

God Among Us: A Theological Analysis of Olivier Messiaen's *La Nativité*

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MUSICAL EXAMPLES

Example 1. "Dieu parmi nous," from Messiaen, *La Nativité*, mm. 1–3

laksmīśa: 2 3 4 8

Lent et puissant

fff staccato

staccato

R

rāgavardhana: 4 4 4 2 2 2

Example 2. "Dieu parmi nous," mm. 23–24

2 2 2 3 3 3 1 - - - u

candrakalā *épitrite*

Example 3. "Dieu parmi nous," mm. 35–36

3 2 2

Example 4. "Dieu parmi nous," mm. 100–104

The first system of the musical score consists of three staves. The top two staves are in treble clef, and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The music features complex chordal textures with many accidentals. The first two staves have long horizontal lines indicating sustained notes or chords. The bass staff contains a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, with 'v' markings below the notes.

The second system of the musical score consists of three staves. The top two staves are in treble clef, and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The key signature is three sharps. The tempo marking "Plus lent" is above the first staff, and "rall." is above the second staff. The dynamic marking "fff staccato sempre" is below the first staff. The music features complex chordal textures with many accidentals. The first two staves have long horizontal lines indicating sustained notes or chords. The bass staff contains a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, with 'v' markings below the notes.

The third system of the musical score consists of three staves. The top two staves are in treble clef, and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The key signature is three sharps. The tempo marking "molto rall." is above the first staff, and "Lent" is above the second staff. The dynamic marking "fff" is below the first staff. The music features complex chordal textures with many accidentals. The first two staves have long horizontal lines indicating sustained notes or chords. The bass staff contains a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, with 'v' markings below the notes. The system ends with a double bar line and a fermata over the final notes.

Example 5. “Dieu parmi nous,” mm. 55–58

501 *Très modéré*

503 *Lent*

Example 6. “La Vierge et l’Enfant,” from Messiaen, *La Nativité*, m. 1

antibacchius

short (u) short (u) long (-)

Example 7. “Puer natus est nobis” plainchant, from Messiaen, *Technique*, p. 37

Pu . er na . tus est no . bis, et — fi . li . us da . tusest no . bis. —

Example 8. "La Vierge et l'Enfant," mm. 16-20, upper staff

Un peu vif G. (montre 8, bourd. t6) *f legato*

This musical score consists of three staves. The top staff begins with the tempo marking "Un peu vif" and the instrument instruction "G. (montre 8, bourd. t6)". The music is marked "f legato". It features a complex melodic line with many sixteenth notes, some beamed together, and several slurs. The middle and bottom staves continue the melodic and harmonic development of the passage.

Example 9. "La Vierge et l'Enfant," m. 16, lower staff

short (u) short (u) long (-)

This image shows a single staff of music for measure 16. The staff contains a series of chords, each with a slur underneath. Below the staff, three labels are positioned: "short (u)", "short (u)", and "long (-)", corresponding to the first, second, and third chords respectively.

Example 10. From Messiaen, *Technique*, p. 37

This image shows a single staff of music with a sequence of six notes: a quarter note, an eighth note, a quarter note, a quarter note, an eighth note, and a quarter note. The notes are all on the same pitch, with the fourth note being a half note with a sharp sign.

SIGNIFICANT SYMBOLIC NUMBERS UTILIZED IN *LA NATIVITÉ*

- one.** A number favored for its indivisibility, one often suggests the indivisible God. Additionally, Messiaen often uses one to add value to another unit of measurement.
- two.** This number represents earthly, terrestrial things, as it is the first even number. Though technically a prime number, it is essentially divisible into smaller units (1 + 1), unlike odd numbers which represent indivisible divinity. For Messiaen, two is the “purest” or smallest even number and is therefore the simplest representation of humanity.
- three.** A favored prime number, three suggests the Holy Trinity. Three cannot be divided, and it therefore suggests the indivisible God comprising three discrete beings. Messiaen considers three to be the first odd number, and he consistently remarks that it is the perfect symbol for divinity.
- five.** The number five is highly symbolic in Messiaen’s music, as it is the sum of the first even number (2) and the first odd number (3). It often represents Christ, who is at once human and divine. Five is also associated with Shiva, the Hindu god of destruction; Messiaen notes that Shiva is associated with destruction, restorative dance, and ultimately rebirth or resurrection. In Indian culture, five represents the union of female (2) and male (3) and is therefore all-encompassing.
- seven.** Another prime number, seven holds great symbolism in many religions and cultures. God created the universe in six days, resting on the seventh; seven therefore symbolizes rest and Sabbath. There are numerous biblical references to the number seven, leading Messiaen to revere this number as representing all things sacred.
- eight.** The number eight symbolizes eternity for Messiaen, as the rest represented by seven is extended into the ultimate rest of eternity.
- nine.** Yet another odd number, nine is a perfect square as the product of 3 x 3. It often represents divinity or maternity, symbolizing the nine months of pregnancy.
- ten.** Ten is the number of commandments that God ceremoniously gave the Israelites; it may therefore be suggestive of Old Testament law in certain contexts within Messiaen’s music.

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