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Harmony, Mode and Meaning in Olivier Messiaen's

La Nativité du Seigneur

by

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Harmony, Mode, and Meaning in Olivier Messiaen’s *La Nativité du Seigneur*

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Introduction

Olivier Eugene Prosper Charles Messiaen was born in Avignon, France on December 10th, 1908. His parents, Pierre and Cécile, were a scholar of English literature and a poet respectively. In this fertile environment, his education on the arts began almost at birth. Upon entering the Paris Conservatory at eleven years of age his musical prowess was all but assured as his studies with such eminent French composers as Paul Dukas and Marcel Dupré progressed. In 1922 he was appointed the Chapel Organist at Paris’ La Sainte Trinité, a position which he would hold till his death in 1992. His compositional style was originally firmly rooted in the French school of composition following his teachers mentioned above as well as César Frank and, most notably, Claude Debussy, whose stylistic influence can be clearly discerned throughout much of Messiaen’s output. As he matured, Messiaen began to conceive musical elements that would be almost exclusive to his compositional process: the modes of limited transposition, non-retrogradable rhythms, inclusion of Hindu rhythms, transcription of birdsong, and so on. Even though many of his techniques were derived from or conceived in non-secular contexts, his output would predominantly serve to elevate his Catholic faith.

La Nativité du Seigneur was composed in the summer of 1935, six years before the now ubiquitous Quatour par la fin du temps. The first full performance took place on February 27th, 1936 when the nine movement work, for solo organ, was divided among three performers. Messiaen’s own enthusiasm for the event can examined in his invitation to his friend, Claude Arrieu: “As this is my most substantial work—and represents for me the result of several years’ reflection—will be so pleased if can come to hear it.” (Hill & Simeon, 2005, p. 59) At the behest
of the composer a pamphlet explaining his intentions was distributed to the audience at the premier:

*The emotion, the sincerity of the musical work: to be at the service of the dogmas of the Catholic Theology.*

*To be expressed by melodic and harmonic means: the progressive growth of intervals, the chord on the dominant, pedal notes, embellishments and extended appoggiaturas.*

*Still more by rhythmic means: rhythms immediately preceded or followed by their augmentation and sometimes increased by a short note-value (half the added value).*

*Above all by the modes of limited transposition: chromatic modes, used harmonically, the strange colour of which derives from the limited number of their possible transpositions (2, 3, 4 and 6 according to the mode).*

*Theological subject matter? The best, since it contains all subjects. And this abundance of technical means allows the heart to overflow freely.* (Hill & Simeon, 2005, p. 59)

This initial performance received rave reviews from the French press as well as from several composers whom were also in attendance (Georges Auric and Henri Sauguet among them). This popularity extended not only through the musical community of the time, but also throughout decades to follow; *La Nativité* would be performed in St. Mark’s Cathedral (London) in December of 1945, partially recorded at Trinité in 1949, performed on French radio for Christmas eve 1949 and again performed live on the radio as late as 1969 (by Messiaen’s old classmate Gaston Litaize). It is also considered a pivotal work in pushing forward the “French Aesthetic” which was largely considered by native press and composers to be “growing stale” by the late 1920s early 1930s. Interestingly enough this concern was again being voiced by the early 1940s by critics such as Armand Machabey who claimed there to be no obvious successor
to Arthur Honegger. These concerns notwithstanding, *la Nativité* has become emblematic of the early works of Olivier Messiaen and of mid-twentieth century French music in general.

**Mode**

Perhaps the most celebrated and researched aspect of Messiaen’s music is his use of mode, specifically his modes of limited transposition. These are "modes...[that] comprise ten, nine, eight, six or even four notes to the octave, and can be divided into four, three or two segments, each of which have the same intervallic structure, the last note of one segment also being the first note of the next." (Street, 1976, p. 819) These modes are assigned the label of "modes of limited transposition" because, unlike the major and minor scales, "artificial" modes, or modes of early Western music, the number of transpositions possible before the entire pattern is mapped onto itself is fewer than 12. Although some of these modes had been utilized by composers before Messiaen—most notably the first and second modes (whole-tone and octatonic)—Messiaen was one of the first to recognize them as belonging to a unique body of modal patterns. Messiaen identified seven of these modes during his lifetime, noting that "their series is closed, it is mathematically impossible to find others, at least in our tempered system of 12 semitones." (Messiaen, 1944, p. 58) Although this statement is true on face value, it has been noted by other authors that other modes that fit within Messiaen’s criteria can be created through the truncation of these original seven.¹ Within the composer’s notes for *La Nativité du Seigneur* Messiaen lists three of the modes that he describes as being “used extensively” within different

¹ See Street’s *The Modes of Limited Transposition* for an explanation of the “truncated modes.”
movements of the work, these are the second, third and fourth modes (it can be surmised that at
the time of composing La Nativité Messiaen had yet to codify the final three modes due to the
fact that they do not appear within the work).

The first mode, with which musicians are most familiar due to widespread use for much
of Western musical history, is that of the whole-tone scale. As its name suggests the whole-tone
scale is comprised entirely of whole-steps, is segmented into six groups of two notes each, and is
transposable twice. Theorists refer to each separate transposition of the first mode with the label
WT (whole-tone) and lowest pitch-class of the given transposition (0 or 1). Here are the two
transpositions of the first mode:

Example 1.1a (1st mode 0 transposition)

\[
\text{Example 1.1a (1st mode 0 transposition)}
\]

1.1b (1 transposition)

\[
\text{1.1b (1 transposition)}
\]

Although Messiaen states in his composer’s notes that this mode is not utilized La
Nativité it should be mentioned that it does appear in melodic passages as well as bass-motions
even though it is not greatly emphasized. (See chapter on mvt. VII.) The relative absence of this
mode is likely due to the extremely limited harmonic palate that results from tertian stacking of the pitches in this mode—the only resulting harmony is that of the augmented triad—as well as Messiaen’s view that the expressive possibilities within this mode had previously been exhausted by both Debussy and Dukas.

The second mode of limited transposition is the most prevalent in this composition, and, indeed, in the music of the early to mid-twentieth century as a whole. Composers such as Rimsky-Korsakov, Scriabin, Ravel, and Stravinsky all made use of the second mode in varying degrees. The octatonic mode, as it is commonly referred to, consists of eight pitch classes (thus the term octatonic) divided into four groups of three notes each. The octatonic scale is created by the alternation of semi-tones and whole-tones. These are the transpositions of the second mode (labeled by their two lowest pitch classes).

Example 1.2a (octatonic 0-1)

![Example 1.2a (octatonic 0-1)](image)

Oct 0-1: 0 1 3 4 6 7 9 T 0

1.2b (octatonic 0-2)

![Example 1.2b (octatonic 0-2)](image)

Oct 0-2: 0 2 3 5 6 8 9 E 0
Messiaen’s third mode is found almost exclusively within his music alone. Its construction is that of a whole-tone followed by two semi-tones. As can be expected, as the level of complication in the patterns is increased, so too is the number of transpositions (to four of the third mode), and the number of the groupings expressed in a single octave decreases (the third mode has only three groupings within an octave). The resemblance of this scale’s intervallic pattern to that of the middle portion of the hexatonic blues scale (minor pentatonic plus #4/b5 [Ex. 1.5]) leads many modern ears to perceive this scale as having a “bluesy” quality to it when played in succession. Since there appears to be no standardized labeling format for the latter of the modes of limited transposition (unlike the WT and Oct modes) the labeling of the different transpositions of the third mode will be presented as such: $3^{rd}$ mode ____ (the lowest four pitch classes of the given transposition). With this in mind, the four transpositions of the third mode are:

Example 1.3a (third mode 0234)
Example 1.4 (third mode pattern compared to the middle section of the hexatonic blues scale)

The fourth mode consists of the major tetrachord with the fifth note of the pattern being and augmented-fourth above the initial pitch. Again, as would be anticipated the number of times this mode is transposable increases to six and the pattern is repeated only twice within an
octave. It should also be noted that, although it is not generally referred to as such, this is also an octatonic mode as it contains eight pitch classes per octave. Given that this mode does not appear in the movements that will be later examined, only the first transposition of the fourth mode is given.

Example 1.5 (fourth mode)

\[
\begin{array}{cccccccccc}
0 & 2 & 4 & 5 & 6 & 8 & T & E & 0 \\
\end{array}
\]

In any composition of an atonal nature the differences and similarities between the pitch resources are of paramount importance. The relationships between the content of each of the modes and their transpositions can easily be examined utilizing interval class vectors (ICVs). Since the first mode is only transposable twice it is obvious that the two transpositions contain no common tones. The octatonic mode yields an ICV of \(<448448>\) (once the digit in the tritone space is doubled) showing that each transposition of the second mode holds four pitch classes invariant at each level of transposition that is not an exact duplication of the original. It should also be noted that the intervallic distance between each transposition level that holds the entire set invariant (in this case at 3 and 6) tells us how many transpositions are possible. Since every time the second mode is transposed up a minor 3\(^{rd}\) the entire set is retained this explains the fact that there are only three true transpositions of the mode. The ICV of the second mode of limited transposition is \(<666966>\). Each of the transpositions of this mode yield six common tones except for at the level of a major third and minor sixth where the pitch content is entirely invariant with the original set. Having the most complex set of relationships, the ICV of the
fourth mode is <464648>. At the transposition levels of 1 (11), 3 (9) and 5 (7) the mode holds four pitch classes invariant while at 2 (10) and 4 (8) six of the original eight pitches are shared.

The number of common tones shared between the modes should also be examined. Each of the WT transpositions share four common tones with each of the octatonic transpositions while the WT-0 is a subset of each third mode transposition that contains the PCs 0 and 2, but only 3 CTs with the other two versions of the third mode. That relationship is maintained when comparing WT-1 with the 3rd mode (the third mode transpositions that contain 1 and 3 are supersets of WT-1 while the other two transpositions only share 3 CTs). Interestingly between each octatonic transposition and each third mode transposition six tones are shared.

Harmony

The advantages of using the octatonic scale and, indeed, the other modes of limited transposition as well, are twofold: first, by their very construction these modes are tonally ambiguous and second, outside of the 1st mode, these scalar patterns yield a great amount of harmonic material from which to build a composition. Example 1.6 illustrates the bounty of tertian chords that can be exploited using the 2nd mode. It should be noted that the available triads and 7th harmonies will be repeated on every other step of the scale (pitches related by minor 3rd will have the same chordal formations available to them). Due to the fact that every
pitch of this scale is capable of being the root of a fully diminished triad and seventh chord the octatonic is also occasionally referred to as the “diminished scale.”

Example 1.6 (triads and 7th chords available in the 2nd mode)

\[
\begin{align*}
   & C^0 & & Cm & & CM & & C#^0 \\
   & C^07 & & C07 & & Cm7 & & CMm7 & & C#^07
\end{align*}
\]

Messiaen, however, does not limit himself only to standard tertian and extended tertian harmonies. As he describes in *The Technique of my Musical Language* (Leduc, 1944):

... it is a question of foreign notes, with neither preparation nor resolution, without particular expressive accent, which tranquilly make a part of the chord, changing its color, giving it a spice, a new perfume...

*The most used of these notes is the added sixth. Rameau foresaw it; 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 definitively in the musical language.* (Messiaen, 1944, p. 63)

He then provided figures (Ex. 1.7a-1.7f) illustrating the construction of the overtone series, and the “logical” and “natural” chordal constructions that result (with his own commentary).
Example 1.7a (triad with added 6th)

"Here it [the added sixth] is on the perfect chord:"

```
\begin{music}
\begin{suppreal}
\addnewnote{\periode}{\upnote{G}}
\addnewnote{\periode}{\upnote{E}}
\addnewnote{\periode}{\upnote{B}}
\end{suppreal}
\end{music}
```

1.7b (Dominant 7th with added 6th)

"on the chord of the dominant seventh:"

```
\begin{music}
\begin{suppreal}
\addnewnote{\periode}{\upnote{E}}
\addnewnote{\periode}{\upnote{B}}
\addnewnote{\periode}{\upnote{G}}
\end{suppreal}
\end{music}
```

1.7c (dominant 9th chord with an added 6th [notice the chords in second inversion after the double bar, this figuration is used often in *La Nativité*. See chapter on mvt. VII.)

"on the chord of the ninth:"

```
\begin{music}
\begin{suppreal}
\addnewnote{\periode}{\upnote{G}}
\addnewnote{\periode}{\upnote{E}}
\addnewnote{\periode}{\upnote{B}}
\addnewnote{\periode}{\upnote{D}}
\addnewnote{\periode}{\upnote{A}}
\addnewnote{\periode}{\upnote{F}}
\end{suppreal}
\end{music}
```
1.7d (harmonic overtone series)

"In the resonance of a low C, a very fine ear perceives an F-sharp:"

1.7e (triad with added 6th and 4th)

"Therefore, we are authorized to treat this F-sharp as an added note in the perfect chord, already provided with an added sixth. Then our perfect chord would be:"

1.7f (resolution of the added 4th)

"and there will be an attraction between the F-sharp and the C, the former tending to resolve itself upon the latter."

(Messiaen, 1944, pp. 63-64)
It is not without coincidence then that the added 6th and added 4th (the augmented 4th Messiaen prescribes) are quite prevalent throughout the movements that are examined in this thesis. Messiaen not only viewed the addition of the 6th and 4th as a stimulating nuance of his music but also as a natural expansion of traditional harmonic vocabulary. In addition, the constructions of the three modes that are primarily exploited throughout *La Nativité* (Ex. 1.2-1.5) all contain the augmented 4th above the majority, if not all, the pitches of the mode. In the case of the 2nd mode an augmented 4th will appear above every step of the mode (the enharmonically spelled 5th discussed previously), in the 3rd mode all but one pitch in the pattern supports and augmented 4th, and the 4th mode also supports an augmented 4th above every pitch in its pattern (see Ex. 1.8a-c). Of course the support of the +4th above the 4th mode should come as no surprise since the second pattern begins on the tritone above the initial note of the first pattern.

Example 1.8a (augmented 4ths supported by Oct 0-1)

1.8b (augmented 4ths supported by third mode 0234)

Third pitch of the 3rd mode pattern does not support an +4th
Chapter Overview

The following chapters will deal with the compositional techniques and allegorical references in *La Nativité du Seigneur*. Movements III (*Desseins éternels*) and VII (*Jésus accepte la souffrance*) will be analyzed as they provide an excellent contrast to one another by which the full range of Messiaen’s early musical language can be explored.

Aspects such as mode, melody, and form are of primary significance in the study of Movement III in that they all contribute to the creation of a quasi-tonal environment. Through careful manipulation of mode and set type Messiaen creates an aural phenomenon which mimics traditional tonality even while utilizing atonal relationships, verticalities, and scales.

In Movement VII of *La Nativité* the central aspect of the composition is the near complete saturation of the movement by two intervals, the 7\(^{th}\) and the 3\(^{rd}\). Each of these intervals is featured prominently in the melody, harmonic structures, inter-set relationships, and form. Messiaen’s use of the various modes of limited transposition within this movement is also quite unique and is examined extensively.
Chapter One

III Desseins Éternels
(Eternal Purpose)

Ephesians 1:5-6

God, in his love,
foreordained us to be his adopted sons,
by Jesus Christ,
in commendation of the glory of his favor.

Perhaps the most ethereal movement of the composition, Desseins Éternels is Messiaen’s attempt to exemplify and embody the serenity of the supernatural in his music. Harmonies and melodic lines flow one to the next at a tempo slow enough (most performances take between five to seven minutes to span the twenty-seven measures) to almost lull the listener into a state of trance; engulfed by the tranquil nature of the sound. The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians lays the groundwork for the serenity of the movement. The text of the Epistle suggests an eternal and indivisible connection between God and his adopted children (those with whom he has created his new covenant). This is an essential idea to Christian theology and the bedrock on which belief is sustained. Messiaen expresses this mood in two primary fashions: 1) through the use of referential octatonicism and the establishment of a quasi-dominant-tonic relationship centered on specific harmonic outgrowths of the octatonic scale; and 2) the repetition of melodic formulas. Form is primarily determined by fluctuations between the three transpositions of the octatonic mode and melodic repetition/variation. The elusive nature of the movement’s form combined with the extremely slow tempo leaves the listener virtually unable to recollect previously heard harmonic material outside the quasi-tonic-dominant relationship that is established. The elegant
flow of the homophonic texture when combined with the thematic/motivic utilization of the octatonic mode leaves the audience in a state of bewildered serenity.

Allegory

From the reading Messiaen committed to this movement we can infer a few aspects of the composition itself. First, the implications of the passage, in combination with the title, must be examined. The declaration made by the first portion of the quotation, “God, in his love, foreordained us to be his adopted sons, by Jesus Christ. . .” is that it had been predetermined, that through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, we will all be accepted as the children of Yahweh. “In commendation of the glory of his favor,” implies that we are entrusted to preserve the sanctity and magnificence of this gift. Messiaen’s title embodies the interpretation of these quotations: *Eternal Purpose*, according to the doctrines of Christianity it is our duty to forever conserve the gifts of love, fellowship and grace which God imparted to us through Christ . . . this is our “eternal purpose.”

Given the difficulty of finding direct corollaries between the text provided and the music in this movement, it is necessary to use the general implications of the passage when exploring the expressive content of the piece. Much like Messiaen’s use of repeated sequences of pitches, rhythms and harmonies in the ‘Liturgie de Cristal’ from *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (published six years after *La Nativité du Seigneur*); the sense of the eternal is achieved by the employment of various musical devices. In ‘*Liturgie de Cristal*’ Messiaen uses “the piano . . . its parts formed out of cycles of harmonies and rhythms (with values of 29 and 17 respectively) against more
regular cycles on the cello,” (Hill & Simeone, 2005, 98) to emphasize the eternal while in *Desseins Éternels* the use of the repeated melodic phrases—which serve to mark time and form—combines with referential octatonicism and slow tempo (marked *Extrêmement lent et tender*) to provide a similar expression of the eternal. Octatonicism is utilized in this case due to the inherent cyclical and symmetrical nature of the mode. The analogue to the notion of eternity in the text is quite apparent when listening to this seemingly endless sea of sound.

The idea of preservation of the covenant between God and man is also construed through the music; this is likely the “purpose” Messiaen referred to in his title of the movement. Within most atonal music it is difficult to aurally determine a “central” harmony or pitch that is emphasized within a work or movement. This is not the case here. The referential octatonicism utilized throughout the movement – that will be defined and explored later – when combined with an establishment of quasi-tonality provides us with the sense of preservation the text implies as well as the musical “center” that is present in traditional tonal works.

Also lending to the allegory of the movement is the form. Although twentieth century compositions are seldom written in common-practice forms, this is a clear example that such works do exist. Messiaen achieves a rondo form through the repetition of mode and melodic content. The use of the rondo itself, much like the previous devices, lends to the idea of the infinite and the preservation previously discussed. Most tonal forms are constructed upon the idea of an establishment of mode and material, departure from, and an eventual return to the original material. This is indeed the case in rondos. The use of this form encourages our perception that regardless of what comes and goes our purpose in life remains steadfast. In addition, the cyclical nature of a rondo conveys the eternal through structure in a way that few other Classical forms can.
The layered analogies contained within this movement provide an example of the depth to which Messiaen strove to express deep philosophical and theological considerations in his music. The combination of form, use of mode and utilization of complex harmonic plans come together to form a mosaic of sound that is at once obscure and elegantly clear in intent.

Mode, Melody and Form

Form Chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Measure Chart</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-------5-------------9---------13---------15---------17-------------------------------21----27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Section Chart</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A-------B---------A---------B'------------------------(link)------------------------A'-----</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Mode Chart</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

When compared to other movements within this work, the use of mode employed in *Desseins Éternels* is almost mundane. The octatonic mode, in all three transpositions, is virtually the exclusive means of expression in this movement as opposed to others which utilize the third mode, chromatic scale, whole-tone and the traditional modes. Although this movement is not purely confined within the octatonic transpositions, as there are minor occurrences of whole-tone and a combination of harmonic material that does not clearly conform to a mode (most easily described as a chromatic aggregate), the octatonic is clearly the most important when formal sectioning is concerned. As in most common-practice era music, mode helps to delineate form above most other considerations. In this movement Messiaen alternates between four measure sections governed by the 1-2 octatonic and neighboring segments that contain the other
transpositions of the octatonic. The only breaks from this pattern of alternating transpositions occur in mm. 17-20 where all pitches of the chromatic scale are present except F and A (the appearance of the whole-tone 0-2 scale in the melody of measures 17 to 19 contributes to the ambiguity of the section) and when the number of measures in each division is varied. The latter occurs in the variation of B material (mm. 13-20) and the final A section which spans measures 21 to 27. It should be noted that these divisions by mode are not always so cut and dried; there is an occasion when a melodic repetition defies the modal sectioning by traversing the modulation (Ex. 2.1).

Example 2.1 (brief overlap of A melodic return [Oct. 1-2] and B harmony [Oct. 0-2])

As the form chart above illustrates, the alternation of mode yields what can convincingly be considered a rondo. This interpretation is also reinforced by the melodic material which is repeated and varied within the given segments. The A section of the rondo spans the first four bars of the movement and is governed by the 1-2 octatonic. A modulation to the 0-2 permutation
of the octatonic states the beginning of the B section in measure five. Although there is no
difference between the number of common tones shared between the octatonic transpositions—
they all share four pitches with one another—the modulation from the 1-2 to the 0-2 octatonic
provides the maximum amount of contrast between the two in that the pitch C# (1) which is
emphasized both melodically and harmonically in the A section, is absent in the 0-2 transposition
of the octatonic used in B. Example 2.2 illustrates the melodic and harmonic centricity of the A
section around the pitch C#.

Example 2.2 (C# Centricity of the A section)

Being the transposition that lacks the primary focus of the A segment it can be said that this is
more akin to a foreign mode than the more closely related 0-1 octatonic that would preserve that
pitch. Admittedly, the C# is occasionally inserted into the B sections, but only as a chromatic
passing, or neighbor tone in the melody (example 2.3).
As example 2.4 shows, measures 9 through 12 contain a slightly varied repetition of the A section and a return to the original mode of the octatonic 1-2 transposition. The variation, in m. 10, occurs through a change of the second harmony of the section from the verticality 257TE to that of 248E, and a minor deviation in the melodic phrase. This return, to both the original opening harmony of the initial A section and its associated mode supports the underlying rondo
structure. Melodic variation in this phrase is achieved in part through the transformation of the fifth pitch of the melody (originally E [m. 2]) to its upper neighbor within the mode (E# [m. 10]). It is further emphasized by the rhythmic augmentation of E from measure 3 (eighth note) in measure 11 (now a quarter tied to an eighth) and subsequent deletion of later parts of the melody to accommodate this increase. This melodic variation is finalized by the transformation of the final measure of the melody to conform to the differing harmony.

Example 2.5 (B and B' Opening Melodic Figures)

The B' section of the movement is easily the most complex variation of the primary themes. The first two measures of this section (mm. 13-14 [in Oct. 0-1]) contain a varied transposition of the first two bars of the B section (mm. 5-6) in that the second half of m. 5 corresponds with the second quarter note area of m. 13 while m. 6 and m. 14 map onto each other. (See Ex. 2.5) This relationship is particularly evident when tracing and comparing the primary contour of these melodies. Following this segmented portion of the B melody is an entire varied reiteration of that theme. It begins in the octatonic 1-2 mode (mm. 15-16) and finishes the last half of the section (mm. 17-20) in the whole-tone 0-2 transposition with the exceptions of B as an appoggiatura in measure eighteen and an Eb in m. 19. Meanwhile, the harmonic accompaniment of the B' section also travels through several modes. Similar to the melody, beginning in m. 13 the harmonic accompaniment spend the first two bars in octatonic 0-
1, the two successive bars in the 1-2 octatonic followed by one measure (m. 17) of the whole-tone 0-2 scale. (See example 2.6.)

Example 2.6 (modulation through B' section)

Measures 18 through 20 are considerably more difficult to decipher. Verticalities of 0478T, 268E, 047T, 0368, 146T and 1368 lend no clear definition of the present mode. Two of those harmonies, 0478T and 1368 do not fit within any octatonic transposition. They do however lie within the 0234 third mode and C#-Ionian respectively; although the lack of much indication that
these modes are of any significance within the movement leads to the necessity to disregard this finding. The remaining harmonies 268E, 047T and 146T do however belong to octatonic modes. The collection 268E belongs to octatonic 0-2 and 047T belongs to octatonic 0-1 as does the verticality 146T. Thus, it must be concluded that this grouping of three measures is a chromatic aggregate of all these modes. When the addition of the melodic whole-tone passage is included the only pitches which are not expressed within measures eighteen through twenty are the F and A mentioned earlier. Once the issue of indiscernible mode is considered it is possible that this small segment of the movement could, in fact, be interpreted as a dependent transition or link to the A’ section rather than truly a part of B’.

Measures 21-27 encompass the final variant of the A section and a coda-like passage taken from B material. The melody of the first four bars of this section comprises a statement and repetition of a segment of the A melody taken from measures 2 and 3 with the initial pitch transposed two steps up the octatonic 1-2 scale (and displaced down an octave). The final melodic figure and cadence of the movement (mm. 25-27) is provided by a rhythmically augmented variation of the initial two measures of the B melody that is transposed from the octatonic 0-1 to the octatonic 1-2 mode. Ending with an emphatic leap of a tritone from G to C# confirms the mode and provides a sense of finality to the movement. Messiaen himself notes this as being a desired melodic cadence in The Technique of my Musical Language “... a very fine ear clearly perceives an F# in the natural resonance of a low C. This F# is endowed with an attraction toward the C, which becomes its normal resolution.” (Messiaen, 1944. 32-33) Example 2.7 shows this final cadence.
Example 2.7 (final cadence of the movement)

Oscillating between two primary modal transpositions provides clear formal and thematic divisions within this movement. The emphasis on the 1-2 octatonic mode and on the individual pitch C# provides for a stable point of departure and arrival throughout. Figure in the addition of the contrasting 0-2 and 0-1 octatonic sets and the rondo form becomes even clearer. In the end the A-B-A-B’-A’ form of example 2.5 emerges. The modal and melodic usages within the movement are an excellent example of the use of twentieth century techniques to breathe new life into forms that had fallen into disuse.
The primary tool of expression Messiaen exploits during this movement is that of referential octatonicism; that is, consecutive musical events that when combined express all, or the majority of, pitches within a single octatonic collection. Messiaen utilizes this technique throughout *Desseins Éternels*. Although in many cases during this movement the entire set is not expressed in the harmonic content—occasionally there is a pitch or two missing—the overall octatonic structure is maintained and expressed by alternation between two verticalities that are primarily dissimilar in their pitch content and are complementary to one another in the formation of the entire octatonic collection being utilized in the given section. The first two harmonies of
this movement illustrate this process (Ex. 2.9). As can be noted from Ex. 2.9 the combination of
the sets 148TE and 257TE yields the governing octatonic set 124578TE.

Example 2.9 (Initial Harmonic Pairing [Complementary Octatonic Subsets])

Example 2.9 (Initial Harmonic Pairing [Complementary Octatonic Subsets])

This device is virtually ever-present throughout the movement and directly leads to the
establishment of the second method of expression Messiaen utilizes, quasi-tonality.

In *Dessins Éternels* fluctuations between a “tonic” harmony and one that contrasts it in
pitch content often creates an effect similar to a traditional tonic-dominant harmonic succession.
This is not to be confused with the aspect of tonality that concerns the alternation between stable
and unstable harmonies (for there are very few “stable” harmonies to be found in this
movement), but rather the alternations between the pitch collections that make up a “tonic”
(labeled as T) grouping and the neighboring pitches that constitute a “dominant.”

There are three primary aspects of tonality as far as harmony is concerned: stability,
expected resolution of leading tones, and the collection of pitches which are defined as within or
outlying the tonic collection. What we define as tonic in a tonal work is based, primarily, upon those pitches that belong to the category of tonic triads (namely the tonic and mediant pitches). The submediant—and in certain cases (such as the deceptive cadence on IV6), the subdominant—triads can fall within this category as they are the only triads which feature the tonic pitch. If this idea is followed to its fullest extent when considering atonal works it is reasonable to think of a set of pitches that is emphasized and contrasted in a way that is similar to tonal tonics triads as a “tonic harmony” just as we would understand them to be through tonal considerations. In this movement there are sets that are presented as central to the piece (in location and frequency); these sets (4-26 and 5-25 [both “tonic” when centered on C#]) are contrasted by collections—related by transposition of the previous set or simply the introduction of a different set—that contain the maximum number of differing pitch classes. They are also departed from and returned to in a way that mimics tonality. Add this to the previously explored fact that all the repetitions of the A section are in the same mode, and a true sense of a “home” mode and harmony is established and maintained throughout the movement. The following table shows the governing sets, subsets and their Forte-numbers, and their referentially octatonic relationship (disregarding mm 17-20 as the chromatic nature of that section does not lend itself to this device).

Table 1

| Section | Mode | Measures | Verticality/Forte # | Measure(s) | Referentially Octatonic with the Set in m
|---------|------|----------|-------------------|-----------|----------------------------------|
| A       | Oct 1-2 | 1-4     | 148TE (5-25)      | 1-2       | ( ) = missing pitches
<p>|         |        |          | 257TE (5-32)      | 3-4       |                                 |
|         |        |          | 148TE (5-25)      | 4         | 1-2                              |
|         |        |          |                   |           |                                  |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Oct 0-2</td>
<td>5-8</td>
<td>03679 (5-31)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>269E (4-26)</td>
<td>6-A</td>
<td>5 (5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0258 (4-27)</td>
<td>6-B</td>
<td>6-A (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>359E (4-25)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6-B (6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3689E (5-25)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7 (0, 2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Oct 1-2</td>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>158TE (5-25)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>248E (4-27)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9 (5, 7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B’</td>
<td>Oct 0-1</td>
<td>13-14</td>
<td>13469 (5-25)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1347T (5-31)</td>
<td>14-A</td>
<td>13 (0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1469 (4-26)</td>
<td>14-B</td>
<td>14-A (0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 1-2</td>
<td>15-16</td>
<td>1247E (5-25)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1258E (5-28)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15 (T)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>247T (4-27)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chromatic</td>
<td>Aggregate</td>
<td>(WT 0-2)</td>
<td>Melody</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17-20</td>
<td>0268 (4-25)</td>
<td>0478T (5-26)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>268E (4-27)</td>
<td>268E (4-27)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>047T (4-27)</td>
<td>0368 (4-27)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>146T (4-27)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A’</td>
<td>Oct 1-2</td>
<td>21-27</td>
<td>148E (4-26)</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>257T (4-26)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>148E (4-26)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>257T (4-26)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>158E (4-26)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>24 (4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>257T (4-26)</td>
<td>26-A</td>
<td>25 (4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>248E (4-27)</td>
<td>26-B</td>
<td>26-A (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2457T (5-25)</td>
<td>26-C</td>
<td>26-B (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>148E (4-26)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>26-C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The leftmost column denotes the large scale form of the movement followed consecutively by governing mode of the sections, measure numbers, the appearing verticalities and their Forte numbers, the measures containing those verticalities, and the referentially octatonic pairings by measure number(s) in which the paired harmony appears.

**"Tonic"** harmonies of the "home" mode (Oct 1-2) appear in bold while "tonic" sets of secondary transpositions of the octatonic are italicized.
As can clearly be discerned in Table 1, a verticality is presented in each new mode which begins a string of successive harmonies that are referentially octatonic with those that precede and follow it. The effect of this process is that there is a sense of departure and return to the local “tonic” harmony within each governing mode (primary tonic shown in bold, local in italic).

Within the A section, the “home” harmony of the movement is established in this way. The 148TE (5-25) verticality (and permutations of this sonority [specifically the inclusionary related set 4-26]) becomes a tonic-like harmony after being repeatedly stated, contrasted, and returned to. At our initial hearing, Messiaen provides our ears (and minds) sufficient time to acclimate to his harmonic language through the exceptionally long duration of the first verticality; thus offering to us a base for the progressions to come. The subsequent contrasting of this harmony with its referentially octatonic partner 257TE (refer to Ex. 2.9) imitates the kind of contrast that occurs when a tonic triad is paired with its dominant-seventh counterpart; in tonal music this pairing of chords provides a near aggregate of the major or minor modes (with the exception of the 6th scale degree [which is present in dominant-9th chords of tonal music]). Through of this kind of listening to relationships between groups of pitches the quasi-tonality of this movement is perceived.

As illustrated in Table 1, each iteration of the A section begins and/or ends with the same harmony, mimicking various traditional tonal cadences and phrase structures. The initial A section can, thus, be perceived as a simple “tonic-dominant-tonic” progression. Given that the opening and closing verticality of this section are exactly the same we can claim this figuration to be the true “root position” version of the harmony, and thus, this motion yields something akin to our “perfect authentic cadence.” Following this logic, the second occurrence of the A section (mm. 9-12) can be construed as analogous to a simple movement from tonic to dominant, a “half
The final return to the A section (A') contains the most stable versions of the “tonic” harmony within the movement. The original 148TE harmony is parsed down slightly to 148E (again, a set that is inclusionary to the original 5-25) and the “dominant” 257TE to its varied versions of 257T (m. 22, 24, and the first harmony of m. 26) and the final incarnation 2457T (penultimate verticality at the end of m. 26). This removal of the common components between the original versions of these verticalities—with the exception of the E that is held invariant between the penultimate and ultimate harmonies—serves to emphasize the current octatonic governing set (1-2) as well as the “tonic” harmony which is revealed to be essentially a C#m7 chord which was slightly obscured earlier in the movement.

Further supporting this hearing of the movement is the fact that one of the primary features of the “A” melodic material is an octave transfer from C#5 to the C#6 that serves as the apex of the melodic arc of this phrase. This motion (again just as in tonal works) emphasizes the pitch C# as being of primary importance to the phrase and, eventually, the movement as a whole. In addition, the final variation of the “A” section contains five separate traversals of the octave between C#5 and C#4, with the movement culminating on the pitch C#4.

In addition to supporting evidence contained within the A sections is further use of the same relationships in the B sections. The second harmony of the first B section (m. 6) is the same 4-26 set that, when transposed to form a C#m7 chord, is used as the final “tonic.” This 4-26 set is eventually returned to at the end of the B section (m. 8) as the local tonic of the section (see example 2.10).

Example 2.10 (B Tonic Harmonies)
This same relationship of sets also occurs, although in reverse order, in the first few bars of the B' section (mm. 13-14) as illustrated below in Ex. 2.8.

The continued use of this relationship throughout all the sections (Rp related sets that also contain the same pitch classes [rather than Rp related sets that are only such because of a transformational process]) allows little doubt to remain that there was an attempt on Messiaen’s part to instill this movement with a tonal quality even given its atonal context.

Example 2.11 (B' Tonic Harmonies)
Chapter 2

VII Jésus Accepte La Souffrance  
(Jesus Accepts Suffering)

Hebrews 10:5-7
Christ told his father upon entering the world:
“You have desired no holocausts,
nor sacrifices for sin,
but a body you have prepared for me.
I am here!

Among the most thematically dense movements of the work, Jésus Accepte La Souffrance exemplifies early Messiaen at his most dynamic. In this brief yet highly expressive work, dark sonorities are starkly contrasted with brilliant verticalities, transparent melodic passages are juxtaposed against murky modal combinations, and glorious heights of elation are pitted against brooding depths of contemplation. Three primary ideas are explored within this musical setting of the Biblical passage taken from Paul’s Epistle to the Hebrews: motivic third relations, 7ths, and contrasts of density and color achieved through modal manipulation. These “themes” are accentuated by Messiaen’s independent treatment of the individual hands throughout the movement. Although there are unifying characteristics between the parts, they often present material from separate modes and thus create quasi bi-chordal textures. The cohesiveness achieved by Messiaen in the utilization of these thematic designs is one of the most impressive accomplishments of this movement.
Allegory

This movement, as all others in this work, is assigned a Biblical passage—in this case Hebrews 10:5-7. This association may of course serve as a point of reference for an inductive analysis of programmatic significance behind the thematic material and musical structure of this remarkable early work. Although specific alignments with instrumental music and text may easily become farfetched, this movement features several readily identifiable instances of metaphoric interaction. When inferred, these instances of musical metaphor can often contribute to our understanding and experience of the work. The first such metaphor occurs in connection with the two opening sonorities (Ex. 3.1). Here, these two chords seem to relate directly to the line “Christ told his father upon entering this world.” The way which the darkness and opacity of the first chord, which exhausts the complete 0-1 octatonic collection (m. 1), gives way to the lighter and more readily defined E-minor triad, forms an apt metaphor for Christ’s entrance from obscurity to relative clarity in the text.

Example 3.1 (Opening Sonorities)
Unlike this relatively clear instance of “word painting,” the lines that follow do not easily lend themselves to literal correlation with specific musical events, though some extrapolation along these lines may be warranted. For example, the fact that there are three interior lines of the text and just as many primary sections of the movement can be viewed as one such an association. Also, it is difficult to avoid some comparisons to the relationship of the “A” and “B” sections to each other, and to the lines “You have desired no holocausts, nor sacrifices for sin . . . .” When contrasted by the “C,” the “A” and “B” sections become quite similar by comparison; the intervallic relationships and textural resemblance is quite palpable as is the semblance of these two. This relationship is appropriate considering the close hermeneutic relationship between the phrases “. . . nor sacrifices for sin,” and “. . . no holocausts.” Both in fact refer to animal—or other offerings that were prescribed as atonement for sin in the book of Leviticus.

Following this path, it is entirely possible for the “C” section to provide a musical analogue for the line “...but a body you have prepared for me.” This is the crux of the quotation as well as the apex of the movement. It is in this passage that Christ acknowledges this purpose on Earth as the martyr whose sacrifice will replace those of the Old Testament, an acknowledgment that corroborates his acceptance of suffering as the title of the movement implies. This is presented as one of the more dramatic and confounding of the movement’s sections, due not only to its palpable sense of sorrow, but also to its brief yet mysterious moments of solace at the zenith of each variation where a stable sonority is always attained.

The true beauty of this Biblical passage is achieved with Christ’s declamation “I am here!” It is here that he accepts his future as the savior of humanity, and it is also here that first expresses his awareness of this purpose. Messiaen achieves the radiance of this statement in what may perhaps be the most triumphant progressions of chords in the entirety of twentieth
century organ literature (Ex. 3.2). From the antepenultimate- to the final measure, a crescendo unfolds—one provided in every possible musical sense available to an organist. In this dramatic passage, the modal usage, the dynamic intensification through the use of the crescendo pedal, the thickening of texture, the addition of pedal notes on the last three attacks, and the ever expanding range encompassed by the chords all lend a sense of swelling attainment and clarity emerging from obscurity. Further reinforcing the analogy between the text and music is the number of sonorities that are accompanied by the pedal; they correspond to the number of words in the final statement of the quote; so that the three words “I am here!” find a musical parallel in the final three harmonies. Also, the final chord of the movement is simply too stark and powerful to be ignored. Christ’s final declaration of arrival can be perceived to be embodied by this resounding C#-major triad.

Example 3.2 (closing progression)

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Messiaen seems to have considered C# triads, and variations thereof, to be the “tonic” sonority of the 0-1 octatonic. While the modes of limited transposition are by their very nature cyclical and any pitch can be made to sound “tonic” through previously described processes (see chapter on Desseins éternels), the prevalence of C# chords beginning and ending sections governed by the 0-1 octatonic points to a clear association between the two in Messiaen’s mind.
Mode and Form

Messiaen's use of contrasting and closely related modes, both simultaneously and consecutively, is typified by this movement. Many of the formal sections contained within can be defined and recognized through their unique utilization of the modes of limited transposition, the chromatic collection, and the melodic-minor and Ionian modes.

As previously mentioned, the opening verticality (see Ex. 3.1) of the movement presents the entire 0-1 octatonic mode spanning from E3 to E5 on the grand orgue. This brief and jarring simultaneity is quickly followed and contrasted by an E-minor chord voiced so that E3 in the bass is retained as a common tone between the two sonorities. In that this chord does not belong to governing 0-1 octatonic set that was previously—although fleetingly—established, it intimates the first modal shift of the movement (ex. 3.3). This movement away from the 0-1 octatonic is immediately confirmed in m. 2 by the repetition of the E-minor chord on the récit above the pedal motion E-G-F-Bb-E, a combination of pitches that only belong within the 1-2 octatonic.

Example 3.3
This brief passage, which we will describe as the “Introductory Theme,” is to be used in its original figuration and variations thereof as a persistent transitional figure between formal sections of the movement.

Following the “Introductory Theme,” in measure 3, is another change in mode heralding the “A” section. The fourth transposition of Messiaen’s third mode, designated 1235 (see introduction, Ex. 1.3d), is the destination of this modulation whose contrast is accentuated by a transfer to the postil manual in measure three. This transposition of the third mode provides the highest degree of contrast to the “Introductory Theme” in the sense that it is the only transposition of Messiaen’s third mode that does not contain pitch class E—precisely the pitch-class emphasized as the bass pitch of the octatonic 0-1, the subsequent E minor triad, and the octatonic 1-2 figures in Examples 3.1 & 3.3.

Example 3.4 (A section in 1235 transposition of the third mode)

Following a repetition of the “Introductory Theme” in mm. 6-7 the “B” section begins. Measure 8 is the first time we hear the poly-modal characteristics that are to be exploited in this and other sections. Within the left hand part, the mode of D-“melodic”-minor is implied by the
A progression from a GMm7 to an AMm7 (when the pitches contained within these two chords are combined they can belong to no other mode). Measure 9 contains a similar modal implication in the form of a BbMm7 chord to a CMm7, again suggesting a melodic-minor mode, but based upon F. These modes can be inferred by the exhaustion of the pitches in a collection by the combining of two complementary sets as discussed in the section of the chapter on movement III concerning quasi-tonality. During these two measures the right hand unfolds two Ionian modes. In m. 8 the right hand spans the entirety of a C#-Ionian scale in descending thirds beginning with G# and B#, while in m. 9, E Ionian follows through an exact transposition of this descending line.

Example 3.5 (first half of B section and utilized modes)

The second half of the “B” section (mm. 10-11) is comprised of the third mode (0234) and maintains only a few of the characteristics of the prior two bars; the motion of chord roots is maintained while the quality thereof is varied to accommodate the new mode. Also, the right
hand texture is supplemented by the addition of an octave doubling below the top-most part and does not precisely mimic the uniform downward motion of the melodic gestures of mm. 8-9.

Example 3.6 (second half of B section with octave doubling and mode change)

Prior to the “C” section is yet another repetition of the “Intro Theme” (mm. 12-13) that is subsequently varied in measure 14 by the transformation of the original E-minor chord into an E-augmented. This variation also neglects second half of the intro theme, the reiteration of the second verticality which is normally accompanied by the pedal line. By changing the second chord from minor to augmented, the stage is set for the modal combinations that color the melancholic “C” section.

In m. 15, an implied BbMm7 chord (the pitches Ab-Bb-D) begins one of the most fascinating combinations of mode presented in this movement. The Ab2 in the left hand is the initial pitch of an ascending chromatic motion while the Bb and D in the right also ascend, but in thirds through the entire whole-tone 0-2 scale. (See Ex. 3.7a.) After traversing five steps up the scales the lines come to a culmination before descending back down toward their origination. This retreat is interrupted two steps before the initial sonority is reached. The pattern that is
established in m. 15 is then repeated in m. 16, but in varied form so that it is allowed to complete its decent back to the original BbMm7 sonority on the final quarter note of the measure (Ex. 3.7b). Slight deviations of this pattern will become the primary thematic idea of the section.

Examples 3.7a & 3.7b

The first modal variation of this pattern appears in mm. 17-18. Initiated from another Mm7 chord (Eb), the pattern of rise and fall from mm. 15-16 is repeated and varied by the modification of right hand mode from 0-2 whole-tone in the previous incarnation to the 0-1 octatonic for this variation (ex. 3.8). The sum of steps encompassed by the motion is also varied; increased by 100% (from five steps up the mode in the original to ten in the first variation). This increase in the number of steps up the scale will later be examined further. As a final adaptation of this motive of modal combination, the chromatic line is paired with the first transposition of the third mode (0234) in mm. 19-20 (ex 3.9).

Measures 21-25 present the “Introductory Theme” in its previous two permutations as well as a final variation. The initial formation of the theme from mm. 1-2 is maintained in mm.
21-22 and m. 23 is a precise repetition of m. 13. For the last variant (mm. 24-25) the simultaneity that previously expressed the entire octatonic 0-1 scale is mutated through the mirroring of the left hand’s set (46903) by the right hand. Inverting the interval relationships around the mirroring

Example 3.8 (first variation of “C theme” [Oct. 0-1])

Example 3.9 (ascent of second variation of “C” theme [third mode 0234])

point of the pitch E yields the set 58E24 in the right hand. This in turn results in an 0-1 octatonic in the left hand and 1-2 in the right. The resulting combination of pitches (58E246903) maintains all the same intervals emanating from the central mirroring point, pitch class 4. If the
sets are examined as they appear (58E24 in the right hand and 46903 in the left) it can be demonstrated the right hand set and it’s inversion in the left hand have a balance of symmetry at PC 4. If we add the PCs in the right hand set’s PCs to those in the left (in reverse order) modus 12: 5+3=8, 8+0=8, E+9=20(mod 12)=8, 2+6=8, and 4+4=8; the common index, and therefore the inversionsal relationship between these sets becomes clear. By the simple observation that the upper note of the bottom set is a half-step below E while the lowest pitch of the upper set is a half-step above E we can establish that 4, rather than 10, is in fact the point of symmetry between the two inversionsally related sets. The ensuing verticality is that of an AM triad in second inversion (maintaining the constant bass pitch E that has been a staple of this theme). The AM chord is the logical resolution of the progression E-minor to E-augmented that previously followed the 0-1 octatonic simultaneity of the prior two incarnations of the “Intro Theme,” in that if the rising chromatic lines (G-G# and B-B# [C]) were continued the result would be an AM triad. This AM chord is then repeated in the m. 25 above the pedal line derived from m. 2.

Example 3.10 (Completion of rising chromatic lines in “Introductory Theme” triads)

In the final cadential gesture, beginning in measure 26, the pedal line that has been virtually ever-present in the repetitions and variations of the “Intro Theme” is transformed into a melodic figure in both the hands (mm. 26-28). Within each measure, beginning on E in m. 26,
the figure is transposed upward by perfect 4ths in order to cycle through all the octatonic transpositions; octatonic 1-2, 0-1 and 0-2 respectively.

Example 3.11 (transposition of pedal figure to hands)

Subsequent to the journey through the octatonic transpositions is the final passage of the movement. Beginning on a 3rd inversion Dm7 chord (the root pitch held over from the final transposition of the prior theme), a pairing of 7th chords is initiated that imply Ionian scales just as in the first two bars of the “B” section (mm. 8-9). This provides continuity between within the material and utilizing the concept of complementary sets from serialism (again as described in an earlier chapter). The Dm7 chord is paired with Em7 to exhaust the C-Ionian mode, or white-note-diatonic collection. An upward whole tone motion of the chord roots is established (following the whole-tone 0-2 scale) by this initial pairing. Following this grouping, a continuation of the whole-step root motion continues through the chords F#m7 and G#m7 (which arrives on the downbeat of the penultimate measure); when combined these chords result in an E-Ionian mode. The final assemblage, Bm7 and C#M, break the root motion between the prior two groupings (but maintains it internally) and completes a motion to A-Ionian which was foreshadowed by the AM triad from m. 25.
Messiaen's employment of mode, for variation and to provide continuity within this movement, is among the most unique within the early twentieth century literature. Modal contrast is used as a tool of variation within individual sections as well as point of intersection relating prior, seemingly dissimilar, material.

**Motive of the 7th**

Beyond the modal considerations discussed above, Messiaen has also utilized two primary motivic formulations, used both locally, and as motivic parallelisms. (to borrow a Schenkerian term). One of these is the utilization of the interval of a 7th. This interval is utilized melodically and harmonically throughout the movement as a unifying feature between the sections.

The first appearance of a 7th is in the left hand in the very first verticality (ex. 3.12). While there is little obvious significance of this interval – especially within the “Intro Theme” – the repetition of this theme and other factors which will soon be described point to this initial appearance as a point of departure from which the rest of the movement will build.

Example 3.12 (7th in the initial verticality)
Within the “A” section a series of factors contribute to the reiteration of the thematic interval of a 7th. The left hand of this segment maintains a series of chords beginning with an EbM and continues through BM and GM triads, each in second inversion and with added fourths. The addition of the 4ths to each triad ensures that the interval of a major-7th will appear in the outer voices of each verticality. A return back to the BMadd4 (again in second inversion) chord at the onset of m. 5 finalizes the left hand motion of the section. Above the sustained chords, the right hand plays a series of verticalities which tend to collapse inward, due to the descent of the upper portion of the sonority, before moving on to the next iteration. The only time this trend is interrupted is toward the end of m. 3 when a Bm triad is presented in three different inversions before the next static verticality is achieved. Each simultaneity presented in the right hand, over a new chord in the left, maintains a constant interval between the outermost parts; that of a minor 7th. The ensuing downward motion of the top parts is thus a fulfillment of the tonal expectation that minor 7ths tend to resolve downward by step. This formula is continuous throughout the section with the pitches C#-G-B appearing above the Eb chord (the right hand part is repeated in m. 4 before continuing on), A-Eb-G above the BM, and F-B-Eb above the GM triad. When, on the downbeat of m. 5, the left hand returns to the BM based harmony, the right hand also returns to the accompanying verticality to that chord (F-B-Eb). The fact that both hands preserve their respective 7ths throughout the “A” section supports the thematic importance of that interval.
If the texture of the “A” section is examined further, it becomes apparent that the outermost voices—of both hands combined—encompass a minor 9\textsuperscript{th} (displaced by an octave) whenever a new verticality is presented. The 9\textsuperscript{th}, itself being an octavely displaced 2\textsuperscript{nd}, can be included within the 7\textsuperscript{th} motive as 2\textsuperscript{nds} and 7\textsuperscript{ths} are inversionally equivalent. This inversional equivalence will be exploited by Messiaen at several points in this movement.

Further adding to the saturation of the 7th within the movement are the relationships presented in the “B” section. Within the first two bars of this section (mm. 8-9 [Ex. 3-14]) the left hand plays nothing but dominant-type 7\textsuperscript{th} chords. In the order that they are presented, these harmonies are the G\textsubscript{m}m7, A\textsubscript{m}m7, B\textsubscript{b}m7 and C\textsubscript{m}m7 chords that were discussed in the examination of mode within this movement. Measure 8 presents these chords in second inversion while in m. 9 they are consistently in first. Regardless of the inversion in which the harmonies are expressed the span of the outermost parts of their root-position versions is always a minor-7\textsuperscript{th}. Example 3.14 illustrates Messiaen’s use of dominant-seventh chords in the left hand paired with the 7\textsuperscript{th}-span motivic material in the right.
Example 3.14 (Prominence of 7ths in the first half of B)

This textural inversion—the interval emphasized in the right hand in the “A” section being transferred to the left in the “B” section and vice-versa—is further played out by the right hand’s part. The traversal of an entire Ionian scale, again described in the section on mode, with the top voice starting on the 7th degree of the scale leading to the final tonic pitch provides the major-7th that was previously presented in the left hand. In measure 18 this is composed out by traversing the C#-Ionian from B# down to C#, and in 19 by falling from D# to E (thus referentially E-Ionian).

As the “B” section moves into its second half (mm. 10-11 [Ex. 3.15]), the set of relationships established in the first half of the section are maintained but varied. Within the 3rd mode transposition of 0234 the left hand continues to play extended tertian harmonies (7th chords). One of the differences is that of chord quality and the subsequent types of 7ths displayed; an AbMm7 is followed by a B*7add4 and eventually a CMm7. Yet, despite a minor deviation in right hand line (due to the shift in mode), the interval of a 7th is again traversed. But due to the modal usage employed the 7th is mutated from major to minor (the F that would be required to complete a span of a M7th is not contained within the 0234 transposition of the third
mode [see introduction]). Additionally, the outer voices of the combined parts encompass a minor-9th when the harmony changes just as they had during the “A” section.

Example 3.15 (Prominence of 7ths in the second half of B)

Although unlike the previous two sections, the “C” section (beginning in m. 15) retains the motivic 7th as a primary feature. The opening combination of the whole-tone 0-2 and chromatic lines begin on an implied BMm7 chord (the pitches Ab-Bb-D) which, in a manner similar to the B section, provides an inversion of a 7th. (See example 3.16.) Once the lines culminate after traversing five steps up their individual scales it is apparent that the 7th is again emphasized by the range traversed by the right hand voices; that is, that the lowest pitch of each voice in the right hand (Bb and D) and the highest (A and C), encompass a major 7th. Adding this focus on 7ths is the fact that once both hands reach their apex the outline of a C#M7 chord is achieved and accented agogically before the descent back down the modes. The repetition of this theme in m. 16 sees the downward retreat complete its journey back to the original intervals of the section.
Example 3.16 (7ths in original C theme)

The octatonic 0-1 variation of this theme (illustrated in example 3.17) contains multiple similarities to that of the original version: the opening pitches of measure 17 again begin on a Mm7 chord (a 4th up from the BbMm7 of m. 15), the upper parts travel the same distance and the apex point of the lines suggest a M7 harmony for a second time (now rooted on B). In this variant of the “C” section theme the opening is transposed from the BbMm7 or the initial offering to an EbMm7 in the same configuration. In order to again achieve an outline of a 7th chord at the zenith of the motion, Messiaen had to double the number of steps traversed by the voices from five to ten steps up the scales. At this culmination of the ascent is a BM7 chord. This is comparable to the C#M7 that was present in the initial version of this group of variations. The ensuing descent is again cut short of its goal (the initial verticality) just as it had been in m. 15.

In the repetition of this variation (m. 18) not only is the number of steps traversed up the scales doubled from the original iteration in m. 15, but also the number of steps encompassed by the descent is also doubled from two to four. Ending the descent after only four steps yields the first non-seventh chord emphasized in this section, a CM triad in second inversion. If the right
hand parts are examined carefully it becomes apparent that the initial pitch of the top voice and
the final pitch of the ascent in the bottom voice outline a major 7th.

Example 3.17 (prominence of 7ths in C Oct. Variation)

Another augmentation of five steps to the scalar motions is added to the final variant of
the “C” section theme (mm. 19-20 [Ex. 3.18]). This version, rather than developing the whole-
tone 0-2 of the first or octatonic 0-1 of the second iterations, conjoins the left hand chromatic
part with the third mode 0234 transposition (refer to introduction) that was employed in the “B”
section (mm. 10-11). The AbMm7 outline at the onset of this variation is again a 4th above the
starting point of the previous deviation. Just as in the prior measures the completion of the
upward motion lands on an agogically accented M7 chord, an AM7. After this culmination the
expected collapse ensues. Again the ebb is interrupted, only this time by a change in direction of
the chromatic line and an agogic accent on pitches that imply an EbMm7. Following this
“cadence” the chromatic line resumes its downward trajectory and comes to rest on B3 while the
upper voices maintain their position on Eb4 and G4. This results in an augmented harmony, this
harmony has only previously been emphasized in the “Intro Theme” variation of m. 14.
Measures 21-25 incorporate the two variations of the “Introductory Theme” with a third as has been described prior. The emphasis of the 7th interval is achieved by the means of the very same verticality that appeared first in m. 1. The repetition of these sonorities in m. 23 and their variation in m. 24 serve to reinforce the previous importance of the 7th within the movement.

The first three measures of the final section exhibits one of the few times within the movement that the 7th is not directly emphasized. Instead, the harmonic 2nds on the first and last eighth notes of each bar (mm. 26-28) provide with the inversional equivalent as the pattern is transposed. (see Ex. 3.11) Also, when all the pitches of each measure are combined the resulting harmony is that of a half-diminished 7th chord. Much like the left hand part of the “B” section this is the only way which the 7th is presented.

Similarly, the final several measures of the movement also emphasize the seventh sparingly and primarily through the chord-types utilized. (Refer to Ex. 3.2.) Each of the five harmonies leading up to the final C♯M triad are minor-seventh chords. The first four of this
group have roots that are all related by ascending whole step before this pattern is broken by the motion from a G#m7 to Bm7 as was described earlier. The only other way the 7th is exploited within these final three measures is the gesture in the pedal that supports the last two harmonies: a move from B down to C# (the second lowest pitch of the pedalboard).

The multitude of ways in which Messiaen expresses the 7th interval within this movement is quite astounding. Outside of the typical harmonic representations there are the melodic motions that span 7ths, the textural inversion of 7ths between sections, the intervallic inversion within the hands and the permutation of the resulting 2nds by octave displacement to a 9th between them. The subsequent continuity that is achieved the saturation of this interval is one of the most impressive features of this composition. Graph 3.1 provides a summary of the transformational motives featuring sevenths in Jésus Accepte La Souffrance.³

³ I use the term Transformational here, not in the specific sense that authors such as David Lewin and Henry Klumpenhouwer use it, but rather in the sense that many of the 7th and 3rd motives in this movement are found in T7 and T3 relationships between sets so that the sets themselves are “transformations” of one another; but also to mean that the 7th and 3rd motives appear in various aspects of the music outside of simple set relationships and verticalities (such as the traversal of these intervals, the fact that governing sets [modes] are often related to one another by one of these intervals, and so on).
Motive of the 3rd

Much like the 7th motive described in the prior section, mediant relationships—and thirds in general—are treated in a very similar transformational fashion. Beyond the tertian structure of the chords Messiaen employs during the movement, the third also figures prominently in the melodic lines, particularly in the upper voices, which often move in parallel thirds, and as a bond between chordal structures and modal centers (mediant and chromatic-mediant relationships). These parallel thirds of the melodic part are virtually constant throughout the movement. As the
following examples will illustrate the third is also used in the manner of a motivic parallelism. In this capacity, the third relations of movement are played out not only by the melodic pairings but also by the chord relationships in the left hand.

The first appearance of thirds outside of tertian chordal structures is in the upper parts of the right hand of the “A” section (mm. 3-5). Above the EbMadd4 chord that spans measure three and part of measure 4 the melodic line is paired in thirds beginning on G and B. The verticality of resolves the minor seventh to 269 through the upper thirds stepping down through the mode (third mode 1235 [refer to introduction]). (see Ex. 3.19) The brief ascending Bm inversions of m. 3 are one of the few occasions when this motion of parallel thirds is broken; but they are quickly reclaimed once the original right hand sonority of m. 3 returns at the onset of m. 4. The chord progression itself—contained within the left hand—emphasizes thirds through different means. The EbMadd4 proceeds to a BMadd4 and GMadd4 before regressing to the prior B chord (see example 3.19). When Eb is reconsidered enharmonically, as D#, we notice that all of these chord’s roots are related by a descending major-third; fortifying the motivic 3rd that, with the 7th, will serve to unify the movement.

Example 3.19 (3rds in A section)

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4 As noted in the introduction the added 4ths of this movement are all of the #4 variety.
Within the first portion of the “B” section (mm. 8-9) the 3rd motive is expanded up by a “composing out” of the interval within the (left hand) chords (Ex. 3.20). Each measure within this part of the section contains two chords related by a second; GMm7 to AMm7 in measure eight and BbMm7 to CMm7 in measure nine. Within this two measure grouping the third relationship is presented between both the initial sonority of each bar (GMm7 to BbMm7 is a chromatic mediant relationship) as well as the referential mode (D-melodic minor to F-melodic minor). This idea of “composing out” the interval of a third is to become one of the primary methods of providing continuity throughout the rest of the movement. To further reinforce this motivic development of the 3rd, the right hand begins its traversing—in parallel thirds—of Ionian modes that are a third apart; the right hand part in measure eight begins on the third G# and B# and descends a C#-Ionian scale while in measure nine it initiates from B and D# while traveling down an E-Ionian. In this way, the mediant is emphasized as both an interval, and as a transformational relationship—one that relates the intervals themselves as well as the referential scales that contain them.

Example 3.20 (3rds in B section)

![Musical Example 3.20](image-url)
The second half of the “B” section (mm. 10-11) displays similar attributes to the first but partially breaks the previously established pattern. The continuation of the mediant relationships between the initial chords is maintained (the first new chord in m. 10 is an AbMm7 and the harmony of m. 11 is a CMm7), but there is only one governing mode in the right hand that covers both measures. The third mode transposition 0234 is the right hand’s prevailing pattern and, being the only mode expressed, has no pairing—a reasonable expectation given the material of the previous two bars.

Section “C” continues the use of parallel thirds in the right hand but is considerably more subtle in its references to the mediant relationships that were previously explored (see examples 3.16-3.18). The primary use of this motive is between the chords that result on the agogically accented points of arrival at the apex and nadir of each iteration of the theme and between all the variations when considered together (the nadir being the lowest pitches of the lines which do not result in a descent to the original pitches that begin the C theme pattern). A sort of reversal of the pattern occurs between the original (mm. 15-16) and first variation of the pattern (mm. 17-18); in that the second measure of the initial pattern (m. 16) descends further than the first (m. 15) as does the first measure of the variation (mm. 17-18). Considering this reversal, the final chord of m. 15 (EM) is mirrored by its lower chromatic mediant, C major, near the end of the descent in measure 18 (on the final eighth note of the second rhythmic group). The chords at the zenith of each variation develop the pattern that was established in the first half of the “B” section, the roots step downward eventually encompassing a third once the second modal variation reaches its apex. The chords in question are a C#M7 (mm. 15-16), a BM7 (mm. 17-18) and, finally, an AM7 (m. 20). The C#M7 and the AM7 that are at the climax of the lines in measure 15 and measure 20 are again related by thirds (Ex. 3.21).
The final section also contains a few permutations of the 3rd. First, the pattern of half-diminished arpeggiation transposed by fourth (Ex. 3.11) that occurs in mm. 26-28 presents the interval melodically. Then, during the approach to the final cadence, the chords (beginning on Dm7) progress upward by whole-step to eventually encompass a third between every other chord; this is again similar to the pattern that was first presented in the B section. The progression in its entirety is thus: Dm7, Em7, F#m7, G#m7, Bm7, C#M7. The Dm7 to the F#m7 provides one grouping into a chromatic-mediant relationship while the Em7 to G#m7 yields the same. When each chord within the progression is paired with the successive harmony Ionian modes can be inferred much in the same way melodic-minor modes were present in the first half of the B section (mm. 8-9). If the Dm7 and Em7 are combined the pitches produce a C-Ionian scale. Following this logic the F#m7 and G#m7 create an E-Ionian and the final two harmonies give us an A-Ionian. A sort of pitch-centricity results when these modes are all considered; EM is the upper chromatic-mediant of CM and AM is the lower. This surrounding of the pitch C is then emphasized by contrast when the final resounding C#M triad is reached. This final harmony is a mediant to the A-Ionian scale from which it is drawn and a chromatic-mediant of the E-Ionian mode that preceded it.
Example 3.22 (cadential progression)

Having utilized the 7th to such an effective result makes the addition of these 3rds and mediant relationships doubly impressive. The nearly complete saturation of virtually every aspect of this movement by these two intervals, from harmonic formations to melodic figures, progression of chord roots, relation of modes, and so on is of primary significance to Messiaen’s musical language in this inventive and expressive work.
Summary

Throughout the examined movements—and indeed the composition as a whole—Messiaen employs mode, melody, form, and harmony to create an atmospheric picture of the chosen Biblical passages with great success and, often, subtlety. Several clear analogous associations can be drawn between the musical content and the text itself. Without Messiaen’s extensive musical language this level of continuity could not be achieved. This is a work that should rival *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* in both celebration and scholarly study.

The impressively executed creation of a quasi-tonality through the use of form, melody, and the repetition and placement of specific harmonies in an atonal context is an achievement worthy of its own extensive composition, more or less simply a single movement. Considering this, *Desseins éternels* is a movement which should be explored by enthusiasts of atonal music not simply for its not insignificant aural beauty, but also for the technical prowess Messiaen drew from in its creation.

Just as impressive as any single technique employed by Messiaen in *La Nativité* is the extent of variation between the movements. Just as *Desseins éternels* is intriguing for the reasons mentioned above, *Jésus accepte la souffrance* is equally so for the profound saturation of the intervals of the 7th and the 3rd. With the addition of the ingenious combining of modes and textures this movement, just as *Desseins éternels*, becomes a masterpiece in and unto itself.

In terms of scholarship, Messiaen is often overlooked in favor of some of the other great composers of the early and mid-twentieth century. Perhaps with more intense examination the intensity of interest in his work will someday grow to rival that of Schoenberg or Stravinsky.
This would only serve but to elevate Messiaen's technical achievements to their proper place among some of the most innovative work of the twentieth century.
Bibliography


