections, emphasizing the individuality of the notes, much like individuals in a crowd. Most of the alternating toccata figurations are widespread four-note chords that require each hand of the organist to take a claws-like shape. Such depiction helps to strengthen the

\textsuperscript{21} Messiaen, \textit{Les Corps glorieux} (Ducretet Thomson jacket notes), quoted in Gillock, \textit{Messiaen’s Organ Music}, 115.

\textsuperscript{22} Messiaen, \textit{Les Corps glorieux} (Ducretet Thomson jacket notes), quoted in Gillock, \textit{Messiaen’s Organ Music}, 115.

symbolism of the toccata figurations as representations of the tumultuous people in the
crowds. Mark 14:1 describes the plot against Jesus thus: “the chief priests and the scribes
sought how they might by some wile lay hold on him, and kill him.” John 18:3 describes the
crowd as “a band of soldiers and servants from the chief priests and the Pharisees, cometh
thither with lanterns and torches and weapons.”

Characteristic technical elements of the toccata figurations are analogous in many ways
to the people during Jesus’ last days before he died. Ametrical rhythms (see Appendix 2.1),
varied chord clusters (see Appendix 4.6), and alternating chords between two manual
keyboards of the organ may represent different groups of riotous people. Chords realizing the
notes of mode transpositions in each voice are as varied and complex as the people. Closed fan-
like movements with the combination of two mode transpositions (see Appendix 1.5) at the end
of each toccata section direct the notes to a common point, as people gathering to a common
place. Each toccata section may symbolize the same crowds of people that are growing in
number, as analogous to each toccata section as a pedal group (see Appendix 5.3) that expands
in the following section. Luke 23: 1, 4 and 10 mention the people of different groups gathering
together to accuse Jesus: “the whole multitude of them rising up, led him to Pilate” and Pilate
addresses “the chief priests and the multitudes. . . . And the chief priests and the scribes stood
by, earnestly accusing him.” Luke 23:27 points to the people who followed Jesus: “And there
followed him a great multitude of people, and of women.”

The symbolic use of parallel perfect intervals in the movement might relate to how
Messiaen understands ancient temple worship. Psalm singing in Temple worship during Biblical
times, though likely unharmonized, also had drones on intervals of fourths and fifths.\textsuperscript{24}

Furthermore, in medieval symbolism, the use of perfect intervals is also associated with Divinity.\textsuperscript{25} The toccata figurations with series of parallel \textit{perfect fourth and fifth intervals} (see Appendix 4.5) may point to religious groups of people that the Scriptures repeatedly mention during the time of Jesus’ death. Most of the alternating \textit{clustered chords} (see Appendix 4.6) are seventh chords, which are also superposed fourth intervals and may symbolize the religious groups of people who are among the crowds or behind the commotion of the crowd.

The members of the Sanhedrin during Jesus’ time—Sadducees, Pharisees, chief priests and scribes—are from different religious groups, yet despite their differences they agree in their plot to kill Jesus.” Matthew 26:59 describes the agreement in the Sanhedrin during Jesus’ time thus: “And the chief priests and the whole council sought false witness against Jesus, that they might put him to death.” In his book, \textit{Customs and Controversies: Intertestamental Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament}, J. Julius Scott, Jr. discusses about how these religious groups are different from each other, and especially the Sadducees and Pharisees who are two very opposing groups in many respects.\textsuperscript{26} The Scriptures mention about these two religious groups and affirm their differences.\textsuperscript{27}


\textsuperscript{25} Johnson, \textit{Messiaen}, 69.

\textsuperscript{26} J. Julius Scott, Jr., \textit{Customs and Controversies: Intertestamental Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament} (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 166-168, 176, 208. Scott discusses how the Sadducees and Pharisees differ in lifestyle as in how they perform public ceremonies and religious rituals. The Sadducees are more conservative and literalistic in following the Old Testament, while the Pharisees have newer ideas and traditions. The priests and scribes are leaders of the people, interpreters and teachers of the law, and most scribes are themselves priests, although generally scribes are respected as independent of priests. Both the priests and scribes are “responsible for defining and perfecting the principles underlying or derived from the law, and to help administer the law as learned counselors in courts of justice.

\textsuperscript{27} Acts 23:8 mentions their opposing beliefs: “the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit: but the Pharisees confess both.” Acts 5:17 states that the high priests are of the Sadducees.
7.2.2 Theme

I strongly believe that the theme symbolizes Jesus Christ. Messiaen’s commentaries to the *Combat de la mort et de la vie* clearly demonstrate that Jesus is the main theological subject of the movement. He writes, “The first part . . . is the actual Combat, that is to say the sufferings and cries of the Passion of Christ (death is the implied outcome of his Passion). The second part is Life . . . It represents the most important, the most moving, [and] the most secretive moment of the life of Christ.”\(^\text{28}\) Also, Messiaen’s use of only one theme throughout the movement is most convincing. Characteristic elements of the theme are very suggestive of one person. The first statement of the theme is monophonic, marked *legato*, and uses a single stop of the organ (see Fig. 7.1).\(^\text{29}\) Messiaen refers to this statement in his *Technique* as “in one voice,” and in his liner notes specifies only one organ stop, the “basson 16 seul” (Bassoon 16’ alone).\(^\text{30}\) The melodic contour with a *short value* (see Appendix 2.3) that accents the descending augmented fourth interval and terminates on a minor third interval, with increasing durational values of the notes altogether are characteristics of *plainchants* (see Appendix 3.3) and suggest a religious character.

The contrasting third intervals in the first three notes of the theme may symbolize Jesus’ unique and contrasting nature, that is, His divinity and humanity. He was born of Mary but was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Matthew 1:20-23 writes about the conception thus: “conceived in her, is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son: and thou shalt call his name JESUS. . . .


\(^{29}\) Messiaen, *Les Corps glorieux*: IV-*Combat de la mort et de la vie*, 1. Although stops may vary depending on the nature of the organ for performance, performance practice aims to follow the composer’s intent as closely as possible. In his personal score copy, Messiaen changed the registration of the first statement of the theme to only one stop, the Basson 16’, which is different from the published score. Gillock, *Messiaen’s Organ Music*, 117.

and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.” Philippians 2:5-7 says that Jesus, who was God, took humanity in himself as a man: “Christ Jesus: Who being in the form of God . . . equal with God: But emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and in habit found as a man.”

Figure 7.1 First statement of the theme, mm. 1-3.

The symbolism in the numbers three and four may have influenced Messiaen’s use of the contrasting minor and major third intervals in the theme to represent Jesus’ divine and human nature correspondingly, that is, the three semitones of the minor third and the four semitones of the major third respectively. In a recording where Messiaen wrote his notes on Les Corps glorieux, Luc-André Marcel points out that the symbolism of the numbers three and four, represent “the contrast of the Godhead and the world [which] is also symbolized by the role of the numbers 3 and 4 . . . ‘Three’ is the number of the Godhead and ‘four’ is its extension into nature, symbolizing the world, the creation of the Godhead.”

One may object that the concept of defining intervals by semitones is too early to apply to Les Corps glorieux, which Messiaen composed in 1939, because the distinction of semitone increments in intervals is usually associated with post-tonal theory of the later twentieth

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31 “This symbolism of the number 4 is pointed out by Luc-André Marcel in his sleeve note for the early Ducretet-Thomson recording of the work.” Johnson, Messiaen, 69, 76.
However, defining semitone relations between notes is a basic element of Messiaen’s language. His *seven modes of limited transpositions* (see Appendix 1.1) are his most obvious demonstration that he thinks of semitone relationships between notes in this way. The limited transpositions of the seven modes are defined by movement by semitone. Also, Messiaen refers to the small symmetrical groupings within the twelve-note chromatic scale by semitone relationships. For example, he describes the symmetrical groups in Mode 2 as “of three notes each. . . . divided into two intervals: a semitone and a tone,” and in Mode 3 as “of four notes each. . . . divided themselves into three intervals: a tone and two semitones.”

Messiaen’s use of the minor third in the theme may symbolize Jesus’ divinity. Almost all the notes of the theme form a diminished seventh chord, which is a chord built on minor thirds (see Fig. 7.2). Messiaen associates the diminished chord with Mode 2 (see Appendix 1.2) and all statements of the theme throughout the movement are in this mode. The notes F♯ and A in the first statement of the theme are a minor third apart, and when taken together with the notes of the minor third interval, on C and E♭, form a diminished seventh chord. These two

![Figure 7.2 Diminished seventh chord and center notes in theme, mm. 1-3.](image)

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34 Messiaen, *The Technique*, 1:59.
pitches, F♯ and A, have very prominent relations to other elements in the movement: F♯ is the center of seven notes in the first measure and is the tonic note of the principal key of the movement; the note A stands as a distinctive note in the first statement of the theme, as it is the last and seventh note in the first measure, it has the shortest value (see Appendix 2.3), it is the highest note and is the center of the thirteen-note theme, that is, between the six previous notes in the first measure and the six notes in the second and third measures on repeated minor third intervals. These same two pitches form the final ascent at the end of the movement, in mm. 98-100, where there is again a minor third on F♯ and A before the final tonic note (see Fig. 7.3).

![Figure 7.3 Last melodic ascent, mm. 98-100.](image)

I associate Messiaen’s use of the major third interval with humanity for a number of reasons. As I have already explained, the first part of the *Combat de la mort et de la vie* directly relates to humanity in the sense of Jesus’ death on Earth. Tonic keys of the theme statements on the *Positif* manual—C minor, E minor and A-flat major—are a major third apart, and these tonic notes form an augmented fifth chord that Messiaen associates to his *Mode 3* (see Appendix 1.3).35 His use of Mode 3 for the toccata figurations, which I see as his representation for the people, corresponds to the concept of the major third interval to symbolize humanity.

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35 Messiaen, *The Technique*, 1:60.
The last theme fragment at the end of the first part, in mm. 56-57, and the sudden ascent of parallel octaves in m. 58, both span a major third interval (see Fig. 7.4).

Another distinct interval of the theme is the augmented fourth (see Appendix 3.2) or tritone interval that may relate to Messiaen’s views about the mysteries of the Trinity, and in this way also recognizes Jesus as the Son, who is the second person of the Trinity. The central note in the first measure is F#, which is a tritone apart from the tonic note of the theme in C; these two notes point to the tonic keys of the two parts in the movement, which are C minor and F-sharp major. The tritone interval has three whole tones and Messiaen uses the number three to symbolize the Trinity.

Messiaen also uses the tritone interval to symbolize the Trinity in the ninth piece of his Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte Trinité. He writes, “A brilliant passage recalls the themes of the Father, Son, the Breath of the Spirit . . . The diminished fifth which concludes it is proclaimed three times.” From Olivier Messiaen, Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte Trinité, [i-iii] (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1973), 76, quoted in Gillock, Messiaen’s Organ Music, 234. Also, in Messiaen’s Trois petites Liturgies, he uses the tritone interval to represent the divinity. Johnson writes, “In medieval symbolism the tritone was the ‘devil’ in music and the perfect intervals symbolized the divinity. This distinction is not one which is valid in Messiaen’s music . . . the two intervals in this context suggests the contrasts of the worldly and the divine which is the subject of the work.” Johnson, Messiaen, 69. Matthew 28:19 enumerates the three persons of the Godhead: “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.”

In his commentaries to the last movement of Les Corps glorieux, Le Mystère de la Sainte Trinité (The Mystery of the Holy Trinity), he writes, “The whole piece is devoted to the number 3. It is in three voices. Its form is tripartite, each of the three large divisions themselves being a tercet;” then he refers to the three voices: “The low voice (the Father) . . . The middle voice (the Son) . . . [and] The high voice (the Holy Spirit).” Messiaen, Les Corps glorieux: VII-Mystère de la Sainte Trinité (Ducretet Thomson jacket notes), in Gillock, Messiaen’s Organ Music, 134.
There are three overlapping tritone intervals in the notes of the diminished seventh chord within an octave. In the first theme statement, the short value on A emphasizes the tritone descent to E♭, and together with the notes of the tritone on C-F♯, they form a diminished seventh chord. A diminished seventh chord is transposable only three times, like Messiaen’s Mode 2 (see Appendix 1.2). All the statements of the theme in the *Combat de la mort et de la vie* are in different keys yet all are in Mode 2. Likewise, in parallel analogy, one of the mysteries about the Trinity is having three persons in the Godhead but all three are as One. 1 John 5:7 describes this idea thus: “And there are three who give testimony in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost. And these three are one.”

It is not surprising to see all three distinct intervals of the movement—minor and major thirds and the tritone—within the first measure of the first theme statement. In fact, also within the first measure, Messiaen provides the distinct pitches and symbolic numbers of the movement that will have important resonances with other elements later in the movement. The very first statement of the theme points to all of the most important numbers in the movement: 3, 4, 6, 7, 13 and 33 (see Fig. 7.5). A critical guide in gathering these numbers is in the division of measures that Messiaen refers to as the first rhythmic notation (see Appendix 2.2), in which his “use of the bar-line [is] only to indicate periods.” He believes that “This notation is evidently the best for the composer, since it is the exact expression of his musical conception,” and he mentions that “I have used this notation in my works for organ (*La Nativité du Seigneur, Les Corps Glorieux*).”

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The first measure contains seven notes—one of the most universally used symbolic numbers in Christian theology. The number seven is a Biblical number that represents the concept of completion and perfection because it refers to the creation week’s duration of seven days.\(^{40}\) Messiaen writes, “Seven is the perfect number, the Creation in six days sanctified by the divine Sabbath; [which is] the seventh day.”\(^{41}\) He also writes about the significance of the number seven in other respects:

Seven is a prime number and a sacred number . . . in all times and countries it has been an object of veneration, and one can find traces of the sacred character of this number since the divine rest on the seventh day, in the seven days of the week, in the seven wonders of the world from pagan antiquity, in religious systems of China and Japan, up to the seven notes of the scale and the seven colors of the rainbow.\(^{42}\)

The theme begins with the two contrasting third intervals, and the semitones of these intervals, when taken together, total seven \((3 + 4 = 7)\). Following this reasoning, the representation of the contrasting third intervals, which may represent Jesus’ divine and human nature, corresponds with the idea of his contrasting nature. Combinations of numbers may show relevant

\(^{40}\) The number seven is a biblical number as the seven days of the creation week: “God created heaven, and earth. . . . And on the seventh day God ended his work . . . And he blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it.” Genesis 1:1, 2:2-3 (DRC1752).

\(^{41}\) Olivier Messiaen, Preface to Quartet for the End of Time, quoted in Rebecca Rischin, For the End of Time, 129.

relationships in Messiaen music, as his writings on rhythm illustrate: “The musician possesses a mysterious power . . . he can chop up time here and there, and can even put it together.”

Another number that Messiaen demonstrates within the first measure is the number 13. The seven notes in the first measure have a total duration of 13 sixteenth notes. The three distinct intervals in the first measure, if their semitones are added together also total 13: minor third (3), major third (4), and tritone (6); or \((3 + 4 + 6 = 13)\). Another representation at the very beginning statement of the theme in C minor is in its 13 notes. In Messiaen’s use of number symbolism in the theme, he seems to allude the use of the number 13 to represent Jesus in some instances.

However, the most prevalent number that Messiaen uses throughout the movement is the number 33, which may relate to what many believe is the approximate age when Jesus died. The duration of the notes of the theme on the Positif, that is, in mm. 1-2, is 33 sixteenth notes. Perhaps the number symbolism on 33 may partially explain why Messiaen separates the last note of the theme on the Pédale, although moving the last note of the theme to the Pédale in m. 3 creates a strong accent and establishes the tonic key of C at the beginning of the movement, aside from supporting the first entrance of the toccata figurations on the manuals. I see another demonstration of the number 33 in all the significant numbers in the first

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43 Messiaen’s words in Rössler, Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen with Original Texts by the Composer, quoted in Wu, “Mystical Symbols of Faith” in Messiaen’s Language of Mystical Love, ed. Bruhn, 104.  
statement of the theme within the first three measures, but the procedure and reasoning is strongly arguable in theoretical terms: the total semitones of the three distinct intervals result in the numbers 3, 4 and 6 (major third, minor third and tritone), there are 7 notes in the first measure and 13 notes in the first theme statement; altogether these numbers total to 33 (3 + 4 + 6 + 7 + 13 = 33). Such a procedure may be seen as a play of numbers, which is not unusual with Messiaen. When he formulated a “communicable language” in his organ work, *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte Trinité* (1969), he demonstrates his fondness of playing with elements in music. He explains, “I have tried, for fun, and to revitalize my thinking, to find a type of musical communicable language.”45 There are many convincing demonstrations of the number 33 throughout the movement in later discussions in this chapter.

7.2.3 Form

Messiaen’s reversal in his use of the *sonata form* (see Appendix 6.1), in reference to the structure of the two parts of the *Combat de la mort et de la vie*, may coincide with his portrayal of Jesus’ transition from death to life, as opposed to the typical life of man on Earth, which leads to death. Messiaen’s sonata form starts with the modulating development in the first part and ends with the exposition of the complete theme in the principal key in the second part.46 Another reversal between the two main parts of the movement is in the key relations, where the modulating first part begins with a theme statement in C minor and the entire second part


is in the principal key of F-sharp major.⁴⁷ Although the key relationship of C and F♯ are structural in nature, the beginning C minor and the ending in F-sharp major is the opposite of what Messiaen himself believes in an augmented fourth-interval relations, in which the “F-sharp is endowed with an attraction toward the C, which becomes its normal resolution.”⁴⁸

The symbolic implications of Messiaen’s use of the distinct intervals in the theme, which are the major and minor thirds and tritone intervals, can also be seen in the large-scale tonal structure of the movement. Each dominant key relation in the movement relates to each distinct interval and compliments the characteristic representation of Jesus’ nature. In relation to the principal key of F-sharp major, the first statement of the theme in C minor at the beginning of the first part relates to the minor third interval, which I see as a representation of Jesus’ divinity, and the dominant C-sharp to the principal key of F-sharp major at the end of the first part relates to a major third interval, which I see as a representation of Jesus’ humanity. In the final cadence of the movement, Messiaen’s use of the substituted dominant of the principal key of F-sharp major with an augmented fourth interval on C and F♯, which is reinforced by the use of the complete notes of the C major scale within the measure, may symbolically point to Jesus as the Son, who is the third person of the Trinity.

7.3 Three Main Sections in the First Part

7.3.1 Theme Statements on the Positif

The movement begins with a monophonic statement of the theme in the lowest octave register on the Positif, then moves the last note to the lowest note on the Pédale. Messiaen associates the sounds in the lowest registers with the darkest of colors, which he describes in his own words as “toned down by black” (see Fig. 7.6).49 In fact, throughout the movement and the entire work, this is one of only two instances when Messiaen uses the lowest C on the Pédale; the other one is at the final cadence in this movement. In his personal copy of the score, Messiaen changed the tempo mark to Lent at the beginning of the first statement of the theme and also changed the registration to a solo Basson 16’.50 In the organ at La Trinité, the Basson 16’ stop on the Positif has some unusual qualities, especially in its extreme low register, which Gillock compares to “a moaning, sobbing human being.”51

![Figure 7.6 First theme statement and entrance of the toccata figurations, mm. 1-3.](image)

Certain aspects of the first statement of the theme seem to point to the beginning setting of Jesus’ passion story at Gethsemane. During his visit to Israel, Messiaen described

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49 Messiaen, Music and Color, 64.
50 Gillock, Messiaen’s Organ Music, 117.
51 Gillock, Messiaen’s Organ Music, 371-372.
“Gethsemane” as “the garden whose three-thousand-year-old olive trees witnessed the agony of Christ.”\textsuperscript{52} The monophonic statement in the lowest registers and on the Basson 16' stop strongly depicts Jesus praying alone in Gethsemane before He was crucified. His prayers that particular night may be among His most important and poignant prayers in His final decision to accept His Father’s will to save the world. John 6:38-40 records Jesus’ words: “I came down from heaven, not to do my own will, but . . . the will of my Father that sent me: that everyone . . . may have life everlasting.” Mark 14:33-34 describes Jesus thus: “he began to fear and to be heavy. And he saith to them [disciples]: My soul is sorrowful even unto death.”

One may object that the very unpleasant low and dark qualities of the theme in the first part are inappropriate for representing Jesus; however, this character reflects Jesus’ physical description, which Luke 22: 43-44 describes thus: “And being in an agony, he prayed the longer. And his sweat became as drops of blood, trickling down upon the ground.” In Isaiah 53:3-4, prophecy describes Jesus’ physical appearance in more details: “Despised, and the most abject of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with infirmity: and the look was as it were hidden and despised, whereupon we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borend our infirmities and carried our sorrows: and we have thought him as it were a leper, and as one struck by God and afflicted.”

The three thematic statements on the Positif in the first part of the movement may be said to symbolically represent Jesus praying three times in the Garden of Gethsemane. The progressive number of voices, from solo voice to two- and three-voice canons, may symbolically represent Jesus who communes with His father through His prayers. These three thematic

\textsuperscript{52} Messiaen, \textit{Music and Color}, 106.
statements are loud and may not be typical of prayers, yet they correspond to the description of Jesus’ prayers in Hebrews 5: 7, “with a strong cry and tears, offering up prayers and supplications to him.” The Gospels of Matthew and Mark describe Jesus addressing His Father in prayer that particular night:

he fell flat on the ground; and he prayed, that if it might be, the hour might pass from him. And he saith: Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee: remove this chalice from me; but not what I will, but what thou wilt.

Again the second time, he went and prayed, saying: My Father, if this chalice may not pass away, but I must drink it, thy will be done.

. . . and he prayed the third time, saying the selfsame word.53

Each toccata section may represent the “chalice” that Jesus mentions in His prayers to His Father. Jesus’ words to Peter on that same evening elaborate upon this notion. John 18: 10-11 describes how Peter tries to defend Jesus among the approaching crowd but was reprimanded by Jesus: “Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it, and struck the servant of the high priest, and cut off his right ear” but Jesus “said to Peter: Put up thy sword into the scabbard. The chalice which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it? Then the band and the tribune, and the servants of the Jews, took Jesus, and bound him.” The entrance of the first toccata section in m. 3 may symbolize Jesus’ third year of ministry on earth.

At the end of the three-voice canon, in mm. 31-32, descending chromatic scales and fragments lead the voices back to the lowest octave register on the Positif. These descending lines are like draping a cloud of gray to a change of scenery, as when Jesus rises from His third

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53 Mark 14: 34-36; Matthew 26:42-44 (DRC1752).
prayer and faces the coming events to His death. Messiaen himself might approve of this reading because he sees the twelve-note chromatic scale as gray.⁵⁴

7.3.2 Thematic Statements on the Pédale

The statement of the theme on the Pédale is very unusual in light of the French organ toccata tradition because it begins unaccompanied and the toccata figurations enter only at the end of the statement (see Fig. 7.7). One would presume that Messiaen would have a good reason to deviate from this tradition, in which moto perpetuum figurations typically come first and then accompany the theme on the pedals. I find it very convincing that Messiaen tries to portray the event when Jesus, who after praying the third time, approaches and speaks to his disciples. Mark 14:43-46 describes this event thus: “And while he was yet speaking, cometh Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve: and with him a great multitude with swords and staves, from the chief priests and the scribes and the ancients. . . . they laid hands on him, and held him.”

The third toccata section intensifies with the alternating toccata figurations on the Grand-Orgue, all three manual couplers engaged, and figurations extensively developed, which altogether strongly depicts the approaching great multitude of people. The placement of the theme on the Pédale in m. 33 may be one of Messiaen’s use of number symbolism to represent the age of Jesus when He died.

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Beginning in m. 40, a number of aberrations in the way Messiaen uses his technical language occurs. This is the only time that toccata figurations accompany the entire thematic passage on the *Pédale*, which Messiaen describes as: “On this bass ascent crashes a veritable flood of chords.”\(^{55}\) This passage has the longest series of chords that spans to almost three octaves from the highest to the lowest note, and also the only instance when both hands playing series of *clustered chords* (see Appendix 4.6) move in parallel direction. Although this passage consists of only thematic fragments on the *Pédale*, in his analysis of the form Messiaen designates it as a separate section, just as he did with the other complete statements of the theme.\(^{56}\) To further emphasize this moment in performance, Messiaen adds a fermata at the end of measure 39 and inserts a breath mark before m. 40 in his own copy of the score.\(^{57}\) The number 40 is a symbolic biblical number that refers to periods of testing, trial or judgment.\(^{58}\) Measures 40-41 may symbolize the moment when Pilate gives the verdict to crucify Jesus. Mark

\(^{55}\) Messiaen, *The Technique*, 1:35.  
\(^{56}\) Messiaen, *The Technique*, 1:41.  
\(^{58}\) Jesus had several significant 40-day periods: Matthew 4:2 tells how he fasted for 40 days; Mark 1:13 tells how he was tempted for 40 days; Acts 1:3 tells how he stayed on Earth for 40 days after the resurrection. One could easily recount many other references to the number 40 in the Scriptures, in both Old and New Testament.
15:15 describes this moment thus: “and so Pilate being willing to satisfy the people . . . delivered up Jesus, when he had scourged him, to be crucified.”

![Parallel Perfect Intervals from Trichords]

**Figure 7.8** Series of parallel perfect intervals in parallel chords, mm. 40-41.

The long series of parallel chords in mm. 40-41 result in a cascade of parallel perfect intervals (see Fig. 7.8). The series of perfect intervals between and on each hand may symbolize the religious leaders, which are mostly members of the Sanhedrin who have come together in agreement despite their opposing beliefs and lifestyles, in their attempt to accuse Jesus and are now more visibly and actively a part of the crowd. Luke 22:52-54, 66 records Jesus’ words to these religious groups of people when He was arrested:

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59 The Sanhedrin is the “Jewish high court of justice [that is] consisted of 71 men and was led by the high priest. The council could decide almost any fate of its people—except the death penalty, which was decided by the Romans.” William G. Johnsson, *Jesus of Nazareth: His Message, His Passion*, vol. 2 (Nampa ID: Biblical Research Institute, Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2015), 152.
And Jesus said to the chief priests, and magistrates of the temple, and the ancient, that were come unto him: Are ye come out, as it were against a thief, with swords and clubs? When I was daily with you in the temple, you did not stretch forth your hands against me: but this is your hour, and the power of darkness. And apprehending him, they led him to the high priest’s house. . . . And as soon as it was day, the ancients of the people, and the chief priests and scribes, came together; and they brought him into their council.

Mark 15: 1 describes the plot and actions against Jesus thus: “the chief priests holding a consultation with the ancients and the scribes and the whole council, binding Jesus, led him away, and delivered him to Pilate.”

Messiaen’s own color association with the long descending parallel chords helps to elucidate this passage. The notes in this passage realize all the notes of the fourth transposition of Mode 3 (see Appendix 1.3), with which Messiaen associates the colors “orange stripped [sic] with red, with a little blue.”60 I see the the resulting combination of these colors relate to the color of blood.61 Messiaen’s color association may be symbolic of Jesus’ blood that Pilate and the people refer to as in Matthew 27:23-26 describes thus: “they cried out the more, saying: Let him be crucified. And Pilate . . . before the people, saying: I am innocent of the blood of this just man; look you to it. And the whole people answering, said: His blood be upon us and upon our children. . . . and having scourged Jesus, delivered him unto them to be crucified.”

There are two fan-like movements immediately following the parallel series of chords in Mode 2 (see Appendix 1.2 and 1.6); and chords are alternating between the Positif and Grand-Orgue, instead of alternating between the Récit and Grand-Orgue as the previous figurations.

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60 Halbreich, Olivier Messiaen (Paris: Librarie Athene Fayard, Fondation SACEM, 1980), 139-141, quoted in Gillock, Messiaen’s Organ Music, 389.

61 The combination of orange and red produces a bright red color, and if mixed with a little blue results to dark red. The color of blood may vary between bright red, which is known as arterial blood, to dark red, as venous blood that is deoxygenated blood. Farlex Partner Medical Dictionary, Farlex, 2012, http://medicaldictionary.thefreedictionary.com/venous+blood (accessed May 23, 2015).
This is the only instance when Messiaen uses Mode 2 and the Positif manual for the toccata figurations. By using a different mode from the rest of the toccata figurations, which are all in Mode 3, and using the Positif manual for the figurations, where thematic statements at the beginning were stated, one must assume that Messiaen is making a very definite point. These two toccata passages are in the second and first transpositions of Mode 2, which Messiaen associates with the colors gold and brown, and blue and violet respectively.62 These two toccata passages may point to the time when the soldiers mock Jesus with a crown of thorns and a purple robe. John 19:2-3 describes this instance thus: “the soldiers platting [sic] a crown of thorns, put it upon his head; and they put on him a purple garment. And they came to him, and said: Hail, king of the Jews.” I see the colors gold and brown as symbolizing the crown of thorns, since most kingly crowns are made of gold and thorns are mostly brown in color; the colors blue and violet may symbolize the purple robe, since the color purple has the combination of the colors red and blue, which also makes violet. The use of the Positif manual adds to emphasize the passage with the mockery on Jesus himself.

The last fan-like movement following the toccata figurations in Mode 2 continues with the longest harmonic development (see Fig. 7.9). This passage in mm. 44-45 is on one manual and has seven varied groupings of clustered chords, which develops with recurring chords through the process of interversion and elimination (see Appendix 4.6, 5.1 and 5.4). These chords accompany the end of a melodic development on the Pédale where theme fragments develop through elimination. The convoluting harmonic development in this passage possibly portrays what Luke 23:27 and 33 describes about Jesus’ long walk to Calvary: “And there

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62 Halbreich, Messiaen, 139-141, quoted in Gillock, Messiaen’s Organ Music, 389.
followed him a great multitude of people, and of women, who bewailed and lamented him. . . .

And when they were come to the place which is called Calvary, they crucified him there.”

Figure 7.9 Ascending theme fragments and groupings of chords, mm. 44-45.

I strongly believe that the following three long-sustained clustered chords with trills and pedal oscillations, in mm. 46-48, portray the excruciating nails piercing through Jesus’ hands and feet as He was nailed to the cross (see Fig. 7.10).63 Though the Scriptures have accounts on Jesus’ pierced hands and feet, there are no accounts of how, specifically, he was nailed to the cross. But Psalm 22:16 prophesizes about Jesus’ crucifixion: “they pierce my hands and my feet.” Jesus’s hands and feet were nailed to the cross as Luke 24:39-40 describes: “Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ . . . Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! . . . he showed them his hands and feet.”

63 Though debatable, the number of nails pierced through Jesus’ hands and feet is commonly described as three.
Messiaen believes that “The cross is the supreme testimony of the love of God for us . . .

[through] the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the Son or the Word, incarnate in Jesus

Christ.”64 Crucifixion by itself is one of the most inhumane act of punishment.65 In his book,

Jesus of Nazareth, William G. Johnsson expounds that although crucifixion was a Roman

execution, Jesus’ cross “is more than a legal execution—it is a cross of rejection” and explains,

“physical suffering, though intense, were the least of Jesus’ woes. Acute mental and spiritual

anguish battered His being.”66 John 1:10-11 states about this rejection: “He was in the world,

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64 Messiaen, Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte Trinité, quoted in Gillock, Messiaen’s Organ Music, 220.
65 Johnsson writes that crucifixion was done in public where the person suffers a slow and agonizing death. Such
punishment was reserved “for the worst offenders.” William G. Johnsson, Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, vol. 1
66 Johnsson, Jesus of Nazareth, vol. 2, 166 and 168.
and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his
own received him not."

I see the three-measure passage in mm. 46-48 as the most horrific imagery that
Messiaen convincingly depicts in all of the *Combat de la mort et de la vie*. This passage involves
a dense network of symbolism that involves sensory, visual, aural, numerical and theoretical
imagery. One of the most powerful symbolism is when Messiaen ingeniously involves specific
sensory details to the organist in this passage by requiring a playing position that is awkward to
execute and is explicitly very symbolic of Jesus’ crucifixion. The fingers in each hand position
must be brought to a close point on long-sustained clustered chords with continuous trills in a
drilling manner. Simultaneously, the pedal oscillations involve both feet in a shivering manner.
In a way, the organist has to metaphorically experience the intensity of pain by involving both
hands and feet for a duration of 33 pedal oscillations. The duration of 33 by itself expresses the
use of number symbolism that points to Jesus.

Messiaen seems to symbolically share this deafening and terrifying experience in aural
terms with the audience in this passage as well, because hearing the pounding of the nails on
Jesus’ body would be a deafening torture. The organ registration in this passage uses all
foundations, reeds and mixture stops from all manual divisions coupled to the *Grand-Orgue* and
the *Pédale*. This specific passage is most intriguing to John Milsom as he writes, “the texture
thickens and the register rises, so more stops come into play. The climax is terrifying. To analyse
such music only in terms of the technical resources it uses — its modes and rhythms, for

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*Messiaen, Combat de la mort et de la vie*, 6.
example — is to risk underestimating the sheer physical impact of its accumulated noise and confusion.”

Considering the two main elements of music under consideration in the first part of the movement, I see the pedal oscillations as the merging of a thematic passage and the toccata figurations. This is the first time that the passage on the Pédale has sixteenth-notes like the toccata figurations, as if it were overpowering the theme. This passage with 33 pedal oscillations on three tritone intervals that descend to a minor third definitely exhibit the use of two distinct intervals of the theme and the number 33. In previous passages, modes are superposed (see Appendix 1-7) where thematic statement and fragments on the Pédale are in Mode 2 and the toccata figurations on the manuals are in Mode 3. The pedal oscillations realize both Modes 2 and 3 (see Fig. 7.11, in which dashed and dotted lines connect common notes or pitches, and isolated common notes are in boxes).

![Figure 7.11 Three mode transpositions in pedal oscillations in mm. 46-48.]

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In theoretical terms, the pitches represented in the pedal oscillations demonstrate the most intricate combination of mode transpositions in the movement. The six pitches in the pedal oscillations [A#, A, G, E, D# and C#] are in the first transposition of Mode 2 (as the first statement of the theme and all thematic passages in the second part are in the same first transposition), yet three of these notes are in the second transposition of Mode 3 and the other three are in the fourth transposition. What makes the combination so amazingly intricate is how Messiaen uses the remaining sequence of notes from the derived scale at the end of the last toccata section, in mm. 43-45, in the notes of the pedal oscillations, in mm. 46-48. Combining mode transpositions is Messiaen’s way of highlighting the passage, as he explains, “Combinations of the modes accentuate the richness of these color complexes.”69 The manner in which Messiaen uses both Modes 2 and 3 in this particular passage may symbolize Jesus’ full submission to His death on the cross, as Philippians 2:8 states, Jesus was “obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross.” 1 Peter 2:24 states the reason of Jesus’ death on the cross, thus: “Who his own self bore our sins in his body upon the tree: that we, being dead to sins, should live to justice.”

7.3.3 Theme Statement Divided Between Keyboards

I consider the divided statement of the theme, in mm. 49-50, as Messiaen’s deliberate treatment of the theme to depict the unjust death of Jesus (see Fig. 7.12). Messiaen points to this passage in his Technique and writes: “The theme is cut in two.”70 Clustered chords interrupt

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69 Halbreich, Olivier Messiaen, 139-141, quoted in Gillock, Messiaen’s Organ Music, 390.
70 Messiaen, The Technique, 1:41.
and crush the return of the theme on the manuals of the organ. These chords seem to recall the excruciating pain of the cross that powerfully throws the melodic line of the theme down to the low sounds on the Pédale. By cutting the theme in two between the manual and pedal keyboards with interruptions of clustered chords, I see this passage as symbolizing Jesus’ unjust death. Luke 23:14-15 records Pilate’s words to the religious leaders: “You have presented unto me this man, as one that perverted the people; and behold I, having examined him before you, find no cause in this man, in those things wherein you accuse him. No, nor Herod neither. For I sent you to him, and behold, nothing worthy of death is done to him.”

Figure 7.12. Interrupted Theme divided between two keyboards, mm. 49-50.

The interrupting chords recall the chords of the toccata figurations. These clustered chords (see Appendix 4.6) are seventh-chords, which are the same half-diminished and dominant seventh chords on each hand used in the alternating toccata figurations. Also, these chords are notated in four clusters and realize all notes of the third transposition of Mode 3 (see Appendix 1.3). In Acts 2:22-23, Peter tells about Jesus to the people in Jerusalem, “Jesus of Nazareth . . . [whom] you by the hands of wicked men have crucified and slain.” These interrupting chords may symbolize the Biblical idea from 2 Corinthians 5:15 that “Christ died for all” of humanity, considering the symbolism on the use of all the notes in Mode 3, recalling
chords in the toccata figurations, and the use of the number four. Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for the sins of all the people in the world, and 1 John 2: 1-2 states, “Jesus Christ the just: And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.” This passage begins with a dynamic marking of ffff, which is the loudest in the movement. The organ registration also compliments the Biblical idea of entirety with full foundations, mixtures and all chorus reed stops of the organ played on the Grand-Orgue, and all keyboard divisions and pedal couplers engaged.71

Messiaen develops the theme through elimination (see Appendix 5.1) in the following thematic fragments, in mm. 50-55, where he also demonstrates the death of the theme (see Fig. 7.13). The continuing thematic fragments on the Pédale descend on two distinct intervals of

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71 Messiaen, Les Corps glorieux, IV-Combat de la mort et de la vie, 6.
the theme: intervals of a tritone and minor third in mm. 50-52, then on minor thirds in mm. 53-54, and lastly they rest on a single note C♯ in m. 55. As he writes, each of these thematic fragments “borrow[s] its harmonies from the chords of resonance,” which has common highest C♯ notes on the manuals and lowest C♯ notes on the Pédale.72 These chords of resonance (see Appendix 4.4) seem to extend the deafening agony of the cross by the sheer volume and range of sound. The extreme pitch registers in these chords of resonance may be symbolic of the farthest distance between heaven and Earth and therefore may symbolize how Jesus came down from heaven to Earth, just as how in John 6:38, Jesus expresses that “I came down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him that sent me.”

The seven theme fragments on chords of resonance may symbolize what are commonly referred to as Jesus’ Seven Last Words on the cross.73 It is easy to see these fragments this way, because Messiaen himself describes them as “great fortissimo cries.”74 The multiple use of the number seven may symbolize the completion of Jesus’ life on Earth: seven instances of octaves and clustered chords in m. 49, seven measures dominated by statements of the theme in fragments in mm. 49-55, seven thematic fragments developed through elimination, and seven chords of resonance.

There is a very short theme fragment on the Pédale, in mm. 56-58, which follows immediately after the seven chords of resonance (see Fig.14). This theme fragment is

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72 Messiaen, The Technique, I: 35; II: 19-20, Exs. 122-123.
73 The Scriptures record seven phrases that Jesus said before he died: 1) Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do; 2) Amen I say to thee, this day thou shalt be with me in paradise; 3) Woman, behold thy son. After that, he saith to the disciple: Behold thy mother; 4) My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? 5) I thirst; 6) It is consummated; 7) Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit. Luke 23:34, 43; John 19:26-27; Mark 15:34; John 19:28, 30; Luke 23: 46 (DRC1752).
74 Messiaen, The Technique, 1:41.
monophonic, has superimposed distinct intervals of the theme, uses varied durational note values, and uses diminishing and abrupt changes in dynamics. I see this very last theme fragment as Jesus’ last breath, death and Resurrection. Jesus “gave up the ghost” or “breathed his last” after saying His last words on the cross.\textsuperscript{75} The short value on the note A, which is similar to the first statement of the theme in mm. 1-2, emphasizes the final melodic descent on a major third, which may symbolize Jesus’ death as a man. 1 Peter 3:18 describes Jesus thus: “being put to death indeed in the flesh.” The last thematic fragment in the first part of the movement descends on the longest and softest note of the theme so far, then abruptly swells to a \textit{ffff}. Messiaen specifically points to this last note as the “great silence that implies the death and Resurrection.”\textsuperscript{76}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{music.png}
\caption{Last theme fragment in first part, mm. 56-58.}
\end{figure}

Messiaen adds an eighth chord of resonance at the very end of the first part, which is also on the highest C\textsuperscript{#} note on the manual keyboard and on the lowest C\textsuperscript{#} note on the \textit{Pédale} (see Fig. 7.14). Adding this eighth chord of resonance is a very compelling demonstration of Messiaen’s symbolic use of the numbers seven and eight. He uses a similar treatment of the

\textsuperscript{75} Luke 23: 46 (DRC1752 and NIV).
\textsuperscript{76} Messiaen, \textit{Les Corps glorieux} (Ducretet Thomson jacket notes), quoted in Gillock, \textit{Messiaen’s Organ Music}, 115.
number eight in the *Quartet for the End of Time*, about which he writes that “seven is the perfect number, the Creation in six days sanctified by the divine Sabbath; the seventh day of this repose extends into eternity and becomes the eighth day of eternal light.” Jesus is triumphant over death, as it says in Revelation 1: 17-18: “I am the First and the Last, And Alive, and was dead, and behold I am living for ever and ever, and have the keys of death and of hell.” Jesus Christ’s perfect gift of salvation was through His death and His Resurrection, which leads to an everlasting life.

7.4 Two Main Sections in the Second Part

7.4.1 First Transformed Theme Statement

The second part begins with a statement very much like the theme in the first part of the movement with 13 notes and with the same exact melodic line; it is in the treble register on harmonic flute stops, resulting to a great contrast to statements of the theme in the first part, which are mostly in the bass registers and with reed stops. Regardless, instead of referring to this statement as a theme, Messiaen quotes it in his chapter on added notes in his *Technique* and refers to its melodic contour of nine notes as “an ‘embellishment group’ on the D-sharp” (see Fig. 7.15).

All the tonic F# chords throughout the second part has an *added sixth* on D#

(see Appendix 4.1).

![Figure 7.15 First theme statement in second part, mm. 59-61.](image)

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77 Messiaen, Preface to *Quatour pour la fin du Temps* in Rischin, *For the End of Time*, 129.
Messiaen points to a transformed theme in his descriptions on the second part of the movement, which I see as corresponding to his symbolic representation of a transformed person—a Resurrected Jesus Christ. In his commentaries, Messiaen refers to the first statement of the theme in the first part as a “*thème unique en ut mineur*” (unique theme in C minor) and the theme in the second part as “*sur le thème unique*” (on the unique theme). He provides seven specific features of the transformed theme: “[1] Grand phrase, [2] very slow, [3] very long, [4] on the unrivaled [unique] theme, [5] in the luminous key of F♯ major, [6] with the color of a ‘mode of limited transpositions’ and [7] the infinitely serene dialogue of two Flûtes of different qualities over the background of pianissimo Voix céleste.”

The ascending melodic phrase in mm. 65-66 manifests all seven of the features Messiaen specifies in his commentaries (see Fig. 7.16). This phrase has 21 notes, which makes it significantly longer than the previous theme statements of 13 notes; it is on the harmonic flute stop of the *Grand-Orgue* marked *mf*, which is in great contrast to the Bassoon 16’ stop of the first theme statement on the *Positif* marked *ff*; and the tempo mark indicates “*Extrêmement*”.

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lent, tender, serein” (extremely slow, tender, serene). There are three thematic fragments based on the theme in C minor: two sequential three-note fragments on the alternating third intervals, and a six-note fragment that transforms the phrase to a grand presentation with palindromic properties (indicated with dashed slurs in Fig. 7.16). With its beginning three notes on Bb-F♯-A, this statement of the transformed theme is in F♯ major.

Messiaen’s description of the transformed theme also includes the accompaniment and the following five measures. In the left hand and pedal accompaniment, there are two parallel ascending lines that realize each note of the first transposition of Mode 2; the other long-sustained notes in the left hand form a diminished seventh chord (see Fig. 7.17, in which the dashed line directs the ascending two notes in Mode 2). Messiaen must be referring to these two ascending lines in Mode 2 with his description, “with the color of a ‘mode of limited transpositions.’”

![Figure 7.17 Accompaniment to transformed theme, mm. 65-67.](image)

The following alternating melodic figurations on two harmonic flutes, which are on the Grand-Orgue and the Positif manuals in mm. 67-71, have common and voice exchange notes with the transformed theme statement (see Fig. 7.18, in which the dashed lines connect

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common notes). Messiaen’s description of “infinitely serene dialogue of two Flûtes of different qualities over the background of pianissimo Voix céleste” definitely refers to the passages following the transformed theme.\textsuperscript{83} The left-hand accompaniment on the \textit{Récit} to these figurations are on Gambe and Voix celeste on Messiaen's personal copy of the score, and on Unda maris and Salicional and the published score.\textsuperscript{84} At the beginning of the transformed theme in m. 65, the pedal note C in the accompaniment supports its first note on B\textsuperscript{♭} and both of these notes are in voice exchange with the first notes in the alternating melodic figure in m. 67, which begins on a high note C with a bass note on B\textsuperscript{♭}; the alternating figuration in m. 71 ends on B\textsuperscript{♭} with a bass note on C. Altogether, the transformed theme and these following alternating figurations total seven measures, mm. 65-71.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure7.18.png}
\caption{Common and voice-exchange notes in mm. 65, 67, and 71.}
\end{figure}

\subsection*{7.4.2 Second Transformed Theme Statement}

Since the second part of the movement is in binary form, the second section has another transformed theme statement, which is very similar to the one in the first section. This

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{83} Messiaen, \textit{Les Corps glorieux} (Ducretet Thomson jacket notes), quoted in Gillock, \textit{Messiaen’s Organ Music}, 115. Gillock’s translation of "unrivaled theme" to Messiaen's "themè unique" is misleading.
\item \textsuperscript{84} Gillock, \textit{Messiaen’s Organ Music}, 121; Messiaen, \textit{Les Corps glorieux: IV-Combat de la mort et de la vie}, 7.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
second transformed theme in mm. 82-84 is even longer; in fact with its 33 notes that ascend to
the highest F# note on the manual keyboard of the organ, it is the longest melodic line in all the
movement (see Fig. 7.19, in which dashed slurs connect common notes in palindrome).
However, it is quite puzzling to see a complete representation of 33 notes in the second
transformed theme divided between two manuals of the organ, where the first 12 notes are on
the Positif and the last 21 notes are on the Grand-Orgue.

![Figure 7.19 Second transformed theme, mm. 82-84.](image)

In the second transformed theme, the last 21 notes is very much like the first
transformed theme in mm. 65-66, which is also on the Grand-Orgue but transposed a minor
twothird higher (see Fig. 7.20). In reference to the beginning 12 notes on the Positif, I see a parallel
relation with the first statement of the theme in mm. 1-4 where it has also 12 notes on the
same manual of the organ. The use of eight-note and four-note fragments seem to recall the
series of thematic fragments on the Pédale in mm. 40-45. The divisions of notes between 12
and 21 notes, which totals to 33 notes, may partially explain why the last note of the first
theme statement in mm. 1-4 is down on the Pédale, and why the second transformed theme in
mm. 82-84 is divided between two keyboards. The number of notes, which divides between 12
and 21, also demonstrate reversed symmetry.
Messiaen's use of two transformed theme statements corresponds to having a binary form in the second part of the movement. In his *Technique*, his description strongly suggests a climactic second section, as he writes in his own words, “A large binary sentence . . . in which one hears at last, in a state of repose, the principal key, F-sharp major, and especially the complete theme from which the sentence is issued.”

I see the second transformed theme of 33 notes with the highest melodic note on the highest F# on the manual keyboard as the complete theme that Messiaen refers to in his description to the second part of the movement.

7.4.3 First Section

The first section begins with two embellishment groups instead of the statement of the transformed theme, which enters seven measures later in mm. 65-66. Messiaen’s reference to the beginning statement as an embellishment group instead of a theme coincides with the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ Resurrection story. Luke 24:1-3 describes this story thus: “And on the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they came to the sepulchre. And they found the stone rolled back from the sepulchre. And going in, they found not the body of the Lord

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Jesus.”86 The two embellishment groups in mm. 59-64 may symbolize the unexpected two angels at the tomb instead of Jesus, which John 20:11-12 describes thus: “Mary stood at the sepulchre . . . And she saw two angels in white, sitting, one at the head, and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been laid.” Matthew 28:5-6 relate what the angels told the women, “Fear not you; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he is risen, as he said.” Matthew 28:8-9 continues to relate the story thus: “they went out quickly from the sepulchre with fear and great joy . . . And behold Jesus met them.”

![Figure 7.21 Descending long phrase, mm. 69-70.](image)

Among the following alternating figurations is a long descending phrase, in mm. 69-70, which manifests several contrasting elements from the transformed theme (see Fig. 7.21, in which dashed slurs connect common notes in palindrome). Although it has distinct intervals of the theme and palindromic properties, it presents seven contrasting elements: (1) it descends, (2) it begins and ends on the reverse beginning and ending notes, (3) it has 13 notes as the first theme statement, (4) it has a palindrome with perfect fourth intervals, (5) it contains notes in the second transposition of Mode 2, (6) the central notes in the palindrome form a first-inversion major triad instead of a diminished triad, and (7) it uses seventh chords that account for all four transpositions of Mode 3 in the accompaniment, recalling the chords and mode that

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Messiaen uses in the toccata figurations (see Fig. 7.22, in which arrows within brackets point to the chords in the mode transposition).

Figure 7.22 Accompaniment in Mode 3 with notes of the C major scale, mm. 69-71.

The long descending phrase, in mm. 69-70, might be said to portray Jesus, who walked with two men on their way to Emmaus on the same day of His Resurrection. The seven contrasting elements of the long descending phrase correspond to the Gospel’s description of Jesus’ appearance in a different (resurrected) form. Luke 24:15-16 describes this difference thus: “Jesus himself also drawing near, went with them. But their eyes were held, that they should not know him.” Similarly, Mark 16:12 states that Jesus “appeared in another shape.” I see Messiaen’s use of the second transposition of Mode 2 in the notes of the palindrome as a reminder of Jesus’ death, since the thematic statements at the end of the first part are in that mode transposition. Woven within the seventh chords in the accompaniment are the notes of a descending C major scale (see Fig. 7.21, in which letter of the notes in the C major scale are written below the chords). Messiaen associates a chord with all the notes of the C major scale as a white chord.\(^8\) The descending notes of the C major scale may compliment the concept of the contrasting phrase and may be like draping a white covering to conceal Jesus’ identity.

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\(^8\) Olivier Messiaen, *Traité*, vol. 1, 357, quoted in Joseph Edward Harris, “*Musique Coloreé*: Synesthetic Correspondence in the Works of Olivier Messiaen” (PhD diss., The University of Iowa, 2004, ProQuest Order No. 3129298), 58.
Messiaen’s representation of the Gospel story of Jesus may also include other related aspects of Jesus’ ministry on Earth. Messiaen explains that "Generally speaking, I’ve allowed my thoughts to revolve around a specific subject . . . but above all in the Holy Scriptures. I’ve tried to find everything which has to do with the subject I’ve chosen and then have tried to translate it into music.”

Although Jesus proved himself alive after His Resurrection, Messiaen acknowledges in his commentaries about the *Combat de la mort et de la vie* that after Jesus’ Resurrection "we know only the following . . . [there are] multiple appearances of the resurrected Jesus in different places." Acts 1:3 states that Jesus “shewed himself alive after his passion, by many proofs, for forty days appearing to them, and speaking of the kingdom of God.” 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 mentions some of the people who had seen Jesus after He rose from the dead: “he was buried, and that he rose again the third day . . . And that he was seen by Cephas [Peter]; and after that by the eleven. Then he was seen by more than five hundred brethren at once . . . he was seen by James, then by all the apostles.”

The remaining seven measures in the first section, mm. 72-78, may represent the time Jesus spent with His followers after His Resurrection and before His Ascension. The measure number 72 may suggest the time earlier in Jesus’ ministry when He appointed 72 people other than his disciples to be his representatives. The seventy-two people are described in Luke 10:1: “the Lord appointed also other seventy-two: and he sent them two and two before his face in every city and place wither he himself was to come.” Alternating short figurations in mm. 72-78

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90 In John 1:42, Jesus’ calls his disciple Peter as Cephas.
are mostly two black-note pairs, C®-D® and G®-A® (excluding the tonic note F®), which may symbolize the two-by-two pairings of Jesus’ followers, and the 11-note phrase may represent His 11 remaining disciples (see Fig. 7.23, in which black-note pairs are in brackets, and arrows indicate pairs that are separated).

![Figure 7.23 Alternating figurations on black-notes and 11-note phrase, mm. 72-78.](image)

This first section of the second part ends with a chord that realizes the notes of a whole-tone scale, in m. 78 (Fig. 7.24). Messiaen assigns the whole tone scale as his Mode 1 (see Appendix 1.1), which has three tritone intervals within its scope. Considering the symbolic use of the tritone interval in reference to the mysteries of the Trinity with three persons of the Godhead, this chord may represent Jesus’ last words to his disciples, known as the Great Commission. Matthew 28:19 records Jesus’ words to His disciples: “Going therefore, teach ye all nations; baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.”

![Figure 7.24 Transition chords between the two sections, mm. 78-79.](image)

There are two transitional chords in m. 78 between the chord on a whole-tone scale at the end of the first section and the beginning tonic chord in the second section (see Fig. 7.24).
Superimposed within the notes of the transitional chords are the three distinct intervals of the theme (see Fig. 7.25, in which dashed slurs connect common notes). This succession of three chords may be said to depict Jesus’ Ascension, which Luke 24:50-51 describes thus: “and lifting up his hands, he blessed them. And it came to pass, whilst he blessed them, he departed from them, and was carried up to heaven.” Messiaen writes that “the exaltation of Christ, begun on the cross and continued through the Resurrection, is not complete until the day of Ascension. This glory . . . has already been obtained, through the union of humanity and deity in the unique person of Christ.”91 Together with the notes of the F# major chord in the second section, which has an added sixth note, these two transitional chords realize all the twelve notes of the chromatic scale. Messiaen wrote about such instances when “Sometimes I’ve used successions of chords in which the twelve tones are heard . . . it is their arrangement that places one note or another in the spotlight and changes the color.”92 The change of color may compliment the idea of two different settings between the first and second sections in the second part of the movement.

Figure 7.25 Superimposed distinct intervals within the transitional chords in mm. 78-79.

91 Messiaen, L’Ascension & Le Banquet celeste (Ducretet Thomson jacket notes), quoted in Gillock, Messiaen’s Organ Music, 38.
92 Messiaen, Music and Color, 49.
7.4.4 Second Section

Messiaen’s reference to the psalms may particularly pertain to the second section of the binary sentence, and not necessarily to both sections. He writes in his commentary about the *Combat de la mort et de la vie* that “It represents the most important, the most moving, [and] the most secretive moment of the life of Christ. This moment is not related in the Gospels . . . but [to] Psalm 138.”93 Psalm 138 expounds three main attributes of God that are known by these theological terms: Omnipotence, Omnipresence, and Omniscience, which respectively mean that God is all-powerful, God is everywhere, and God knows everything.94 Messiaen’s own quotation above relates directly to these three attributes of God: “most important” refers to God’s omnipotence, “most moving” refers to God’s omnipresence, and “most secretive” refers to God’s omniscience. I therefore seek to find the relevance of these three aspects in relation to the music elements that Messiaen demonstrates in the second section of the binary sentence.

The palindromic design of the notes in the two transformed theme statements may symbolize the power of the Resurrected Jesus’ that transcends through eternity, since Messiaen sees the nonretrogradable design as a symbol of eternity.95 Messiaen also associates eternity with God and His power: “eternity is God himself. Eternity is indivisible like God is indivisible. . . . Eternity is to affirm the existence of God.”96 Messiaen sees that integrating his nonretrogradable ideas may somehow demonstrate God’s power, as plainly seen in nature, in

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the symmetry of our body parts, and in our lives that we live. The following words, though in
reference to rhythm, explain Messiaen’s nonretrogradable views:

our face with its two symmetrical eyes, two symmetrical ears, and nose in the middle;
our opposite hands with their opposed thumbs;
our two arms, and the metrical branchings.
These are nonretrogradable rhythms.
A final symbol—this moment which I live, this thought which crosses my mind,
this movement which I accomplish, this time which I beat,
before and after lies eternity: it’s a nonretrogradable rhythm.”

The words in Psalm 138:13-16 refers to the wonders of the human body and human life that
describes the extent of God’s power in a most magnificent way:

    For thou hast possessed my reins,
thou hast protected me from my mother’s womb.
I will praise thee, for thou art fearfully magnified:
        wonderful are thy works, and my soul knoweth right well.
My bone is not hidden from thee, which thou hast made in secret:
        and my substance in the lower parts of the earth.
Thy eyes did see my imperfect being, and in thy book all shall be written:
days shall be formed, and no one in them.

    In his commentaries, Messiaen adds these descriptive words that may specifically point
to the second transformed theme statement: “we have described in advance this sublime
instant when Jesus rises, living, luminous, first-born among the dead, and, in the sunny peace of
his resurrection addresses this testimony of love to his Father: ‘I am again with you.’” The
second transformed theme, in mm. 82-84, rises to the highest F# on its last note on the Grand-
Orgue, which is the highest melodic note in the movement (see Fig. 7.26, in which dashed slurs
connect common notes in palindrome). This statement may symbolically illuminate a risen
Jesus Christ in all His splendor because Messiaen refers to the key of F# major as the luminous

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97 Messiaen, Music and Color, 77.
98 Messiaen, Les Corps glorieux (Ducretet Thomson jacket notes), quoted in Gillock, Messiaen’s Organ Music, 115.
key and he associates the note F♯ with crystal, which “causes other colors to sparkle, often resulting in gem-like quality.”99 Its 33 notes realize all the notes of the first transposition of Mode 2 (see Appendix 1.2), a feature that clearly points to the years Jesus lived on Earth. Messiaen associates Mode 2 to the colors blue and violet, which in the context of a discussion about symbolism in the Middle Ages, represent either the Love of Truth or the Truth of Love.100 With two accompanying lines to the second transformed theme that realize all the notes of the first transposition of Mode 2, altogether these three ascending lines may address the complete and harmonious testimony of Divine Love of the Trinity through eternity.

The palindromic properties in the melodic domain demonstrate Messiaen’s regard for the supremacy of melody among the other basic elements of music.101 He writes, “we shall seek at first to make melody ‘speak.’ The melody is the point of departure. May it remain sovereign! And whatever may be the complexities of our rhythms and our harmonies, they . . . shall obey it as faithful servants.”102 Messiaen believes that in the history of music in Western civilization, melody appears first, and harmony, timbre and rhythm follows thereafter.103 Though Messiaen

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100 Halbreich, Messiaen, 139-141, quoted in Gillock, Messiaen’s Organ Music, 389; Samuel, Conversations with Olivier Messiaen, 20.


103 Messiaen, Music and Color, 54.
focuses more on rhythmic elements in his later works, he writes, “let us not forget that music is
first Melody.”

It is easy to see the expansion of the second transformed theme as Messiaen's way of
demonstrating Jesus’ “most moving” omnipresence and perhaps his interpretation of Psalm
138:18 thus: “I will number them, and they shall be multiplied above the sand: I rose up and am
still with thee.” The second transformed has 33 notes, which extends to a long melodic line that
ascends to the highest octave register on the keyboard manual of the organ through multiple
thematic fragments and its palindromic properties.

Messiaen’s use of the tritone interval throughout the movement in different levels may
represent the omnipresent attribute of the theme in reference to the verses in Psalm 138:7-12:

Wither shall I go from thy spirit? or wither shall I flee from thy face?
If I ascend into heaven, thou art there: if I descend into hell, thou art present.
If I take my wings early in the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea:
Even there also shall thy hand lead me: and thy right hand shall hold me.
And I said: Perhaps darkness shall cover me: and night shall be my light in my pleasures.
But darkness shall not be dark to thee, and night shall be light as day:
the darkness thereof, and the light thereof are alike to thee.

The tritone interval is present from the smallest detail of an interval within the theme to the
key structure of the movement, and most specifically between the pitches C and F#. In the first
statement of the theme, in mm. 1-4, Messiaen places the notes C and F♯ in the first measure
and reinforces the significance of the tritone interval by the descent from the shortest and
center note of the theme on A to E♭. In the second transformed theme, the palindrome centers
on A, which is in the middle of a tritone interval on F♯ and C (see Fig. 7.26). For a broader
perspective on the range of the theme, I consider all the thematic statements in the movement

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104 Messiaen, Traité 1, trans. Baggech, S1.
and sees the significance of a tritone interval on the pitches C and F#, in reference to the lowest to the highest notes of the theme. In the first part of the movement, the last note of the first theme statement in mm. 1-4 reaches down to the lowest note on the Pédale on C, and in great contrast the last note of the second transformed theme in the second part reaches to the highest F# note on the Grand-Orgue. In the structural level, the first part begins with a theme statement in C minor, and the second part is in the principal key of F-sharp major.

The long phrase in mm. 87-89 corresponds with the second transformed theme, which demonstrates the tritone relationship on C - F# between its beginning and ending notes (see Fig. 7.27, in which dashed slurs connect common notes). This long phrase begins on B#, ascend to the highest F# on the manual keyboard, then descends to two octaves below on another F#; notes in this long phrase basically outlines the notes of the F-sharp major triad with an added sixth note on D# and is in the first transposition of Mode 2. However, there are other notes that belong to either the second or third transpositions of Mode 2 (D, E#, G#), which form a diminished triad. The use of these other notes may symbolize the statements of the theme in the first part that are in the same transpositions, which may serve as a memory of Jesus’ death.

![Figure 7.27 Intervals and palindromic properties in long contrasting phrase, mm. 87-89.](image)

In the final cadence at the end of the movement, the notes C and F# are present in both vertical and horizontal directions: between the F# on the melody with a bass note on C, and the
same bass notes on C to its final resolution on the tonic bass note on F♯ (see Fig. 7.28). The note C on the Pédale is the only second instance of this lowest note in the entire Les Corps glorieux, which may be a symbolic reminder of Jesus’ presence from the depths of the Earth into heaven above.

![Figure 7.28 Tritone intervals at the end of the movement, mm. 98-100.](image)

Psalm 138 tells about the thoroughness of God’s knowledge or His omniscience attribute, which leads me to explore Messiaen’s use of number symbolism in the movement since awareness of significant numbers and their implications for Messiaen’s theological views requires critical analysis, logical thinking, meticulous computations, and discerning interpretation. The verses in Psalm 138:1-6 express:

Lord, thou hast proved me, and known me:
thou hast known my sitting down, and my rising up.
Thou hast understood my thoughts afar off:
my path and my line thou hast searched out.
And thou hast foreseen all my ways: for there is no speech in my tongue.
Behold, O Lord, thou hast known all things, the last and those of old:
thou hast formed me, and hast laid thy hand upon me.
Thy knowledge is become wonderful to me: it is high, and I cannot reach it.

I see Messiaen’s use of number symbolism in his use of: intervals, number of notes, duration, and measure numbers. The most significant numbers in the movement are: 3, 4, 7,
13, 33 and 100, of which the numbers 33 and 100 are mostly representations from collective passages; there are specific symbolic numbers: 40, 72 and 144. Messiaen also integrates his fondness in symmetry and use of prime numbers since both of which he associates with God’s power.105

Among the more obvious use of the number 33 that may symbolically refer to Jesus’ life are: the theme statement on the *Pédale* in m. 33, the 33 pedal oscillations, and the 33 notes of the second transformed theme. In addition to beginning the first statement of the theme on the *Pédale* in m. 33, the following thematic fragments continue to reiterate the number 33: notes of the theme in D minor together with the three following eight-note fragments in mm. 40-43 total 33, the four-note and two-note fragments in mm. 43-45 total 33 notes, and this passage leads to the 33 pedal oscillations in mm. 46-48 (see Fig. 7.29).

*Figure 7.29* Three demonstrations of 33s on the *Pédale*, mm. 33-48.

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There is yet another prominent demonstration of the number 33 at the very beginning and ending of the movement in the duration of note values of melodic lines in the first transposition of Mode 2. As discussed earlier in the identifying features of the theme (see Chapter 7.2.2), the duration of the notes on the *Positif* in the first statement of the theme in mm. 1-2 is 33 sixteenth notes. Similarly and also on the *Positif*, the duration of the last melodic ascent in mm. 98-100 is 33 eighth notes (see Fig. 7.30). The total duration of this melodic ascent is 36, but when one subtracts the value of the E♯, which is 3, the result is a duration of 33 eighth-notes (36 – 3 = 33). All the notes in this melodic ascent belong to the first transposition of Mode 2 except for the note E♯, which is the note that gives the strongest tonal impression to the key of F-sharp major; in reference to the distinct intervals of the theme, E♯ is the note that is a major third above C♯.

![Figure 7.30 Duration of the last melodic ascent, mm. 98-100.](image)

The second transformed theme also demonstrates 33 notes, and the first transformed theme would also demonstrate a total of 33 notes when placed together in relation to the first statement of the theme with its 12 notes on the *Positif* (see Chapter 7.4.1 and Fig. 7.20). The first representations of the theme in each part of the movement, in mm. 1-2 and 65-66, total to four measures, and the second transformed theme that patterns this representation in its division of its notes between two manuals has a total of three measures. I see the use of the numbers three and four in the number of measures as symbolic of Jesus’ human and divine nature. This demonstration also reinforces the idea of Jesus’ Resurrected life on earth in the
first section of the second part, then in heaven in the second section. The division of 33 notes
within the statements of the theme demonstrates a simple inversion of numbers when placed
side by side and demonstrates Messiaen’s fondness of symmetry and as well as his play of the
numbers one, two and three: \(12 + 21 = 33\); \((1+2=3)\) and \((2+1=3)\).

Messiaen’s use of the number 100, which is the first three-digit round number, may
associate to his concept of completeness. He seems to demonstrate relationships between
separate phrases by his use of a total number 100. This concept of completeness in his use of
the number 100 may illustrate Jesus’s parable of the Lost Sheep, in which Jesus refers to an
incomplete number of 99 with the missing one lost sheep. Luke 15:4 states: “What man of you
that hath an hundred sheep: and if he shall lose one of them, doth he not leave the ninety-nine
in the desert, and go after that which was lost, until he find it?”

The number of notes of significant theme statements in the two parts of the movement
total to 100. The theme in C minor has 13 notes (mm. 1-4); theme in D minor together with the
three ascending eight-note fragments has 33 notes (mm. 33-43); first transformed theme in F-
sharp major has 21 notes (mm. 65-66); and the second transformed theme has 33 notes (mm.
82-84); or \((13 + 33 + 21 + 33 = 100)\). The sum of 100 thematic notes may reinforce the idea of
Messiaen’s choice to use only one theme throughout the movement; though with many
statements, its total of 100 notes may refer to only one person who is Jesus.

The duration of the notes at the end of the first part, which may represent Jesus’ last
words, breath, death and Resurrection, totals to 100 sixteenth notes (see Fig. 7.31). Messiaen
describes the entire passage collectively as the “last element of development in an understood
dominant pedal in F-sharp major.”106 All the notes in these fragments belong to the first transposition of Mode 2, except for the note E## in m. 56 on the last melodic descent, which is a major third above the last note on C#. Although the total duration of these theme fragments is 108 sixteenth-notes, when one subtracts the value of the note E##, which is 8, the result is a total duration of 100 sixteenth notes (108 – 8 = 100). The collective representation in the duration of these notes may refer to the completeness of Jesus’ triumph over death.

![Figure 7.31 Duration of the thematic fragments on the Pédale, mm. 50-58.](image)

Yet another demonstration of a total duration of 100 sixteenth-notes are between the phrases of the first transformed theme and its contrasting descending phrase. The first transformed theme has a duration of 52 sixteenth-notes and the contrasting long phrase has 48 sixteenth-notes, when added together total to 100 sixteenth-notes. The use of a duration of 100 sixteenth-notes in both instances strongly affirms the complimentary relationship of these two phrases in referring to the same Resurrected Jesus (see Fig. 7.32).

![Figure 7.32 Duration of two contrasting thematic phrases, mm. 65-66 and 69-70.](image)

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Messiaen’s most obvious use of the number 100 to demonstrate completeness is in the total number of measures in the movement. He evidently shows his measure divisions as a part of his musical expression, as in the earlier discussions in reference to mm. 3, 33, 40 and 72 in relation to their respective theological representations. One may then ask, is there a significance in the division of measures between the first and second parts, and between the first and second sections within the binary form of the second section? With a total length of 100 measures, it would be reasonable to expect Messiaen to have divided the movement proportionally between its two parts at m. 50. But instead m. 50 corresponds with the theme statement’s split between two manuals and where Messiaen describes as “cut in two.”

There is a representation of a very large number in the movement that may point to Jesus as the Lamb of God. The sum of all the notes from melodic phrases in the second part, which relates to Jesus’ life, and adding the last note of the first part that represents Jesus’ Resurrection result to 158 (see Table 7.1). However, when one subtracts notes that do not belong to the first transposition of Mode 2, which is 14, results to 144 (158 – 14 = 144). The number 144 compels me to refer to the symbolic number of 144,000 in the book of Revelation, which is the last book in the Scriptures. Revelation 14: 14:1 speaks about the Lamb who is Jesus Christ and a chosen 144,000 and describes thus: “And I beheld, and lo a lamb stood upon mount Sion, and with him an hundred forty-four thousand, having his name, and the name of the Father, written on their foreheads.” John 1:29 records John the Baptist’s words upon seeing Jesus for the first time: “Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who taketh away the sin of the

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107 Messiaen, The Technique, 1:41.
world.” In his book, *Plain Revelation*, Ranko Stefanovic writes that the number 144,000 “is symbolic, denoting the totality of God’s end-time people.”¹⁰⁸

Table 7.1

*Melodic Phrases on Jesus’ Resurrected Life, mm. 57-100.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure numbers</th>
<th>Number of Notes</th>
<th>Notes that are not in Mode 2-first transposition</th>
<th>Description of Phrases</th>
<th>Theological Representation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>57-58</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>last note in first part</td>
<td>Jesus’ Resurrection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59-64</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>embellishment groups on D#</td>
<td>Angels at the tomb</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65-66</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>transformed theme</td>
<td>Resurrected Jesus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69-70</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3 (G#)</td>
<td>contrasting long phrase</td>
<td>Jesus in different form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74-76</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2 (E#, G#)</td>
<td>shorter phrase</td>
<td>Jesus’ disciples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79-81</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>embellishment group on D#</td>
<td>after Jesus’ Ascension</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>82-84</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>second transformed theme</td>
<td>ascended Jesus in heaven</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>87-89</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>6 (G#, D, E#)</td>
<td>contrasting long phrase</td>
<td>remembrance of Jesus’ life on Earth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>93-95</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2 (D)</td>
<td>short phrase</td>
<td>remembrance of Jesus’ disciples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>98-100</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1 (E#)</td>
<td>last melodic ascent</td>
<td>Jesus to Eternity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL:</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>158 – 14 notes = 144</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>144 total notes in Mode 2-first transposition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The theological truth about Jesus Christ who saves the world is at the center of Messiaen’s Catholic faith. The Passion and Resurrection of Jesus are among Messiaen’s most revered truths in the Scriptures, as he expresses his desire for this theme for the only opera he intended write. However, he feels unworthy to portray Jesus in an opera setting and also considers the limitations of the stage.¹⁰⁹ When Messiaen was asked about symbolic conventions, what he expresses may relate to his understanding of the verses in Psalm 138:

> Christ appeared in order to lead us from the visible to love of the invisible. Christ the man can be represented, not Christ the God. God is not representable. He is not even expressible. . . . “God is eternal” signifies not only that he will never end, but that he


never had a beginning. Here is where temporal notions of “before” and “after” encumber us. To conceive of something without a beginning absolutely overwhelms us, we who have begun, first, in our mother’s womb, then in our earthly life. The same goes for other divine attributes.

. . . I’m not a theorist—only a believer, a believer dazzled by the infinity of God!110

Messiaen’s personal sentiment in his written defense to the Parisian critics about his Les Corps glorieux may relate to his understanding of the last two verses in Psalm 138:

“The qualities of Les Corps glorieux . . . was intended to bring me nearer to Him who is beyond space and time. And even if my music . . . even if my life is far, very far from the Divine Love that I adore, I nonetheless imbued my notes with a little celestial tenderness. I did that in my bitterness, in my unworthiness.”111

In the last three measures at the end of the movement, the use of the harmonic flute stop of the organ, the return of the melody on the Positif manual with the softest dynamic markings, and the theological symbolism—in relation to specific notes, range and duration of notes, use and placement of distinct intervals, number of measures and division within the measure numbers, mode and key—altogether seem to reflect on Psalm 138: 23-24: “Prove me, O God, and know my heart: examine me, and know my paths. And see if there be in me the way of iniquity: and lead me in the eternal way.”

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110 Messiaen, Music and Color, 28.
111 Messiaen, “‘Querelle de la musique et de l’amour”, quoted in Hill and Simeone, Messiaen, 153.
CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

Learning Messiaen’s technical language and understanding how he portrays his theology in his music is astounding but seems inexhaustible. It is my hope that the technical and theological analyses in this dissertation can give a better understanding of the *Combat de la mort et de la vie* and a different perspective on Messiaen’s musical language. This intensive research, analysis, and theological interpretation may hold the key to a better understanding of the entire cycle of *Les Corps glorieux* in terms of both its technical and its theological aspects.

Messiaen has a number of works inspired by a common subject, such as those about Jesus or the Trinity. I see that a comparative study of the themes that Messiaen used within these works may give a better understanding of his melodic traits. He often provides commentaries for each of his theologically-inspired works that links specific musical elements and melodic lines with their corresponding theological representations. Other elements such as intervals, numbers of notes, duration, or specific organ stops, may have similar significance and representations that may possibly relate to his theological views in relation to the work.

There may be some yet-unexplored theological correlations between some significant works of Messiaen. For example, *Les Corps glorieux’s* seven movements and the *Quatour pour la fin du Temps*’ eight movements might relate to Messiaen’s own belief in the symbolism of the numbers seven and eight, and especially considering the close proximity in the composition dates between *Les Corps glorieux* of 1939 (which he composed right before serving in the war) and *Quatour pour la fin du Temps* in 1940-41 (which he composed while in captivity during the
war)—and also their close proximity in publication (both were published in 1942 within two weeks).112

The *Combat de la mort et de la vie* is the heart of *Les Corps glorieux*. It is an intricate musical and theological artwork in which Messiaen portrays the greatest and most complex of all drama—the story of Jesus Christ’s Passion and Resurrection, which is clearly the battle between His death and life. The power of its imposing harmonies gives the loudest sounds and densest colors, which may take us to the darkest and lowest depths our minds could imagine of the cruelest act of humankind. Its melodic lines may lead us to think beyond the horizon of this world, from the solemnity of a single note to the enthralling ascent of its melody. The union of melody and harmony may transport our vision of eternity with sparkling colors to lift our spirits to the everlasting embrace of Divine Love. Listening, performing, or studying the *Combat de la mort et de la vie* with the knowledge of the details of its story and the symbolism of its musical elements may bring Messiaen’s music to life, may inspire our imagination to explore a world without end, and may even convince us to believe in the Christian truths that Messiaen conveys in this work.

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APPENDIX

Annotated Glossary of Messiaen’s Musical Language

1  MESSIAEN’S MODES

1.1  Seven Modes of Limited Transpositions

There are seven Modes of Limited Transpositions (see Fig. A.1). Each of these modes is transposable only a limited number of times. Within the twelve notes of the chromatic scale, each mode forms symmetrical groups that are equally divided within the octave. The first transposition always begins and ends on the note C, and the last note in a group is the beginning in the next group. Use of these modes can either be melodically or harmonically, within one tonality or in polytonality, and the composer is free to give preference to his chosen tonality.\(^1\)

Among these seven modes, Messiaen uses Mode 2 the most frequently, and next are Modes 3, 4 and 6; he seldom uses Modes 1, 5 and 7.\(^2\) In his color association, transposition of notes by an octave produces the same colors, although the shade is lighter and leans toward the color white in the higher registers, and shade is darker and leans toward black in the lower registers.\(^3\) Combining modes together accentuates the colors.\(^4\)

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\(^1\) Messiaen, *The Technique*, 1:58.
\(^3\) Messiaen, *Music and Color*, 64.
1.2 Mode 2 Transpositions and Color Associations

Mode 2 is also known as the octatonic scale. It is transposable only three times as the diminished seventh chords. In each transposition are four symmetrical groups on a semitone and a whole tone (see Fig. A.2).  

In general, Messiaen associates the first transposition of Mode 2 with the blue-violet color, the second transposition with gold and brown, and the third transposition with green.\textsuperscript{6} But in detail, he describes the first transposition as “‘blue-violet rocks speckled with little gray cubes, cobalt blue, deep Prussian blue, highlighted by a bit of violet-purple, gold, red, ruby, and stars of mauve, black, and white;’” the second transposition as “‘gold and silver spirals against a background of brown and ruby-red vertical stripes;’” and the third transposition as “‘light green and prairie-green foliage, with specks of blue, silver, and reddish orange.’”\textsuperscript{7}

1.3 Mode 3 Transpositions and Color Associations

Mode 3 is transposable only four times, and relates to the augmented fifth chord. There are three symmetrical groups within each transposition, with four notes in each group on a whole tone and two semitones intervals (see Fig. A.3).\textsuperscript{8} Messiaen associates the first transposition of Mode 3 with specific details: “orange haloed with milk white with pink reflections, speckled with a little red, like an opal, with green pigmentations and several gold spots.”\textsuperscript{9} He also specifies the second transposition in detail: “‘horizontally layered stripes: from bottom to top, dark gray, mauve, light gray, and white with mauve and pale yellow highlights—with flaming gold letters, of an unknown script, and a quantity of little red or blue arcs that are very thin, very fine, hardly visible. Dominant are gray and mauve.’”\textsuperscript{10} The third transposition

\textsuperscript{7} Messiaen, \textit{Music and Color}, 64.
\textsuperscript{8} Messiaen, \textit{The Technique}, 1:60.
\textsuperscript{10} Messiaen, \textit{Music and Color}, 64.
associates to the colors blue and green, and the fourth transposition to the colors “‘orange stripped with red, with a little blue.’”

1.4 Relation to Major Tonality

Messiaen explains that his modes of limited transpositions can be within one tonality or several tonalities, and the composer can choose to specify a tonality or none at all. He cites Mode 2 as an example: “in its first transposition: [it] can hesitate between the four major tonalities of C, E-flat, F-sharp, and A. . . . By the frequent return of the tonic of the chosen key of by the use of the dominant seventh chord in that key . . . we mix the mode with the major tonality.”

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11 Halbreich, Olivier Messiaen, 139-141 quoted in Gillock, Messiaen’s Organ Music, 389.
12 Messiaen, The Technique, 1:64.
1.5 Modulation of a Mode to Itself

A passage or section can have several tonalities within one mode transposition, or have several transpositions within a mode. Messiaen writes that modes can modulate to another transposition within the same mode.13

1.6 Modulation of a Mode to another Mode

Phrases and passages can alternate between modes. Messiaen gives examples where Modes 2 and 3 alternate within phrases. Alternation within phrases are usually by figurations, and alternation in longer passages are between phrases.14

1.7 Superposed Modes

Polymodality is the superposition of two or more modes. Messiaen’s examples use a different mode in the upper staff and another mode in the lower staff. The superposition of modes can either be melodically or harmonically.15

2 RHYTHM

2.1 Ametrical Rhythm

The most fundamental characteristic in Messiaen’s rhythmic language is his ametrical rhythm.16 His rhythmic language is greatly influenced by Greek meters and Hindu rhythms,

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which are additive rhythmic structures. The resulting characteristic elements of his rhythmic language are: irregular note values, unequal divisions of bar lines, preference to prime numbers, and use of nonretrogradable rhythms and rhythmic characters. All these characteristic elements are integrated together in his music.\textsuperscript{17}

2.2 Rhythmic Notation

Many of Messiaen’s works are without time signatures. In regards to rhythm in his music, he specifies that “the values are always notated very exactly...the reader and the performer have only to read and execute \textit{exactly the values marked}.”\textsuperscript{18} He specifies four categories of notating rhythms in his treatise. He expresses his preference to the first notation, which “consists of writing the exact values, without measures or beats, while saving the use of the bar-line only to indicate periods....This notation is evidently the best for the composer, since it is the exact expression of his musical expression.” And he mentions, “I have used this first notation in my works for organ (\textit{La Nativité du Seigneur, Les Corps glorieux}).”\textsuperscript{19}

2.3 Added Values

Messiaen defines an added value as "a short value, added to any rhythm whatsoever, whether by a note, or by a rest, or by the dot.”\textsuperscript{20} It is one of his ways to demonstrate his ametrical rhythm: “In practice one will rarely hear the simple rhythm before addition of the

\textsuperscript{17} Samuel, \textit{Conversations with Olivier Messiaen}, 47.
\textsuperscript{18} Messiaen, \textit{The Technique}, 1:14.
\textsuperscript{19} Messiaen, \textit{The Technique}, 1:28.
\textsuperscript{20} Messiaen, \textit{The Technique}, 1:16.
added value; the rhythmic pattern will almost always be immediately provided with the added value . . . the rhythm is absolutely free.”

There is a close relationship between added values to rhythms and added notes to chords, since this “same charm, one somewhat perverse, is found in these values of supplement which make the rhythms limp deliciously, in these foreign notes which insidiously transform the tint of the chord.”

The use of added values can also considerably change the aspect of rhythmic preparations and descents. A melodic upbeat on a short added value, or a rhythmic preparation prolonged by an added value, accentuates its termination.

2.4 Palindrome or Nonretrogradable Rhythms

One of Messiaen’s trademark techniques is his nonretrogradable rhythms, which are rhythmic palindromes. Based on retrogradation, he refers to this technique as “a contrapuntal procedure which consists of reading from right to left what normally ought to be read from left to right. Applied to rhythm alone, it gives some curious reversals of values.” Messiaen defines this principle: “outer values identical, middle value free. All rhythms of three values thus disposed are nonretrogradable: If we go beyond the figure of three values, the principle grows, and we should say: all rhythms divisible into two groups, one of which is the retrograde of the other, with a central common value, are nonretrogradable.”

He explains his nonretrogradable rhythm technique in the Preface of his most popular work, Quatuor pour la fin du Temps

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21 Messiaen, The Technique, 1:16.
23 Messiaen, The Technique, 1:17.
(1941). This technique is also known as “rhythmic palindrome, symbolic stasis, what he will call ‘non-retrogradable rhythm. . . . stasis representing simultaneity (i.e., eternity). If time can be read both forward and backward in the same way, quite literally, the ‘end of time.’”

3 MELODY

3.1 Supremacy of Melody

Messiaen states the supremacy of melody over rhythm and harmony: “The melody is the point of departure. May it remain sovereign! And whatever may be the complexities of our rhythms and our harmonies, they shall not draw it along in their wake, but on the contrary, shall obey it as faithful servants.” And he counsels: “The noblest element of music, may melody be the principal aim of our investigations. Let us always work melodically; rhythm remains pliant and gives precedence to melodic development, the harmony chosen being the ‘true,’ that is to say, wanted by the melody and the outcome of it.”

3.2 Preferred Intervals

The descending augmented fourth, also known as the tritone interval, is Messiaen’s most preferred melodic interval. He believes that “a very fine ear clearly perceives an F-sharp in the natural resonance of a low C. This F-sharp is endowed with an attraction toward the C, which becomes its normal resolution.” With different examples in the use of the augmented

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26 Schloesser, Visions of Amen, 124.
fourth interval, he describes, “beloved melodic contours . . . first formula of melodic cadence...point of departure of this theme . . . a great number of melodic contours . . . descending augmented fourths abound.”

3.3 Plainchant

Messiaen regards plainchant as “an inexhaustible mine of rare and expressive melodic contours.” Thus, he makes use of the plainchant or adaptations of plainchants in several of his works, where he uses added values, groups of notes in prime numbers, and melodic contours with descending augmented fourths and major sixths, and with upbeats and terminations.

3.4 Upbeats and Termination

Messiaen refers to a short value as an expressive accent resulting from a combination of an upbeat, an accent and a termination.

4 CHORDS

4.1 Added Notes

Added notes are foreign notes added as part of the chord that are neither prepared nor resolved. Messiaen sees the effect of these notes as “changing its color, giving it a spice, a new perfume . . . a character of intrusion, of supplement: the bee in the flower! They have,
nevertheless, a certain citizenship in the chord, either because they have the same sonority as some classified appoggiatura, or because they issue from the resonance of the fundamental.”

Messiaen believes that the most frequently used added note is the added sixth:

“Chopin, Wagner made use of it (and also some writers of a facile and light temperament, notably Massenet and Chabrier, which proves to what point it is natural!). Debussy and Ravel installed it definitely in the musical language.” He also observes that the added sixth note was “foreseen by Rameau and established by Debussy, and because Mozart, that great melodist, often used the descending major sixth, we shall choose that interval anew.”

4.2 Perfect Chord

A perfect chord is a triad with added intervals of an augmented fourth and a major sixth. Messiaen points out: “The perfect chord with added sixth and added augmented fourth . . . will be the typical chord of the second mode of limited transpositions.”

4.3 Chord on the Dominant

The chord on the dominant has all the notes of a major scale, and notes are typically simultaneous (see fig. A.4).

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34 Messiaen, The Technique, 1:47.
35 Messiaen, The Technique, 1:47.
38 Messiaen, The Technique, 1:50; 2:37, Ex. 201.
4.4 Chords of Resonance

Chords of resonance refer to special chords that are arranged in inversions and share a common bass note (see fig. A.5). Connection between chords can be by its inversion. The connection of these chords give a multicolor effect that Messiaen associates to the colors of a stained-glass window.\(^{39}\)

4.5 Chords in Fourths

Melodic contours and chords built on augmented and perfect fourth intervals are special chords (see figs A.6 and A.7). Messiaen prefers these chords over the typical chords built on third intervals.\(^{40}\)

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4.6 Clusters of Chords

Clusters of chords are typically multiples of notes of four or five notes in each hand. In one of Messiaen’s examples, there are four notes in each cluster of chord simultaneously cascading resulting to a descending series of octachords (see fig. A.8).\(^{41}\)

\(^{41}\) Messiaen, *The Technique*, 1:51; 2:39, Ex. 222.
DEVELOPMENT

5.1 Development by Elimination

In common practice, development through elimination is like extending a theme by using fragments in succession. In this melodic development through elimination, each fragment becomes shorter and may be reduced to an interval, a rhythmic motive, or even to a single note. Messiaen credits the creation of this technique to Beethoven and refers to the first movement of his *Fifth Symphony* in C minor: “This procedure is at the basis of all thematic life. It consists of repeating a fragment of the theme, taking away from it successively a part of its notes up to concentration upon itself, reduction to a schematic state, shrunken by strife, by crisis.”\(^{42}\) Referring to its opening four-note motif, he writes, “‘the cell is treated as a living being. It becomes a theme, it becomes a figure, it multiplies itself (doubled, tripled). It returns to its original form. It is shortened by a value….finding in it a ‘thematic death’…which is achieved by the gradual elimination of the cell.’”\(^{43}\)

5.2 Embellishment Group

Messiaen treats dissonances and foreign notes the same, and when these notes function as a group or entity, he refers to them as a single embellishment group.\(^{44}\)

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\(^{42}\) Messiaen, *The Technique*, 1:35.


\(^{44}\) Messiaen, *The Technique*, 1:55-56.
5.3 Pedal Group

Instead of a single sustained or repeated pedal note, a pedal group is an enlarged group of dissonances that is independent of its surrounding music. It may appear above or below its surrounding music, regardless of changes in its surrounding rhythm, melody or harmony. Passages may be polymodal or may superpose two mode transpositions.45

5.4 Interversion of Notes

Messiaen’s examples of this procedure show how he changes the order of notes from a mode transposition in a melodic development, which may also vary in rhythmic values and the number of notes by either omitting or using a note more than once (see Fig. A.9, in which dashed slurs connect common notes). He writes that notes can have “a large number of different orders,” and also suggests that “one could multiply the combinations.”46

Figure A.9 Interversion of the notes of Mode 5.

45 Messiaen, The Technique, 1:55.
FORM AND ORGANIZATION

6.1 Sonata Form

Messiaen’s use of sonata form is different from the traditional practice since he considers the development as the most important part and considers the recapitulation as obsolete. He wrote that there are two developments, saying, “two in a sonata-allegro: the middle, modulating development; [and] the terminal development, generally built over understood dominant and tonic pedals.” And he explains the process: “we may also start directly upon the central modulating development and end upon a large sentence forming at once the conclusion, the first complete exposition of the principal theme, and the definite establishment of the principal tonality.”

6.2 Binary Form

A binary sentence is a piece divided into two main sections. Messiaen specifies four alternating parts in these two sections: a) theme, b) first commentary, modulating more or less, inflected toward the dominant of the initial key; c) theme, d) second commentary, concluding upon the tonic of the original key.” The commentary in a binary sentence “is a melodic development of the theme” that uses fragments, which may be varied rhythmically, melodically, and harmonically; and can also present other elements, which may present “a certain agreement of accent.” The first sentence usually modulates toward the dominant, and the second sentence concludes in the tonic key.

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