

TAMARA STEFANOVICH
piano

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)
Aria variata alla maniera italiana BWV 989
(approx. 16 minutes)

OLIVIER MESSIAEN (1908-1992)
Huit Préludes (1928-29)
Chant d'extase dans un paysage triste
(approx. 7 minutes)

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)
Sinfonia No. 9 in F minor BWV 795
(approx. 4 minutes)

JEAN-PHILIPPE RAMEAU (1683-1764)
L'entretien des Muses
(approx. 7 minutes)

OLIVIER MESSIAEN (1908-1992)
Vingt Regards sur l'enfant Jésus
Regard des Anges
(approx. 5 minutes)

INTERMISSION

OLIVIER MESSIAEN (1908-1992)
Vingt Regards sur l'enfant Jésus
Première Communion de la Vierge
(approx. 7 minutes)

JEAN-PHILIPPE RAMEAU (1683-1764)

Les Cyclopes

(approx. 4 minutes)

JEAN-PHILIPPE RAMEAU (1683-1764)

La Poule

(approx. 3 minutes)

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)

Sinfonia No. 15 in B minor BWV 801

(approx. 2 minutes)

OLIVIER MESSIAEN (1908-1992)

Catalogue d'oiseaux

L'Alouette calandrelle

(approx. 6 minutes)

OLIVIER MESSIAEN (1908-1992)

Vingt Regards sur l'enfant Jésus

La Parole toute-puissante

(approx. 3 minutes)

OLIVIER MESSIAEN (1908-1992)

Vingt Regards sur l'enfant Jésus

Noël

(approx. 4 minutes)

OLIVIER MESSIAEN (1908-1992)

Cantéyodjayâ

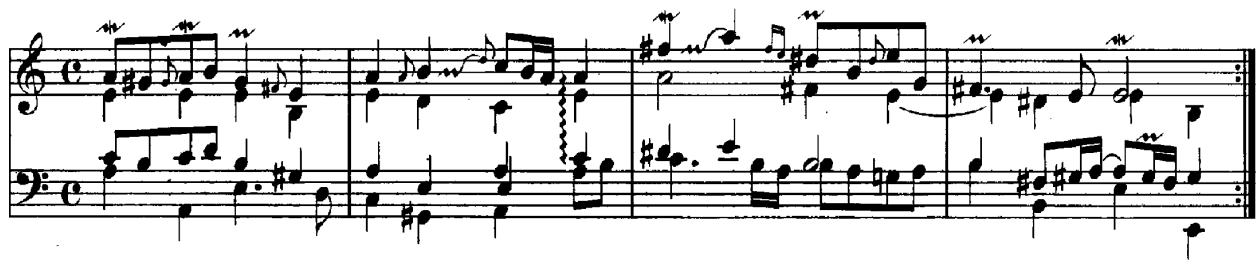
(approx. 13 minutes)

Johann Sebastian Bach

Aria variata alla maniera italiana BWV 989

The *Aria variata alla maniera italiana* is one of the earliest of Bach's keyboard works and dates from around 1709 when he was employed as organist at the ducal court in Weimar. This was a period in which Bach was studying and copying out the works of Italian composers such as Vivaldi and Corelli, eager to learn and apply the stylistic traits that made their scores so lively and appealing.

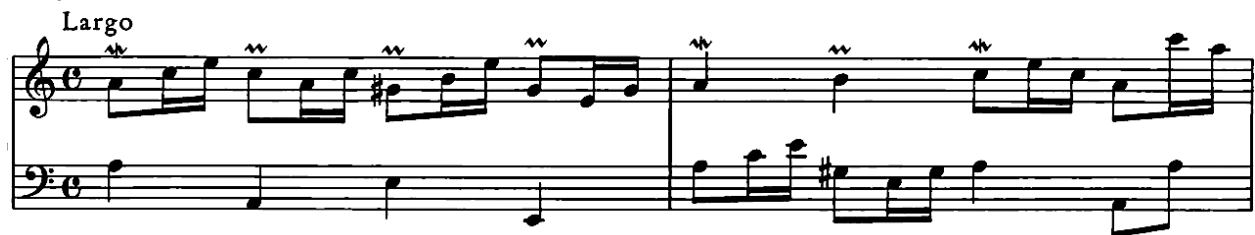
The *aria* or "theme" of this set of variations is given in highly ornamented form in the so-called *Andreas Bach Buch*, a manuscript of 57 keyboard works from Northern Germany copied out by the composer's brother, Johann Christoph Bach (1671-1721).



Presented in a chorale-style four-voice setting, this theme lays out the expressive harmonies that will form the basis for the 10 variations that follow. Bach's use of the *harmonic* rather than the *melodic* structure of his theme to undergird each of his variations prefigures the same procedure that was to be used in his much later *Goldberg Variations* of 1741.

The initial variations are essentially two-part inventions that concentrate on a very small number of musical motives, shared between the hands, that fill in the harmonic scaffolding of the theme.

Var. 1



The variations become ever more animated, creating increased forward momentum as further subdivisions of the theme's original quarter notes occur. Triplets replace duplets, the pace of imitation between the hands increases and rhythmic displacement intervenes to rough up the surface texture.

This momentum slows, however, in the *Andante* of Variation 6,

Var. 6



after which the pace picks up again. A dance movement in 12/8 follows.

Var. 7



More acrobatic figuration appears in Variation 8.

Var. 8



And finally, both hands erupt into continuous 16th-note motion in Variation 9.

Var. 9



The concluding Variation 10 is not really a “variation” at all, but just the opening theme, returning in slightly modified form to end this work in the same manner and mood as characterized the chorale setting with which it began.

And in this unusual move we see yet another parallel with the *Goldberg Variations*.

Olivier Messiaen

Chant d'extase dans un paysage triste from Huit Préludes (1928-29)

Olivier Messiaen was France's most influential twentieth-century composer. While he began his career in the 1920s much influenced by the harmonic innovations of Debussy and the propulsive rhythms of Stravinsky, he stands apart from even these revolutionaries in his approach to composition. Indeed, his music occupies a place outside the bounds of the Western tradition in art music itself.

His is music that *illustrates* but does not *narrate*. It is typically French in its desire to point the listener's attention to phenomena outside the music itself, indicated in descriptive titling or in scrupulously careful labelling within his scores. These phenomena include the sound of birds singing, an emotional landscape, the contemplation of the great symbols of the Catholic faith or the mystic states produced by Hindu rhythms. But his music has no narrative arc, no final end-point that it is aiming for, because the elements of tension and release that create forward motion and large-scale coherence in Western music are simply not there.

This is because he does not use the traditional scales that create and enable that tension, that release and that coherence. Instead, he invents his own scales, or *modes*, based on a predetermined patterning of intervals. And to each mode he gives a number.

His Mode 2 creates a scale from the pattern of a semitone followed by a whole tone, to create an octatonic (8-degree) scale comprised of the notes

B#-C#-D#-E-F#-G-A-A#-B#

The unusual sound of this scale pattern is heard at the beginning of the second of his *Huit Préludes* (1928-29), entitled *Chant d'extase dans un paysage triste* (Song of Ecstasy in a Sad Landscape).



This opening ostinato of a sad and moping melodic character evokes the “sad landscape” of the work’s title, made particularly acute in its grieving quality by the accented “sob” gestures in the second measure.

But the promise of a brighter mood is on the horizon as luscious streams of saturated chords in the manner of Debussy soon appear to relieve all this dreariness.

The “ecstasy” of the title is invoked by a subsequent passage replete with sugary sonorities and “ecstatic” trills.



These two sections, with their different moods, alternate almost impassively as the work proceeds, never really influencing each other but rather occupying their own psychological space within the piece.

Johann Sebastian Bach

Sinfonia No. 9 in F minor BWV 795

Sinfonia No. 15 in B minor BWV 801

Bach's Two-Part and Three-Part Inventions (the latter called *sinfonias* by Bach) were written as instructional materials to teach students how to play two- and three-voice polyphonic textures cleanly and musically. They first appeared in 1722 in the collection that Bach prepared for his then 11-year-old son Wilhelm Friedemann Bach (1710-1784).

* * *

The *Sinfonia No. 9 in F minor* is perhaps the most “abstract” of the three-part inventions, and arguably the greatest, according to Sir András Schiff. Written in fugal style, its opening measures present the three principal motives that will be interwoven throughout the piece.



There is (1) a fragmented fugal subject comprised of small “sighing” phrases, supported by (2) a bass line of slow chromatically descending steps in the style of a lament and enlivened by (3) a disruptive motive in much faster notes, which is actually just a decorated version of the fugal subject.

These three motives appear in all voices, demonstrating the unmatched contrapuntal skill of Bach in treating even the most chromatic of themes.

* * *

The *Sinfonia No. 15 in B minor*, with its whirlwind of florid passagework, addresses the digital dexterity of the student.



This passagework tests the performer's skill in playing rapid broken-chord figures in both hands while still maintaining a dance-like pulse in the triplet figures of the main theme.

Jean-Philippe Rameau

L'entretien des Muses – Les Cyclopes – La Poule

Were one to seek a visual analogy for the effect of French harpsichord music on the ear, the idea of a delicate hand elegantly waving a lace handkerchief might inevitably spring to mind, such is the degree of ornamental “flutter” on the sonic surface of these pieces. And yet the harpsichord works of Rameau, while entirely in this style, come off as rich, deeply satisfying tapestries of sound rather than as frivolous baubles of Rococo entertainment.

Part of the reason is that his compositional method was very advanced for the time, both in the solidity of its harmonic foundation and in the various innovations he claimed to have introduced in writing for the keyboard. Many of the showy *batteries* (styles of keyboard attack) for which he so modestly takes credit in the introductions to his published collections involve hand-crossings or nimble tag-team exchanges between the hands.

This unusual combination of the graceful and the virtuosic, along with Rameau's innate sense of theatricality, make his harpsichord music ideal for the modern concert hall.

Rameau published three collections of harpsichord pieces in 1706, 1724 and ca. 1727 respectively. Many of these works are *character* or *genre* pieces (a French specialty), each labelled with a colourful title identifying a person, object or activity meant to be described by the music so labelled. Such titling plays to the French national expectation that music will not just float freely in a world of its own, but rather will be descriptive of something real, anchored in some pre-existing impression already stored in the imagination.

* * *

L'entretien des Muses (Conversation of the Muses) is in binary form, with repeated first and second halves. It describes in its three-voice texture a serious discussion amongst the high gods responsible for inventing and promoting the various domains of the arts, such as poetry, tragedy and dance.



Occasional melody notes tied over the bar line give a halting conversational quality to this three-voice texture while a long trill in the first half of the piece points to the intensity of the divine discussion.

* * *

Les Cyclopes is a *rondeau* that describes the blacksmith's workshop of the one-eyed giants — that eye being in the middle of their forehead — who create the weapons for the gods.



The opening volley of scale figures returns at various intervals, separated by numerous episodes that evoke the hammering sounds and ringing anvil blows that resound from their work.

Rameau's *batterie* of repeated notes is seen in measures 5-6 of the opening and is enlarged upon later in the piece with bold hand-crossings that send the left hand of the performer flying through the air in imitation of the vigorous, wide-ranging arm movements of these giant craftsmen of hot metal.



Meanwhile, deep in the bass register, a constant churn of 8th-note motion involving octave stretches in the left hand



creates a continuous hum of activity and considerable resonance from the lower regions of the keyboard to convey the impressive level of sound coming from the workshop.

* * *

La Poule attempts to forge a link between the disparate worlds of concert performance and animal husbandry. If the number of works inspired by farmyard animals is understandably low on most recital programs, the number directly descriptive of chickens, in particular, is even lower.

Rameau's *The Hen* struts and frets its four minutes upon the stage and then is heard no more. And yet by dint of insistent repetition and development of the simple opening motive, five repeated notes and an arpeggio, the composer manages to enlarge his caricature into a riveting portrait of considerable tragicomic grandeur.



But given the social context of this piece, more may be happening in it than merely an amusingly accurate portrayal of the ambulatory clucking behaviour of this common barnyard fowl.

The very *portrayal* of this animal on such an aristocratic instrument as the harpsichord, the plucking quills of which are, after all, made from bird feathers (and isn't *that* dark), makes the characterization live on two levels at once: the elegantly courtly and the rustically agricultural.

The question needs to be asked whether this proudly strutting but mindless creature is not really a hidden portrait of the many equally mindless French aristocrats that strut around the halls of Versailles in courtier's plumage engaging in endless rounds of polite but useless conversation such as this



only to pick up a few seeds of royal favour from the ground and peck out their rivals for the spoils.

And dare I even point out that the symbol of France, the symbol of the French king himself, is *le coq*, i.e., the rooster?

Olivier Messiaen

XIV. *Regard des Anges* – XI. *Première Communion de la Vierge*
 XII. *La Parole toute-puissante* – XIII. *Noël*

from *Vingt Regards sur l'enfant Jésus*

Messiaen's deep commitment to the Catholic faith surfaces explicitly in his music towards the end of the Second World War. His *Vingt Regards sur l'enfant Jésus* (1944) is a collection of 20 piano pieces, each *regard* (contemplation) focused on a scene from the New Testament, present as a kind of *tableau vivant* in the composer's imagination as he writes.

This music is very complex, and often shockingly dissonant because of the non-traditional scale patterns that Messiaen uses for each piece. His scores are filled with symbolic musical motives and rife with arcane compositional devices such as canons and "unretrogradable rhythms" (i.e., palindromes).

The music is highly thought-out and meticulously notated with explanatory labelling by the composer. But nonetheless, it is not music that is easily accessible at a first hearing.

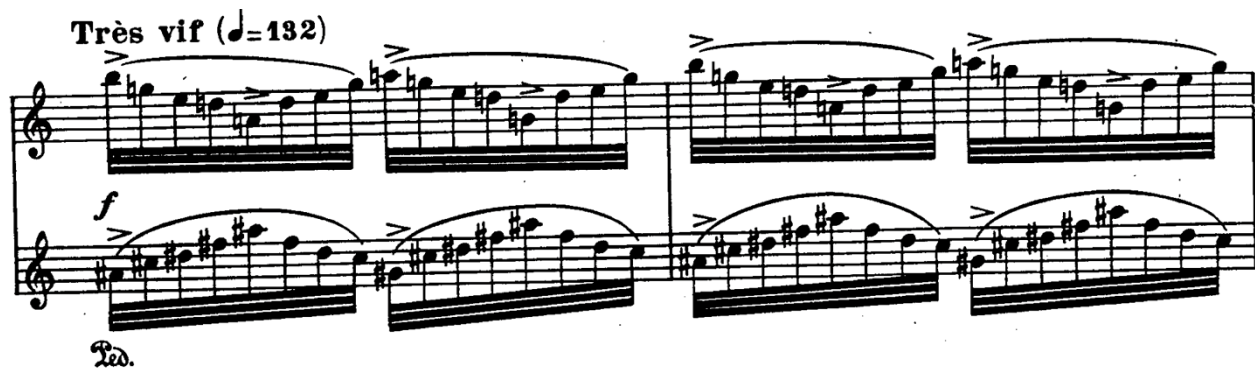
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Regard des Anges lets us see through the eyes of God's angels.

Messiaen tells us what kind of scene this is in a textual commentary at the head of the score:

Scintillations, percussive sounds, the powerful blowing of trombones; your servants are fiery flames ... then the songs of birds that fall from the sky – and the stupor of the angels increases, for it is not to them but to the human race that God has united himself.

Messiaen adored Chopin and this piece opens with the beating of angels wings in a texture reminiscent of the contrary-motion patterning between the hands of Chopin's harp-like 'Aeolian' étude, Op. 25, No. 1 in A flat.

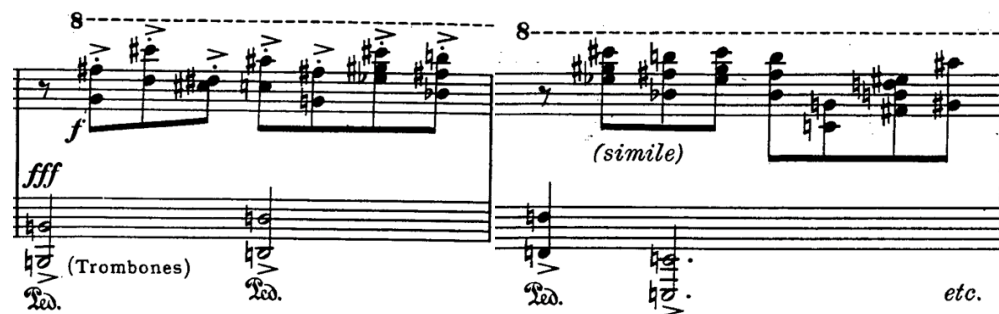


It is worth remembering that Messiaen is not working *narratively* in these pieces. He presents independent “panels” of music illustrating his subject matter in the same manner as that used in multi-part altarpieces: the panels all present aspects of the same theme but are not meant to interact with each other.

A rhythmic canon in tritones soon breaks out, perhaps suggesting the beating of drums.



Then trombones blare majestically:



After a while the sound of twittering birds is heard:



This birdsong passage is astonishingly evocative and prefigures Messiaen’s later obsession with capturing and notating the sounds of birds in nature.

Bien modéré

The musical score is written for two staves. The upper staff is in bass clef and the lower staff is in treble clef. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The tempo is marked 'Bien modéré'. The dynamics are marked 'pp (*)' and 'cresc.'. The notation includes eighth and sixteenth notes, rests, and a fermata. The lyrics are '(non legato) (La stupeur des anges s'agrandit)'.

pp
(*)

cresc.

(non legato)
(La stupeur des anges
s'agrandit)

The musical “plot lines” for the remaining works from the *Vingt regards* are as follows:

After the Annunciation, Mary looks with adoration upon Jesus within her ... my God, my son, my Magnificat! my love without the sound of words ...

(intérieur)
(Thème de Dieu)

Later the beating heart of the baby Jesus is felt within her, pulsing in the bass.

(crescendo)

ff

f

1 9

8a bassa

(Battements du cœur de l'Enfant)

1 11

8a bassa

La Parole toute-puissante (The all-powerful Word)

This child is the Logos that sustains all things with the power of his word ...

Un peu vif (♩=126)

16^a bassa
(Tam-tam; pédale rythmique sur un rythme non rétrogradable)

* * *

Noël

The Christmas bells ring out with us the sweet names of Jesus, Mary & Joseph

Très vif, joyeux (♩=168)

Très vif, joyeux (♩=168)

ff (comme des cloches)

ff

16^a bassa

The opening of this piece imitates the cacophonous clanging of bells in celebration of the birth of the Christ child.

Olivier Messiaen

L'Alouette calandrelle from *Catalogue d'oiseaux*

Starting in the early 1950s, Messiaen began to deepen his fascination with the sounds of birds, which he viewed as creatures that roam free in nature as joyous manifestations of God's love.

And so, starting in 1956, he began roaming across the width and breadth of the French provinces to transcribe the sounds of each geographical region's native bird species. These transcriptions, totalling 77 distinct species in all, he used to compose 13 pieces of solo piano music which were published in 1958 under the title *Catalogue d'oiseaux* (Bird Catalogue).

Like his *Vingt regards*, each of the collection's 13 pieces is richly annotated, indicating in turn the name of each bird he is hearing. Although one single bird lends its name to each movement, Messiaen includes the full range of bird sounds he heard on a specific afternoon of bird-watching — or rather, bird-listening.

And like a good “birder” diarist, he notes the important details of each outing: where he was, the time of day, the weather, etc.

* * *

In the fifth movement of his collection Messiaen indicates above the score of his movement entitled *L'Alouette calandrelle* that he was in Provence, in arid rocky terrain, surrounded by broom and cypress, with “fierce light and heat.”

On such an afternoon a number of bird calls come to his ear, beginning with the song of the lark — the “greater short-toed lark,” to be precise:

*(Chaleur et solitude
du désert de la Crau)*

Alouette Calandrelle

Lent (♩ = 54) **Un peu vif** (♩ = 108) **Lent** (♩ = 54)

pp *p* *pp*

mf (clair)

Red. Red. ** Red. Red.*

As the birds that Messiaen is hearing have not been schooled in the equal temperament system of 12 equally-spaced semitones used in modern Western music, he gets over this misalignment of pitch classes by having his birds “sing” on the piano in two-note tone clusters, to quite telling effect.

But larks aren't the only creatures auditioning to achieve everlasting fame in his piano works.

A chorus of cicadas croaks out their rough refrain as well.

(chœur des cigales)
Presque vif (♩ = 138)
long
mf (sec et monotone)
f *pp* *ff*
8^a b. (sans péd.)
Red

And the predatory *faucon crécerelle*, a type of falcon, is ever on the watch for prey:

Faucon Crécerelle
Vir (♩ = 152)
f
Red

Not to mention the dull, metallic call of the *caille* (quail):

Caille
Très modéré (♩ = 120)
(bien rythmé, claquement doux et mouillé)
mf *long*
(sans péd., avec sourdine)

In these vivid aural memories, transcribed and recorded on score paper, we get to share in the composer's boundless love of Nature and its aviary inhabitants.

Olivier Messiaen

Cantéyodjayâ

In the period immediately following World War II, Messiaen began to study in depth the 12-tone “serial” composition methods of Schoenberg, Webern and Berg, the so-called “Second Viennese School.” This school of composition was eager to replace the old way of making music with melodies in major or minor keys and diatonic scale-based harmonies with a new approach that would apply rigorous patterning to the musical parameters of pitch, rhythm and duration in pre-determined “series” (hence the term “serial”).

Interesting as Messiaen found these ideas in themselves, they seemed to him merely an extension of late-nineteenth-century German Romanticism. He thought of serial composition as a way of refracting the musical ideals of that period through a mathematical prism only to arrive, in the end, at the same kind of musical expressiveness found in the works of Wagner, Richard Strauss and Mahler.

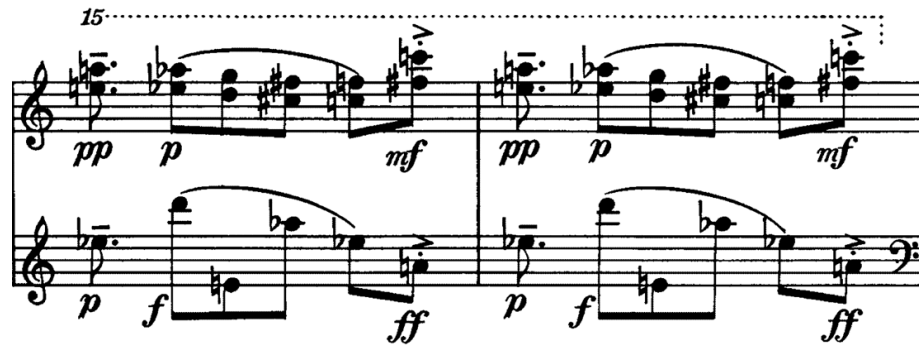
And Messiaen was no German Romantic. For him music had a religious quasi-liturgical purpose, so he looked for inspiration to the ancient musical practices of South India where myriad varieties of Hindu rhythmic patterns had formed the basis for the region’s musical culture for centuries.

The result was *Cantéyodjayâ* (1949) a work consisting of 27 brief “panels” or episodes of music, each structured in a special way. And as had become his practice, the work is elaborately labelled with the names of the Hindu rhythms and practices employed in the separate sections.

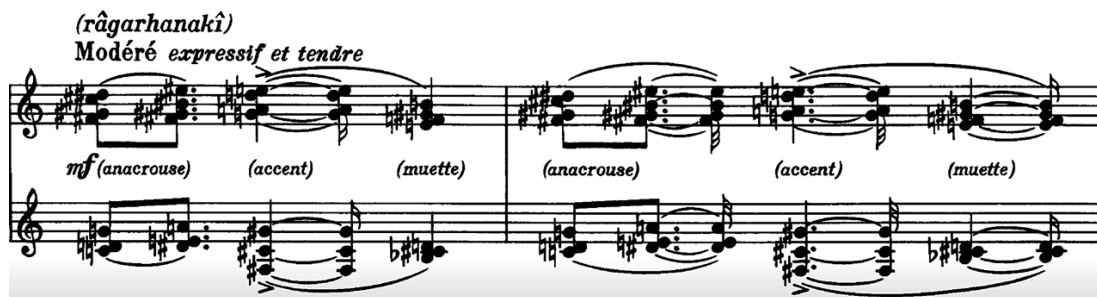
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The opening section functions as a “refrain” that by its frequent recurrences gives the work as a whole a kind of rondo-ish structure. Note the “serialized” dynamics of this section.





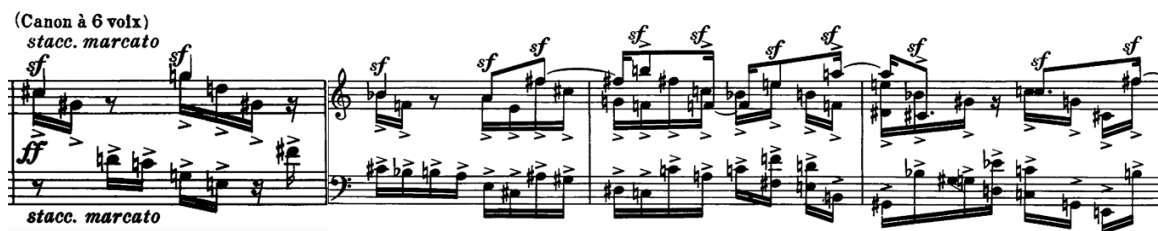
The intervening episodes range widely in their structure and emotional quality. Some are tender and affectionate:



Others are complex mathematical puzzles in which dynamics, pitch and duration values are rigorously organized in repeating series.



And there is even a passage in canon:



The overall effect is one of dazzling, almost overwhelming complexity but a complexity subsumed within a ritual purpose.

Messiaen, even at his most obscure, remains a joyous celebrant at a musically conceived Mass of his own creation.

Donald G. Gíslason, 2024