

**Notes de programme (en anglais)
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Livre du Saint Sacrement ("Book of the Holy Sacrement")

Both Messiaen's first published organ work, the short piece *Le banquet céleste* ("The heavenly banquet") and his monumental *Livre du Saint Sacrement* (1984), the last of the works published during his lifetime, are concerned with blessed sacrament (Holy Communion). The *Livre du Saint Sacrement* is the most extensive of Messiaen's organ cycles. It carves out a theme that is central to Messiaen and summarises his work in terms of musical style and form.

The mystery of Holy Communion

The celebration of Holy Communion lies at the heart of Catholic life. The themes chosen by Messiaen for his compositions have already shown the meaning that this holy act had for him and how fruitful it was for his musical creativity. Furthermore, without Messiaen's work as an organist and improviser, the "Book of the Holy Sacrement" would be unthinkable. The liturgical framework within which the organ works evolved is also perceptible in the *Book of the Sacrament*, although it is neither cast in the form of an "Organ Mass" nor conceived for the setting of a church service.

The movement titles reveal a threefold division within the prodigious work: movements I-IV are a preparation, movements V-XI portray various scenes from the Gospels with connections with Holy Communion or which have meaning for the Catholic interpretation of communion, and, in movements XII-XVIII the liturgy of communion is translated into musical form:

1. "Adoro te" (I adore Thee) - adoration before the wonder that takes place.
- II. "The source of life" - the longing after God's gift.
- III. "The hidden God" - the awareness of the mysterious meaning of the bread and wine.
- IV. "Act of faith" - realisation of faith in the light of the encounter with Christ.
- V. "Puer natus est nobis" (A child is born to us) - Birth of Jesus.
- VI. "Manna and the bread of life" - the wonder of the feeding of the five thousand in Galilee.
- VII. "The resurrected and the light of life" (a further development of a motif in the text on the feeding of the five thousand).
- VIII. "Institution of the Eucharist"
- IX. "Darkness" - Jesus' death, in whose remembrance the Eucharist is celebrated.
- X. "The resurrection of Christ" - the necessary premise for the Christ's presence at the Eucharist.
- XI. "The appearance of the risen Christ to Mary Magdalene" - the first revelation after the resurrection, a sign of the way in which Christ is always encountered in the mystery by the faithful.
- XII. "The Transubstantiation" - the inconceivable happening through which Christ becomes present in the form of bread and wine.
- XIII. "The two walls of water" - an ingenious connection to the act with which the bread is divided after the Transubstantiation.
- XIV. "Prayer before Communion".
- XV. "The joy of Grace" - the inner dimension of the partaking of communion.
- XVI. "Prayer after Communion" - the expression of silent wonder of one who has partaken of Christ.
- XVII. "The presence multiplied" - a further meditation on participation.
- XVIII. "Offering and

final Alleluia"- the last act, through which the spiritual outlook desired and designated by the church for participants in the Eucharist should be carried forward into everyday life.

The overall system reflects the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist and its spirituality: after inner preparation one approaches an awareness of that which Christ did, of the Eucharist, whereupon one participates in the Holy celebration.

The texts that stand above each movement comprise significant quotations from the Bible, and well-known Catholic hymns and prayers, as well as one of the most renowned classics in pious literature, *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis from the 15th century. More abstract theological/philosophical texts of the type that appear in Messiaen's commentaries on the *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité* ("Meditations on the mystery of the Holy Trinity," 1969) are seldom to be found here, aside from Thomas Aquinas' sequence -or rather, didactic poem in the form of sequence *Lauda Sion salvatorem* (see, in particular, the second quotation for movement XIII).

Biblical texts are quoted: in part certain passages in the Gospels that relate in some way to communion, and also other texts that pertain to, or have a liturgical connection with, communion. For the evangelist himself, the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to John (movements VI, VII) already deals with the bread of life as the Eucharist, the Holy Communion; Messiaen's associations coast from John 6:54 ("Whoso eateth my flesh ... hath eternal life, and I will raise him up ... ") through to a related passage on eternal life in John 8:12 ("he that followeth me, ... shall have the light of life"), which provide him with a reason to dwell on the concept of eternal life in his thoughts. The choice of passages for movements VIII-XI is, in light of the ideas in the second part of the work, easy to understand. That the words of the centurion of Capernaum to Jesus in St. Matthew's Gospel (Matthew 8:8) are quoted beneath the title "Prayer before communion" is due to the fact that this text, slightly altered, occurs at precisely this moment in the communion liturgy: "Lord, I am not worth to receive Thee, but only say the word and I shall be healed."

Isaiah 9:6 is quoted as the motto for the first movement in the sequence about Jesus' life, movement V, in the version that appears as the introit for the third Mass of Christmas ("Missa in die"). Following the text from John's Gospel in which Jesus feeds thousands of people with only five loaves and two fish in Galilee, a passage (16:20--21) from the Book of Wisdom, one of the Deuterocanonical books of the Bible, is quoted; the text deals with the miracle in which manna rains down on the Israelites, wandering in the desert. Its words are transmitted in the eucharist and are quoted in the liturgy.

Several of the remaining mottos are taken from well-known Catholic texts. *Adoro te devote*, a hymn by Saint Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274) is sung at Benediction and Corpus Christi, the feast day on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday in which, in particular, the mystery of the eucharist is celebrated. The first movement takes its title from the start of the hymn. In movement III one of its central verses is quoted. One of the hymn's statements on that which gives us certainty that Christ is present in the bread is

portrayed in movement XII. In the conceptual tradition related here, the external forms of bread and wine are a shroud for the Godly presence; symbols through which it manifests itself. The words that constitute the motto for movement IV are part of an often used series of prayers: an act of faith, an act of hope, an act of love. Two quotations by Saint Bonaventure (c. 1221-1274) express an intimacy in the piousness before the Blessed Sacrament. In the tradition to which Messiaen felt that he belonged, in particular the inner, personal aspect of the celebration of the Mass is stressed: its meaning for the inner person, the devotion, the deep inner communion with Christ, the anticipation of eternal life with him. The same spirit characterises the quotes between the soul and Christ in Thomas a Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*. One of the quotations for movement VI is taken from Columba Marmion (1858-1923), Abbot of the Benedictine monastery in Maredsous, Belgium, who had Irish roots, at the start of the 20th century and one of Messiaen's teachers. His spiritual message, with roots in the Benedictine tradition and, at the same time, open to the legacy of Saint Thomas Aquinas, was focused on Christ and fellowship with him. The Marmion quotation renews Messiaen's entrenchment in the French-speaking intellectual and spiritual tradition commonly known as the "Renouveau catholique" ('Catholic Renewal') (see also chapter 2.1).

The musical language

To the listener with only a moderate familiarity with contemporary art music, parts of the "Sacrament Book" may appear to be difficult or radical music. Here, Messiaen uses the tonally very free musical language that he developed, particularly in the "experimental" period around 1950 and, therefore, can be found in works including the *Livre d'orgue* ("Organ Book," chapter 3.8).

In other parts of the work the means of expression of the melody and harmony of older times is just far away. Parts of the "Sacrament Book" strongly recall Messiaen's earliest works, with harmony (and melody that is coloured by it) that is built on music of the Impressionists - not least Claude Debussy - and Messiaen's own "modes of limited transposition."

The musical language throughout is typical of Messiaen: he develops his own stylistic devices that clearly set him apart from other 20th century composers. A richness of colour in the harmonic progressions; certain intervals (e.g. augmented fourth) that frequently recur; ingenious use of the sonic possibilities of the organ; an ever varied rhythm influenced by the changing and intricate rhythms of Ancient Greek poetry and, in particular, by the Indian music tradition; melody that is influenced to a large extent by Gregorian chant (unless it is not even a matter of direct quotations or variations of plainsong themes); as a whole, a strongly palpable will to paint scenes and express emotions - all this is continued from the line of Messiaen's earlier works.

Birdsong also plays an important role in the "Sacrament Book" - this musical gift from nature which was used systematically by Messiaen in his works since the 1940s and completely dominated a period in his music (see chapter 2.8.2). The birdsong in the "Sacrament Book" is remarkable in that only birds that are found in Israel appear - as the composer writes in the commentary - purely birds that Jesus himself may have

heard. Even in the use of birdsong, a theological concept emerges; it confirms a picture of Messiaen as one of the musical creators whose entire thinking and output are strongly influenced by his Catholic world view and piety. Many of the birds belong to species never found in northern latitudes.

The birdcalls were notated in situ, including at the Dead Sea, Jordan, the Judaeen desert near Jerusalem and in the Tel Aviv area. The notations took place during a journey to the Holy Land that Messiaen made shortly before commencing work on the "Sacrament Book." For a listener expecting a reserved interpretation of the Gospel texts, it is surely surprising, perhaps even shocking, to hear, for example, the form of the "Institution of the Eucharist," in the extremely important hour in which Jesus acquainted his disciples with the sacrifice that he would accomplish on the cross. The atmosphere of the supper room is portrayed with the help of cairn chords, while Jesus' words "this is my body, this is my blood" are expressed through solemn and heavy chord progressions - but the room's window is open and a bird sings outside ...

To a limited extent, Messiaen employs the aforementioned musical code language (langage communicable), which was developed in *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité*, in the "Sacrament Book." All this makes the "Sacrament Book" a summary of Messiaen's untiring musical work over some sixty years; work whose aim it was to push at the boundaries of music in such a way as to create a universal dimension in music or, as he put it, "a music that, at the same time, touches all things and God."

In contrast to the earlier works, Messiaen provides more of a general commentary which describes the course of the work that we shall view here. For texts on individual movements, reference should be made to the corresponding chapters.

"The Livre du Saint Sacrement for organ was written in 1984. It includes 18 pieces: some of them are short, others are more developed. The first pieces are acts of adoration before Christ, who is invisible but really present in the Holy Sacrament.

The first piece, "I adore Thee," expresses exactly this adoration.

The second piece, "The Source of life," expresses the thirst for grace given through the Holy Sacrament.

The third piece is entitled: "The hidden God." In addition to the music of adoration on the soft foundation stops 16 and 8 of the Swell, with the Octavin 2, one hears here: a plainsong theme: the Alleluia of the Feast of Corpus Christi (the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ), and two bird songs of Israel: Tristram's Grackle, notated at En Gedi, between Masada and the Dead Sea, and the Olivaceous Warbler (notated at Lod, near Tel Aviv). The fourth piece is an act of faith before the real presence of God. All the graces that Christ won for us at various times in his earthly life always keep

their power, which is applied to us at each feast of the Liturgy. This idea is developed at length in the very beautiful book by Dom Columba Marmion, *Le Christ dans ses Mystères* (Christ in His mysteries). It is especially through the Holy Communion that the graces of the Mysteries of Christ are given to us. Therefore, the pieces which are going to follow describe each Mystery of Christ in chronological order.

The fifth piece: "Puer natus est nobis" (A child is born to us) speaks of the Nativity. It makes use of a plain-song theme: the Introit for Christmas. It also uses a bird song: the Olive-Tree Warbler.

The sixth piece: "Manna and the bread of life," comes from the Sermon on the bread of life, preached by Jesus at Capernaum, in the course of his earthly life. In this sermon, Jesus himself mentions manna as a symbol of the Eucharist. The music, then, represents the desert where the manna fell from heaven. Very high chords on the 3-rank Cymbale of the Swell evoke the peace and silence of the desert. The long trilled chords on the Clarinet and Nazard of the Positif at 16, 8, and 4, crescendoing and decrescendoing, imitate the very strong desert wind which blows from time to time. The songs of two birds of Israel are used, those of the Morning Chat and the Desert Lark (both songs were taken down in the desert of Judaea, by the Mount of Temptation). The Desert Lark is a bird native to the rocky terrain of Jordan and Palestine, with very bright plumage (yellowish-orange and yellowish-brown). Its abrupt, monotonous song is typical of the Judean desert.

Since the sermon on the bread of life promised the Resurrection, the seventh piece is entitled "The Resurrected and the light of life."

The eighth piece: "Institution of the Eucharist," represents that holiest of moments when Christ first pronounced the sacramental words, 'This is my Body. This is my Blood.' The background of the piece is a Greek rhythmic pattern (bacchius): short, long, long, slightly amplified. The miraculous words are given to the Hautbois of the Swell, with the Bourdon 16, Octavin, and Tierce in chords of the third mode (second transposition), gray and mauve, over a sustained pianissimo on the Cor de Nuit of the Positif, in A major, blue-violet, and very calm. The song of the Nightingale floats through the open window.

The ninth piece, "The darkness," is about three kinds of darkness. First, the 'power of darkness': horrible clusters in Mode 2 (first and second transpositions) and then in Mode 3 (first, second and fourth transpositions). Second, the Crucifixion with the rending of distended members and the fortissimo of suffering. Third, the physical darkness which falls across the land.

The tenth piece: "The Resurrection of Christ." Christ rises suddenly, in all the power of his glory, with the fortissimo of the organ and luminous chords radiating all the colours of the rainbow.

The eleventh piece: "The Apparition of the risen Christ" to Mary Magdalene. It is the most fully developed movement of the cycle, daylight has not yet broken. It is dark, the end of the night. A progressively rising commixture of chromatic counterpoint describes the moment. Mary Magdalene, weeping by the tomb, turns and sees Jesus without recognizing him. Jesus says to her, 'Mary!' Mysterious and solemn chords symbolize the vision of the Resurrected One, and his soft voice seems to come from beyond. A long crescendo passage follows. Mary looks, but she does not understand. She hesitates, wide-eyed, and suddenly, filled with a wild joy, she recognizes him! Chords with tense resonance and their transposed inversions. She kneels down before him. The voice resumes. The lamentation heard in the Crucifixion joins the mysterious chords: the glorified body of Christ has kept the marks of the five wounds. Then comes the mission: 'Go, find my brothers and tell them my words: I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'. The themes of the Son and the Father are accompanied by the song of a bird of Iran and northern Palestine, the White-Throated Robin. This is the revelation of the Resurrection and the Ascension, and so the word A-p-o-c-a-1-y-p-s-e (Revelation) is spelled out fortissimo in a musical alphabet. Night is ending, and the chromatic counterpoint of the beginning returns in a descending pattern. The mysterious and solemn chords of the Resurrected One are taken up again pianissimo. In the pale dawn the vision fades away.

From the twelfth piece onward, we leave the chronological order of events in the life of Christ, and we are in his Church today, making prayers to him through the Holy Sacrament. The title of the twelfth piece is "The Transubstantiation." This term is used in theology to denote the changing of the substance of bread and wine into that of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist. A mode of durations, pitches, and timbres tries to express this mystery. The songs of two birds of Israel, the Common Garden Bulbul and the Laughing Dove (both notated at En Gedi in Judaea), are superimposed on the first notes of a plainsong theme, the Communion of the Feast of Corpus Christi (the Feast of the Holy Sacrament). The mode of durations, pitches, and timbres follows, and the two birds and the plainsong return. The opening notes of the plainsong are developed, using alternating durations of 2, 3, and 4 32nd notes, insisting on the relationship of three to four. The movement ends with the Communion for Corpus Christi played on the 16 Quintaton with the Nazard, over a pianissimo background on the Voix céleste.

Thirteenth piece: "The two walls of water." The composer has made a comparison between the presence of God in the two raised walls of water at

the parting of the Red Sea, and the actual presence of Christ in the two fragments of the broken host. The movement is a fortissimo tutti alternating between a vigorous toccata and the song of the Melodious Warbler. In the middle, jagged arpeggios in contrary motion represent the precipitous waves. The toccata returns, followed by the song of the Egyptian Great Reed Warbler. The fortissimo conclusion superimposes complementary colours: acid green on brownish red, yellow on violet.

The fourteenth piece: "Prayer before communion." It is an act of humility. 'lord, I am not worthy to receive you.'

The fifteenth piece: "The joy of grace." inspired by two texts from 'The Imitation of Christ.' Birdsongs are used to symbolize the joy of Divine Love. The birds are the Common Garden Bulbul and Tristram's Grackle (both notated at En Gedi, Judaea) and the White-Throated Robin (of Iran and northern Palestine). One will note the absence of 8 foot sound in the registration and the abundance of mixtures and small mutation stops.

Sixteenth piece: "Prayer after the communion." Melodic garlands on the Quintaton 16 and Nazard of the Positif alternate with the Bourdon 16 and Quinte of the Great, over a background of the Voix céleste on the Swell. The quotation from Saint Bonaventure talks of softness and sweetness, and the harmonic colours try to correspond these qualities. Toward the very end, one will note the chords of contracted resonance and in transposed inversions.

Seventeenth piece: "The Presence multiplied." Jesus Christ is present in all the consecrated hosts on earth, for all times and all places.

The eighteenth and final piece is entitled: "Offering and Final Alleluia." An offering to God of all the prayers of all the saints. After the act of offering sung by the Cornet of the Positif, the joy of the Saints. This joy alternates a dazzling toccata with brilliant alleluia-like passages on the foundation stops and pleins-jeux. The word 'I-a J-o-i-e' [joy] is proclaimed and there is a conclusion in fortissimo."