

**Saint Thomas Church, Fifth Avenue
New York City**

Richard Tanner, *Organist and Director of Music*
Nicolas Haigh, *Associate Organist*
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Sunday Recital Series

Richard Tanner, organ

The Nancy B. and John B. Hoffman Organist and Director of Music

Sunday, December 14, 2025 at 5.15p.m.

La Nativité du Seigneur (1935)

- i. La vierge et l'enfant
- ii. Les bergers
- iii. Desseins éternels
- iv. Le verbe
- v. Les enfants de Dieu
- vi. Les anges
- vii. Jésus accepte la souffrance
- viii. Les mages
- ix. Dieu parmi nous

Olivier Messiaen
(1908-1992)

LA VIERGE ET L'ENFANT

Conçu par une Vierge un Enfant
nous a été donné.

Sois transporté d'allégresse, fille de Sion !

Voici que ton roi vient à toi,
juste et humble.

*Conceived of a virgin,
unto us a child is born, for unto us a son is given.
Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion;
behold thy king cometh unto thee;
he is just and lowly.
(Isaiah; Zechariah)*

The first meditation begins in a mood of rapt contemplation – a moment frozen in time as the Virgin gazes down with infinite tenderness at her new-born child. This movement is in ternary form (ABA) like the three panels of a stained-glass window, and the opening scene is bathed in violet light. The scherzo-like central section represents the joy of the Blessed Virgin in a kind of hypnotic dance constructed from three independent elements - an ornate melody for the right hand (based on the plainsong Introit for Christmas Day, *Puer natus est*), an ostinato group of eleven chords for the left hand, and a “carillon” pedal ostinato sounding in the treble register on bell-like mutation stops. A brief reprise of the opening scene and an exquisite improvisatory cadenza, for solo flute, bring this first movement to a close.

LES BERGERS

Ayant vu l'Enfant couché dans la crèche,
les bergers s'en retournèrent, glorifiant et louant Dieu.

*Having seen the child lying in a manger,
the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God.
(St. Luke)*

The introduction to the second meditation again describes the scene in the stable, intensifying the atmosphere of the preceding piece, as the shepherds kneel in silent adoration. The superposition of two chordal lines in different modes evokes “the holy light round the manger” in a complex of shifting colours - violet blue, flecked with red, gold and silver. Ten years later, Messiaen was to write a similar passage in the *Regard du Silence* from *Vingt Regards sur L'Enfant Jésus*, once again depicting the infant Christ asleep in the manger; in this case he described the music as “emerging from the silence like colours coming out of the night”. With a brief flourish on their pipes, the shepherds rise, and the music takes on a more human, less rarefied character as they depart, piping “a sort of carol with a curious rhythm – a naïve melody in the style of the popular noels of the French provinces, played first on the clarinet, then on the oboe, with two simple verses, and two decorated verses.” The use of Greek rhythmic figures gives the carol an attractively wayward, unpredictable flavour.

DESSEINS ÉTERNELS

Dieu, dans son amour, nous a prédestinés à être ses fils
adoptifs, par Jésus-Christ, à la louange de la gloire de sa grâce.

*God, in his love, has predestinated us into the
adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, to
the praise of the glory of his grace.
(Ephesians)*

The next three meditations move away from the historic events of Christmas, and concentrate on more profound theological considerations. A single seamless phrase for flutes, accompanied by Voix celestes, *Desseins Eternels* is one of those ecstatic, timeless slow movements which feature in many of Messiaen's early works (*Diptyque*, *Combat de la Mort et de la Vie*, *Quartet for the End of Time*). This is a meditation on the mystery of God's eternal plan for the salvation of humankind through his Son; the composer directs the performer to play “extremely slowly and tenderly”.

LE VERBE

Le Seigneur m'a dit: Tu es mon fils. De son sein,
avant que l'aurore existât, il m'a engendré.
Je suis l'Image de la bonté de Dieu,
je suis le Verbe, dès le commencement.

*The Lord has said unto me, thou art my son.
In his bosom, before the dawn existed, he begat me.
I am the image of the goodness of God, I am the word of life,
that which was from the beginning.
(Psalms; Wisdom; St. John)*

The second volume of *La Nativité*, containing the fourth and fifth pieces, is concerned with the Word of God, the Word made flesh. To match the grandeur of this theme, Messiaen uses the fortissimo of the organ for the first time, making a striking effect after the preceding fifteen minutes of very quiet music. In his own words, “The eternal generation of the Word is something that cannot be expressed. Nevertheless, I felt I had to give it a commentary, however unworthy - meditation on this theme being recommended at the season of Christmas. Le Verbe is divided into two parts. The fundamental theme of the first part is a slow descent on the pedal reeds, reminiscent of the terrible fortissimo of the long trumpets in Michelangelo's Last Judgement, and also of certain trombone themes in the music of Wagner . . .” A short development, employing several characteristic harmonic and rhythmic devices, leads to the second part of the piece, which “symbolises the Word. It is a long solo for cornet (a tone-colour that is particularly colourful and rich in harmonics), which combines elements of the plainsong Sequences in its structure, the Hindu rāgas in its character, and the ornamented chorales of Bach in the arabesques which decorate the solemn melody . . .” There are no Christmas Sequences in the plainsong repertory, so Messiaen took as his model the Easter Sequence *Victimae paschali laudes*, and this forms the basis of both the melody and the phrase-structure of this serene meditation.

LES ENFANTS DE DIEU

A tous ceux qui l'ont reçu, le Verbe a donné le pouvoir de devenir enfants de Dieu. Et Dieu a envoyé dans leur cœur l'Esprit de son Fils, lequel crie: Père! Père!

But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God. And because ye are sons, God has sent forth the spirit of his son into your hearts, crying: Abba, Father.
(St. John; Galatians)

This short fifth meditation cannot really stand alone, but acts as a coda to the preceding movement, tying together the theological strands of *Desseins Eternels* and *Le Verbe*, emphasising the Word as the agent whereby the Christian becomes the adopted child of God. A joyful rhythmic crescendo over long pedal points accelerates into a majestic phrase for the tutti ("Abba, Father!"), after which the music quickly subsides into a peaceful, ecstatic close – the true peace that dwells in the hearts of those who have become children of God.

LES ANGES

L'armée céleste louait Dieu et disait:
Gloire à Dieu au plus haut des cieux!

A multitude of the heavenly host, praising God, and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest'.
(St. Luke)

The third volume of *La Nativité*, like the first, contains three pieces, with two descriptive and one theological meditation. With *Les Anges*, we return to the Christmas story. "The Gloria in excelsis is the first of all Christmas songs: it was taught to us by the Angels. It is a song of joy. This joy, this exultation, are expressed here. But by Angels, pure, invisible, incorporeal spirits, endowed with complete liberty and transparency. The piece is written for just two voices . . . and the music evolves entirely in the treble register. The rhythm is extremely free; no equal values . . . Greek and Hindu rhythms . . . all contributing to a vital expression of joy, free of all material constraints." Towards the end of the piece the uneven rhythms are ironed out into a rapid staccato moto perpetuo, and the angels seem to be beating their wings directly overhead; but they soon retire into the distance, and finally fly off the top of the keyboard in a haze of fluttering trills.

JÉSUS ACCEPTE LA SOUFFRANCE

Le Christ a dit à son Père en entrant dans le monde:
'Vous n'avez agréé ni holocaustes, ni sacrifices pour le péché, mais vous m'avez formé un corps. Me voici!'

Wherefore when he cometh into the world he saith to his father, sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not, but a body hast thou prepared me. Lo, I come.
(Hebrews)

This seventh meditation withdraws to a distance once more, to ponder the mystery of the Incarnation. Like the preceding piece, it is best introduced in the composer's own words: "This extraordinary text, drawn from Psalm 40 and applied by St Paul to Christ in the Epistle to the Hebrews, reveals to us the first stirring of the soul of Jesus at the moment of the Incarnation. In this solemn moment he accepts the Cross, and all the sufferings of his life and Passion. Behind the Angel of the Annunciation, behind the manger at Christmas, there already stands the Cross. This unique sacrifice, evoked by the first two chords, receives immediate consent in the reply of the Bassoon deep in the bass. The progressive augmentation and diminution of the intervals describe with realism the tension of the Crucifixion. At the end of the piece, the formula of acceptance, fortissimo for the tutti: 'Lo, I come!'"

LES MAGES

Les Mages partirent, et l'étoile allait devant eux.

*The wise men departed, and the star went before them.
(St. Matthew)*

The eighth meditation returns to the highly-coloured, evocative atmosphere of the first two pieces. As the Wise Men leave King Herod, the star returns, and guides them to the stable at Bethlehem. "And they follow with their camels, their servants, their gifts – a tranquil and majestic caravan." The hypnotic progress of this nocturnal procession is represented by an incessant ostinato of off-beat chords, while the melody in the pedals symbolises the star, sounding high and clear on soft mutation stops, with an accompaniment of coloured chords, "passing from green and gold to velvet blue, deep purple alternating with orange." "Towards the end, the registration becomes tender and mysterious: the Three Kings are on their knees before the infant Christ."

DIEU PARMI NOUS

Paroles du communiant, de la Vierge,
de l'Église tout entière:

Celui qui m'a créé a reposé dans ma tente,
le Verbe s'est fait chair et il a habité en moi.

Mon âme glorifie le Seigneur, mon esprit a tressailli
d'allégresse en Dieu mon Sauveur.

*He that made me rested in my
tabernacle.*

*And the word was made
flesh and dwelt among us.*

*My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my
spirit hath rejoiced in God my savior.
(Ecclesiasticus; St. John; St. Luke)*

The final meditation forms the whole of the fourth and last book of *La Nativité*. *Dieu parmi nous* has become a popular showpiece in its own right, but in fact it sums up the whole work, and loses much of its overwhelming climactic effect when played out of context. This movement is much more complex than any of the preceding pieces; there are three symbolic themes, introduced in turn on the opening page. "First, a massive descending pedal theme (recalling the equally impressive descent of *Le Verbe*), representing the glorious and ineffable fall of the second person of the Holy Trinity into human nature – this is the Incarnation. Second, a gentle theme of love, representing Communion with Christ. Third, a theme of joy: this is Mary's Magnificat, treated in birdsong style." (Incidentally, this is the first time that birdsong, even in a non-specific, stylised form, appears in Messiaen's music.) Development of these themes follows, eventually erupting into a wild toccata, with the Incarnation theme thundering out in the pedals beneath a barrage of staccato chords – "This toccata in E major is the essence of the piece, the long development which precedes it being nothing more than a preparation." At the end the music gradually slows down through a succession of five enormous, brightly-coloured harmonies, finally coming to rest on a luminous chord of E major.

RICHARD TANNER is The Nancy B. and John B. Hoffmann Organist and Director of Music at Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue, New York City, where he directs the Saint Thomas Choir of Men and Boys, the leading ensemble of its kind in the United States.

Richard has specialised in the training of boy and girl chorister voices for over thirty years. As music director, organist and producer, he has made over fifty recordings and has worked extensively for the BBC, including for twenty years as a musical director and organist for BBC Radio 4's Daily Service.

Orchestras that he has conducted include the Malta Philharmonic Orchestra, the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, the period instrument ensemble, Canzona, and The Bliss Sinfonia, which he founded. Recordings as a conductor, both with the Northern Chamber Orchestra, include Requiem and Organ Concerto by David Briggs and The Manchester Carols by Carol Ann Duffy and Sasha Johnson Manning. His organ recordings are available on Spotify, including Messiaen's La Nativité du Seigneur. He has given masterclasses in Shanghai and Shenzhen, and has directed choral courses in Sweden and for RSCM America.

Richard was a chorister at St Paul's Cathedral, student at the Royal Academy of Music, London, and organ scholar at Exeter College Oxford. He has held posts at St Albans Cathedral, Trinity Laban Conservatoire, All Saints' Northampton, Rugby School and Blackburn Cathedral, where he was Director of Music for 13 years.

He is married to the soprano, Philippa Hyde (www.philippahydesoprano.com).

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BENTON SCHMIDT, organ

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