

Problems of Performance the O. Messiaen Cycle "Vingt Regards Sur L'Enfant-Jesus" for Piano

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ABSTRACT

This article is devoted to a holistic analysis of the piano cycle by O. Messiaen "Vingt regards sur L'Enfant-Jesus" from the point of view of the features of the musical language and the problems that arise in front of the performer of the largest composition in piano literature of the twentieth century. The article substantiates the importance of the performer's comprehension of the concept of the cycle, the means of expression created by the composer and defined in the work "Technique of my musical language", as well as the author's comments on the musical text. Particular attention is paid to the study of the principles of organizing artistic texture based on a system of "modes of limited transposition", integration of melody and harmony, "resonant" chords, etc.; a specific coloristic technique of "sound stained-glass window", discovered by O. Messiaen. The author draws attention to the expansion by the composer of the coloristic possibilities of the piano, imitation of bell sounds, "bird" singing, giving unique trepidation, sophistication, luminosity to the sound of the instrument and presupposing a rich palette of pianistic techniques of the performer.

Keywords: *twenty gazes, performance, piano, texture, "bird style", coloristic technique, Olivier Messiaen*

I. INTRODUCTION

The cycle "Vingt regards sur l'Enfant-Jesus" by the genius composer of France Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) is one of the most monumental works of piano literature of the 20th century.

The first performer of this composition was one of the best and constant interpreters of the music of O. Messiaen — Yvonne Loriod. Among the French pianists, passionate admirers of Messiaen's oeuvre, Michel Beroff stands out. Being a ten-year-old boy, he independently learned and played for the author such a complicated cycle and now Beroff's repertoire includes all the works of Messiaen created for piano [1]. One of the first among Russian performers turned to the music of Messiaen a wonderful pianist M.V. Yudina. Her repertoire included pieces from this cycle: "Noël", "Regard de l'étoile", "Regard des Anges"; concert for piano and orchestra "Réveil des oiseaux" [2].

In 1960–1970, the works of O. Messiaen began to appear in the concert programs of Russian pianists, including, in particular, the pieces from the cycle "Vingt regards sur l'Enfant-Jesus", although rarely enough. So why are the "twenty gazes", so interesting for pianists with their extraordinary colorful sound, and some pieces with a virtuoso scope, are still not often heard in the programs of concert pianists or students of conservatories? Until recently, one of the reasons in

Russia was not so much the complexity of comprehension of the composer's style as the inaccessibility of musical material. Only in 1979 in Russia was published the compilation: "O. Messiaen. Selected Pieces", which included five pieces from the cycle: "Regard de la vierge", "Regard du temps", "Regard de l'esprit de joie", "Noël", "Je dors, mais mon cœur veille" [3]. Previously, only two pieces were published: "Regard de l'étoile", "Regard des prophètes, des bergers et des Mages" but without indicating the name of the cycle or the pieces themselves [4, 5].

Starting from the last quarter of the twentieth century, interest in Messiaen's music began to increase not only from the performers, but also among researchers [6–14]. The proposed research is based on the study of the musical text in the French edition [15], the work by O. Messiaen "The Technique of My Musical Language" [16], as well as the scientific works of contemporary researchers of the music of O. Messiaen.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

The scale of the concept (the performance of the whole piano cycle lasts about two and a half hours) can be compared, perhaps, only with such a "colossus" as the "Turangalila" symphony. Each great artist has a global theme, to which he subordinates all his creative

aspirations. Such a theme of "grandioso" for Messiaen was the theme of "human, nature and divine providence". The composer's choice of this topic is partly due to events in the biography.

The idea of "Vingt Regards" upon the child Jesus came from the Messiaen under the influence of the work of Maurizio Toesco "The Twelve gazes". Messiaen "borrowed" from there four "gazes" — contemplation of the prophets, the shepherds and the magi, the Angels, the Virgin, the Heavenly Father. "I took", — writes the composer, — "the same idea, interpreting it in a different way, and added sixteen new gazes" [17].

As Messiaen noted: "By their nature and scale, my works often grow out of the forms of musical scenic" [18]. This piano cycle is based on the dramatic principle of development. The exposition ("Regard du Pere"; "Regard de l'etoile"; "L'echange"; "Regard de la Vierge") and the plot of the action — the piece "Par Lui tout a ete fait" — gives the background to the birth of Jesus.

Then followed the "gazes" of a philosophical detached character: "Regard des hauteurs", "Regard du temps". The movement of action to the culmination is symbolize in the piece "Premiere communion de la Vierge", Mary learns the good news — she must have a son, so for the first time appears musical material related to Jesus (the author's remark says: "the beating of the heart of a baby"). The culmination of the cycle is the piece "Noël". This is followed by "gazes" on Jesus or pieces in which he himself is acting: "Regard des Anges", "Le baiser de l'enfant-Jesus", "Regard des prophetes, des bergers et des Mages", "Regard du silence". The denouement is the last "contemplation" of the "Regard de l'eglise d'amor", where the body of Christ is buried.

As in musical stage works, in "Vingt regards" there are leitmotifs. There are three of them. The first leitmotif is the "Theme of God (the Father)", which is held in "Regard du Pere", the piece "Par lui tout a été fait", "Regard de l'esprit de joie", in "Premiere communion de la Vierge", "Le baiser de l'Enfant-Jesus" ("Fig. 1").

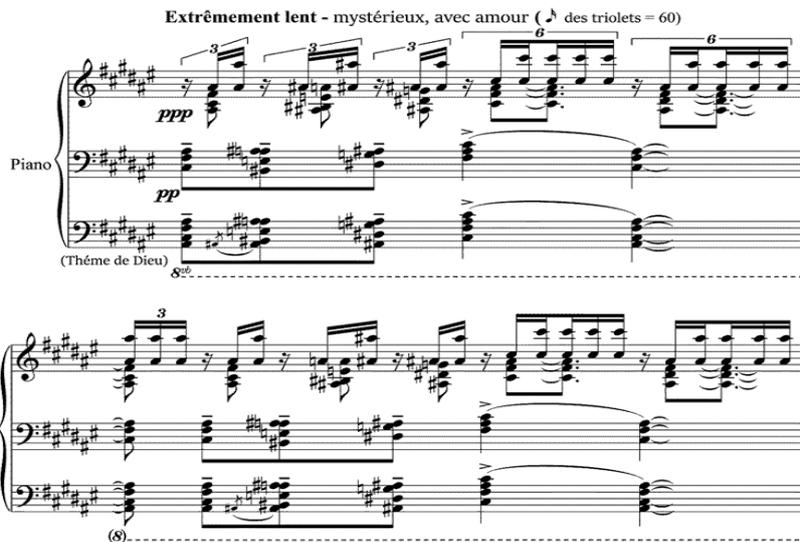


Fig. 1. O. Messiaen, "Regard du Pere", b. 1-2.

The second leitmotif is "the Theme of the Star and the Cross" ("Fig. 2").

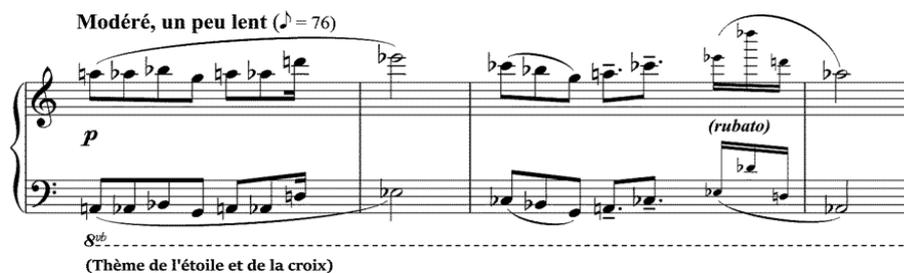


Fig. 2. O. Messiaen, "Regard de l'etoile" ("Contemplation of the star"), b. 6—11.

In the preface to the music edition, the composer explains the use of the same musical material by the fact that the star opens the earthly path of Jesus, and on the cross it ends. The third leitmotif is the "Theme of Chords". It passes from one play to another, either in a concentrated or fragmented form, "like a rainbow" (as defined by Messiaen) ("Fig. 3").

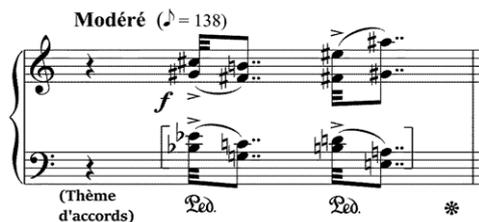


Fig. 3. O. Messiaen, "Regard des Anges" ("Contemplation of the Angels"), b. 5.

In connection with the dramatic unity of the cycle, the question arises: is it possible to perform separate pieces? It can certainly be answered in the affirmative. "Contemplation", although they are connected by a common concept, are nevertheless independent plays. P. Devoyon, who inimitably performed the piece "Premiere communion de la Vierge" in the second round of the VI International Competition P.I. Tchaikovsky, brilliantly demonstrated the practice of performing separate pieces of the cycle.

III. PRINCIPLES OF THE MUSICAL LANGUAGE AND FEATURES OF THE ARTISTIC TEXTURE OF THE CYCLE "VINGT REGARDS SUR L'ENFANT-JESUS"

What are the most characteristic principles of the Messiaen musical language found expression in this cycle? All the works of Messiaen are created in a peculiar system, which the composer calls "modes of limited transposition" [19]. Messiaen divides the twelve sounds of the tempered system into several symmetric groups. "All modes of limited transposition can be used both melodically and harmoniously — melody and harmony never leave the notes that make up the scales degree of this mode" [19]. The thesis on the unity of melody and harmony is held in various chapters of the composer's book "The Technique of My Musical Language". It is important that the lead role Messiaen assign melody. "The melody is our starting point, and let it dominate the music. Harmony should not be invented, but extracted from the melody. It, harmony, is independent, as it exists in a latent form in any melody" [20].

Messiaen modes coexist peacefully with tonality. "Not being polytonal, they are in an atmosphere of several tonalities at once. The composer can freely give preference to one of these tonalities or leave a tonal

impression unclear" [19]. So in the piece of "Premiere communion de la Vierge", written in the second modes of "limited transposition", the tonality of B-dur is clearly heard. A multiple reminder of a tonic chord creates a sense of tonality. In "Regard des prophetes, des bergers et des Mages" a-moll is felt. The number of such examples is easy to increase.

The peculiarity of the system of modes influenced the coloristic side of Messiaen's music, which is distinguished by the unusual freshness of sound achieved by using peculiar harmonic means. "Especial" chords give refinement: the dominant, which includes all the sounds of natural major; resonant chord (consisting of overtone sounds); a chord from fourths ("forget about classical chords constructed by thirds, and try to apply a chord from diminished and perfect fourths" [21]. At the heart of the harmonious language of Scriabin of the "Promethean" period is a similar principle.

One of Messiaen's discoveries was such a specific coloristic artistic technique as the sound "stained-glass window" [21]. It is no coincidence that the composer uses the terminology inherent in the visual arts to indicate musical (harmonic) reception, since stained glass painting evokes associations not so much plastic as musical. "Stained-glass windows with their mighty colorful chords and melodious rhythms give rise not so much to body-plastic as to poetically musical images" [22].

The principle of "sound stained-glass window" is the movement of chords on a sustained bass. Moving chords include appoggiatura, or as the Messiaen also calls them additional notes (that is, non-chord sounds) that change the coloristic sound of the chord, "give it a new flavor, spice." These notes preserve the nature of the invasion, additions — "like a bee on a flower" [23].

Moving chords flicker like stained glass windows of cathedrals. The "stained-glass window" effect is used, for example, in the piece of the "Premiere communion de la Vierge". There is no such musical theme in the cycle — "Madonna (Virgo) with a baby", and an association should arise here, obviously, with works of fine art ("Fig. 4"; author's remark — a reminder of "The Virgin and the Baby").

Since it was in this place that the "stained-glass window" method was used, the author's "reminder", as it seems to us, can be connected with the masterpiece of stained glass art — the "Our Lady with the Child" of the Chartres Cathedral.

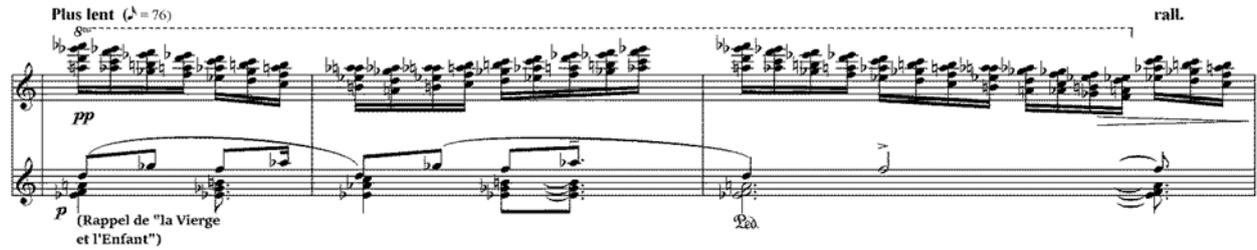


Fig. 4. O. Messiaen, "Premiere communion de la Vierge", b. 21-23.

There is almost no "contemplation", in which triumphant glee of a bell ringing would not be heard. Undoubtedly, the enormous influence on the Messiaen of the opera "Boris Godunov" M.P. Mussorgsky and, of course, Russian music in general (it is well known that it is in Russian music that one can trace the "encyclopedia" of bell ringing). In "The Technique of My Musical Language", Messiaen repeatedly writes about the influence of Russian music on his work [24]. Messiaen composes the first formula of his melodic cadence under the influence of five notes from the beginning of the opera "Boris Godunov", he finds the same five notes in the Russian song "There was no wind", which he calls one of his favorite childhood songs.

On the influence of Mussorgsky on Messiaen, Maria Veniaminovna Yudina also wrote: "The enormous, fruitful influence of Mussorgsky on all French music is well known. It's obvious successor is the wonderful cycle of Olivier Messiaen "Twenty gazes upon the child Jesus" [25].

The unique trepidation, sophistication, luminosity of the sound of music by Messiaen is created by an imitation of bird singing. Some of Messiaen's works are entirely devoted to birds. These are concerts for piano: "Réveil des oiseaux", Concert for piano, chamber orchestra and percussion "Les oiseaux exotiques", piano cycle "Catalogue d'oiseaux". The image in the music of bird singing develops the traditions of French music, coming from L.-C. Daquin, J.F. Rameau, F. Couperin, as well as Russian music — N.A. Rimsky-Korsakov, A.N. Scriabin. We can recall Scriabin's Tenth Sonata (moods and sounds of the "forest", "bird trills"). Birds "inhabit" almost all pieces of the cycle. In some "gazes", they appear sporadically, in others they have a large place (for example, in "Regard des Anges" almost half of the piece; in "Regard des hauteurs"). In a verbal commentary on "Regard des hauteurs", Messiaen even indicates what specific birds he depicted: this is a nightingale, and warbler, and finch, and goldfinch, and, of course, an lark.

Often Messiaen also uses such a coloristic principle as the simultaneous sounding of extreme registers with an empty middle, which was a characteristic feature of

L. van Beethoven's texture of the late period of creativity.

The music of the Messiaen, possessing enormous timbral richness, puts forward before the pianist the task of mastering a diverse sound palette. In many pieces there are remarks pointing to one or another musical instrument, the timbre of which the performer should "imitate": "like a tomtom" or "oboe" in "Regard des prophetes, des bergers et des Mages" (there is one more remark for the "oboe" — complementary, suggestive — "a little shouting"), "trombones" in the "Regard des Anges", "like a xylophone" in the "Regard de la Vierge" and others. These author's remarks direct the artist's imagination in search of a certain sound quality.

IV. PROBLEMS OF THE SOUND INCARNATION OF TIME AND RHYTHM IN THE CYCLE OF "VINGT REGARDS SUR L'ENFANT-JESUS"

No less attention, than the coloristic side of music, Messiaen devoted to the metro-rhythmic beginning. The increasing role of the metro-rhythm and the intensified development of various previously unused opportunities in this area is a characteristic feature not only of Messiaen's creativity, but also a tendency characteristic of 20th century music as a whole. According to Messiaen, the "The Rite of Spring" I.F. Stravinsky led him to the new interpretation of metro-rhythm [26]. Messiaen devoted to the problems of rhythm of his theoretical works "A Treatise on Rhythm" (1954). In the "Technique of My Musical Language", six out of nineteen chapters are devoted to rhythm [16].

The Messiaen prefers "ametric" music (the term of the composer), that is, to such music where "division in to bars is preserved to indicate the boundaries of the period and the range of action of random signs" [26]. The composer considers this method of notation to be the most natural, however, along with the "ametric" method; he also uses the usual one — metric. "This method is false for the composer, since it contradicts the rhythmic plan of the composer, but if the performers properly relate to accents, the listeners will perceive the rhythm correctly" [26].

Messiaen uses and variable-time signatored recording. In "Vingt regards" we can find all three ways of rhythmic notation (although the time signature are not indicated). For example, in the piece of the "Premiere communion de la Vierge", bar's with a pronounced three-quarter time of 3/4 or 3/8 are adjacent to "ametric".

One of Messiaen's favorite rhythmic methods is "additional duration". This is a short duration, added as a separate note, or pause or dot. As a result, rhythms are formed, which are based on "prime numbers" 5, 7, 9, 11, 13. Messiaen writes: "We show a predilection for such numbers" [27], (in the "Fig. 5" an extra duration is marked with an asterisk). Sometimes the extra duration sounds like a pause (for example "Premiere communion de la Vierge", b. 80).



Fig. 5. O. Messiaen. "Regard des Anges", b. 136.

Additional durations give the rhythm a special charm, make it "delightfully limping" (as defined by the Messiaen). Such a temporary organization requires the pianist to have a very precise, rhythmically verified performance. The composer gives advice on how to work on this aim: "Performers who feel awkward when meeting such rhythms should mentally calculate notes with short durations (for example, sixteenths), but this can only be done at the beginning of the work — in a public performance this procedure will turn performance into an unbearably boring sight: "performers must develop a sense of duration over time. This will allow them to observe dynamics, accelerations, decelerations — in general, everything that is required for a living and emotionally-filled composition" [26].

We dare to add that although Messiaen advises to count mentally only at the initial stages of studying a work, nevertheless, the performer should from time to time return to this method at later stages of work so that rhythmic inaccuracies do not creep in.

Another rhythmic principle favorite by Messiaen is an increase or decrease in duration. This principle has been used before. The peculiarity of the Messiaen transformations is that they are rarely multiple of two, it is characterized by not a divisible increases or decreases: by 1/5, 4/5, 1/3, etc. Even using multiple

transformations of rhythm, Messiaen invents the ability to make it still out of square.

In the eighth bar "Premiere communion de la Vierge", the "Theme of God" is given in a multiple reduction. But the eighth of the first bar and the eighth of the eighth bar are not equal, since in the first bar the eighth is 50 and 40 in the eighth bar. Sometimes, as in the piece "Premiere communion de la Vierge" (in the section "Modere, un peu vif"), the first and third chords of the "Theme of God" are halved, while the second chord is reduced by 4/5 duration, then by 1/4. Due to this variation in the reduction of the second (out of three) chord, an irreversible rhythm so beloved by Messiaen is formed. "Rhythms divided into two groups, one of which is the reversal of the other, with a common Central duration, are irreversible" [28].

Messiaen came to irreversible rhythms through the study of ancient Indian music. In addition to the rhythmic techniques already mentioned in the "Vingt regards", Messiaen also uses others, such as the "rhythmic canon" (only the rhythmic pattern is imitated); a gradual increase or decrease in duration ("Regard des prophetes, des bergers et des Mages"). One of the main tasks facing the performer is the exact reproduction of the rhythm, which the composer repeatedly recalls. "Regardless of whether the music is metrized or not, the durations are written out precisely — the performer must take care of their equally accurate performance" [26].

What place does "tempo rubato" take in the music of Messiaen? The pianist must use this means of expression with great care. More freely, in terms of agogic, in our opinion, performer can play music written in the "bird style". Of particular difficulty is "tempo rubato" where additional durations are used, since if at least slightly violate the accuracy, the essence of this principle disappears. The Messiaen often notes in notes the gradual acceleration or deceleration of the tempo. The effect of prolonged slowdown in the play "Premiere communion de la Vierge" is very peculiarly created.

An important role in the music of Messiaen is played by the principle of *ostinato*, characteristic of 20th century music. It can be found in S. Prokofiev, D. Shostakovich, A. Schoenberg, I. Stravinsky.

Messiaen often creates a piece based on repeated varying of a single theme. So the "Premiere communion de la Vierge" is built on the "Theme of God", conducted by *ostinato*, which is further rhythmically modified. In the "Regard des prophetes, des bergers et des Mages" the central place is occupied by the imperative theme of four sounds, intonation close to the "Theme of the Star" (see also "Fig. 2"). This similarity is not accidental, since the star showed the shepherds, the magi the way to the baby Jesus.

When one theme is repeated, there is a danger of monotonous performance, especially since Messiaen very often has a large musical fragment, supported at one dynamic level. In "Première communion de la Vierge", the entire first section, except for two bars, sounds on *p* and *pp*, the second section on *f* and *ff*. The performer must skillfully calculate the dynamics of the piece.

The music of "Vingt regards" is extremely multifaceted. It is either majestically large-scale, or tremulous-tender, and this, of course, should be reflected in the piano interpretation of the pieces of the cycle. Messiaen uses a multi-sounding chord texture, chord passages in both hands at the same time ("Regard de l'esprit de joie", "Je dors, mais mon cœur veille", etc.).

However, despite the abundance of chords, the impression of massive sound does not occur, since chords are most often placed in a high register. The composer's tendency to use texture of double notes is noticeable.

Sometimes the Messiaen uses a similar method: for the first time the theme sound monophonically, when repeated in the texture of double notes (for example, "Regard des prophètes, des bergers et des Mages" (b. 22-29, b. 62-70), "Regard de l'esprit de joie" (from b. 1). The passages in seconds in the "gazes" resemble the similar texture in the "Scarbo" by M. Ravel. Messiaen often uses leaps at wide intervals.

An analysis of the texture of the Messiaen allows us to conclude about the influence of the principles of the pianism by F. List. Passages of the Messiaen, like the figures of F. Liszt, cover the entire keyboard with one throw. In such passages that require swiftness and brilliance, the principle of distributing the figuration between the hands is often used (for example, in the piece "Première communion de la vierge"). The composer is also using another technique typical of List's texture - compressing the passage into a chord complex (in the play "Regard de l'étoile").

In the music written in the "bird style", we can find an abundance of grace notes, trills, and the composer uses rehearsal technique to create a feeling of trepidation.

Some pieces very accurately "illustrate" the verbal commentary preceding the plays. So, in the "Regard des Anges" the comment reads: "Scintillate" – sparkling figures of the thirty-second, "*percussions*" – an imperative theme of chords and a rhythmic canon that sounds like a bell ringing; "the powerful, immense sound of trombones", "then the birds singing in the azure"; "the amazement of the angels is increasing". The growing amazement is transmitted by expanding the sound range (the dynamics also grows accordingly: from *pp* to *fff*).

V. CONCLUSION

Summing up, we can note that Messiaen, relying on the traditions of world musical culture, created a piano composition unique in style and means of expression, embodying the composer's philosophical understanding of the picture of the world. In "The Technique of My Musical Language", Messiaen repeatedly writes about those who influenced his oeuvre. This is all French music preceding his activity, especially Debussy, and, of course, Russian music, especially Mussorgsky, Stravinsky, Russian folk song, Rimsky-Korsakov, Scriabin, as well as pre-classical music: Gregorian chant, ancient Indian music. The cycle "*Vingt regards sur l'enfant-Jesus*" poses the pianist the task of deeply comprehending the concept of this kind of sounding Gospel, proclaiming the value of preserving human life and moral essence in spite of any trials, saving the world with its luminosity.

Messiaen's works all over the world more and more attract performers not only by their originality, but, of course, by the fact that in his work he aspired "to ensure that music ... could express lofty noble feelings" [20].

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