

## Messiaen and Improvisation

The Lise Waxer Memorial Lecture  
The Spring 2015 Meeting of the New York State/  
St. Lawrence Chapter of the American Musicological Society

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This paper considers Olivier Messiaen's approach to improvisation and its relationship to his compositional techniques by analyzing his last organ concert at La Trinité, Paris on 18 December 1991. Scholars have paid scant attention to Messiaen as an improviser, missing opportunities to link this significant creative activity to his work as a composer. Since some of his organ works emerged from actual improvisations, this paper supplies crucial connections between the improvisatory and compositional crafts of Messiaen, fostering a more complete understanding of him as a composer.

After providing a backdrop to Messiaen as an improviser, which will include showing video clips of him playing the organ at La Trinité, this paper will focus on the 1991 improvisation concert and the relationship it has to his compositional techniques and theology. Through an examination of Messiaen's notes for the concert—his last musical manuscript according to his wife Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen, and a recording of this historic event (both provided to me by former concert pianist Père Jean-Rodolphe Kars), the paper considers how Messiaen used and developed given themes, colored his music through harmony and different organ registrations, and structured each extemporization and the concert as a whole. Despite the concert being a swan song, we find the composer to be at the height of his inventive powers.

In the concert, Messiaen incorporated three plainchant themes from the *Missel grégorien* (Solesmes, 1985): (1) the Kyrie "Clemens rector" (p. 150), (2) the Gradual "Qui sedes" from the third Sunday of Advent (p. 175), and (3) the Introit "Puer natus est" from the Christmas Day Mass (p. 198). He also used the songs of the blackbird, blackcap, and nightingale. Messiaen structured the concert in the following manner: (1) an "entrée de [la] grand'messe" based on "Clemens rector"; (2) a contrasting movement using the same plainchant, along with "Debussyian" chords and the nightingale's song; (3) a slow movement using the songs of the blackbird and blackcap juxtaposed with "Qui sedes"; and (4) a "sortie de [la] grand'messe" based on "Puer natus est." As for harmonic materials, Messiaen used stock harmonizations associated with modes 2 and 3, non-modal sonorities such as the chords of transposed inversions on the same bass note, harmonic litanies, and wedge progressions.