

KING'S COLLEGE  
CAMBRIDGE



**MESSIAEN**  
LA NATIVITÉ DU SEIGNEUR

Richard Gowers



## ORGAN SCHOLARS OF KING'S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE

Organ Scholars at King's are undergraduate students at the College with a range of roles and responsibilities, including playing for choral services in the Chapel, assisting in the training of the probationers and Choristers, and conducting the full choir from time to time. The position of Organ Scholar is held for the duration of the student's degree course. Richard Gowers was Organ Scholar at King's from 2014-2017, and among his predecessors are a great number of respected musicians who have gone on to have distinguished careers. Recorded at the end of his time at King's, this is Richard's first solo recording, and the first recording by an Organ Scholar to be released on the College's own label.

**CD**

**67:40**

**OLIVIER MESSIAEN**

LA NATIVITÉ DU SEIGNEUR (NEUF MÉDITATIONS POUR ORGUE)

1	I La Vierge et l'enfant	6:55
2	II Les bergers	7:11
3	III Desseins éternels	6:51
4	IV Le Verbe	16:20
5	V Les enfants de Dieu	3:59
6	VI Les anges	3:42
7	VII Jésus accepte la souffrance	5:14
8	VIII Les mages	7:56
9	IX Dieu parmi nous	9:32

## LA NATIVITÉ DU SEIGNEUR

In September 1931 at the age of 22 Olivier Messiaen took up the prestigious position of *Organiste Titulaire* at the church of La Sainte-Trinité, promising 'to perform his duties with wisdom and classical restraint'. He went on to do so with dedication and distinction for some sixty years – but if he managed to show 'classical restraint', this was only by keeping his own compositions out of the picture. Even in these early years, despite his pale demeanour and quiet, shy manner, his music already betrayed a direct, passionate intensity and bold originality. In the years following his appointment at the Trinité he wrote a stream of striking orchestral and organ works on religious themes. At this time there was much debate among Catholic thinkers concerning the relation of faith to the modern world. The writings of Thomas Aquinas had held canonical status since a Papal encyclical of 1879, following which a whole culture of 'neo-Thomist' ideas came to dominate French religious thought, including the writings of Jacques Maritain (1882-1973). His treatise *Art et scolastique* of 1920 set out a theological rationale for artistic practice as a pure, objective creative act

untainted by personal expression or emotion; this rather austere manifesto struck a chord and came to underwrite (perhaps surprisingly) the most chic and coolly provocative new music being written in Paris in the 1920s – that of the neo-classical Stravinsky and Les Six. Although Aquinas himself remained vitally important to Messiaen throughout his life, he hated neo-classicism, calling it 'dry' and 'mechanical', and could not accept that a religious subject could sincerely be treated in such a dispassionate, impersonal manner. Already in his earliest pieces, religious contemplation for Messiaen is voluptuous, sensual and violently expressive.

One notable aspect of the sensuality in Messiaen's music was his distinctive array of modes, whose symmetries and cyclic properties lend a floating, suspended quality to both harmony and melody that can become hypnotic, especially at a slow tempo. He discovered these modes early on, and in the orchestral *L'Ascension* (1932-33) they are sculpted into the first of Messiaen's grand religious designs: four movements which lead the listener on a broad arc from expectancy to exultation. The arrangement of this work for organ (1934, including a new and exhilarating third movement) created the first of Messiaen's organ cycles, and surely paved the way for his next imposing religious fresco, *La Nativité du Seigneur*, written in the mountains near Grenoble over the summer of 1935.

'I think I have made progress from the rhythmic point of view', he wrote to his friend Claude Arrieu in September of that year, and indeed it was in this new work that Messiaen unveiled a novel

and striking approach to rhythm, conceived very much as a counterpart to his symmetrical modes, combining both symmetry and irregularity and sweeping away the traditional, regular metres which had quietly underpinned most European music for the last several centuries. What catalysed this startling move was finding, in the article on 'rhythms' from Langren's recently completed *Encyclopédie de la Musique*, a list taken from a 16th century Spanish treatise of 120 rhythms from different regional musical traditions. For Messiaen, these 120 descriptions offered a way to handle rhythm that was at once vigorous, sophisticated, and susceptible to infinite elaboration: he did not see these 'rhythmic rhythms' as culturally marked, but universal: he felt no need to think of the way they might have been used in their original context, did he use them to suggest any sort of 'oriental' atmosphere. The new rhythms, armoured, combined with his distinctive modal harmony, now gave Messiaen a complete and highly original musical language, and the means to develop a far wider range of moods and ideas than in any piece of his up to that point. It is easy to understand why he viewed *La Nativité* as a landmark in his development.

Messiaen had already built up quite a reputation, and the premiere of *La Nativité* at La Trinité on 27 February 1936 aroused lively interest, and some famously positive reviews. Rather than playing it himself he divided the movements among three organist friends – Daniel Lesau, Jean Langren and Jean-Jacques Grunenwald – perhaps hoping that each of them would go on to perform the whole work for themselves. The audience was

lured with a specially printed leaf which, as well as summarising the new musical techniques, proclaimed Messiaen's overriding aim:

*The emotion, the sincerity of the musical work: to be at the service of the dogmas of Catholic theology [...] Theological subject matter? The best, since it contains all subjects. And the abundance of technical means allows the heart to overflow freely.*

Responding to the exhortations of Dom Columba Harmon in his book *La Chrétié des rythmes*, which Messiaen acquired in 1931 and took deeply to heart, *La Nativité* contemplates each element of the Christmas story in turn. The arrangement of nine topics shows a characteristic interweaving of symbolism, divine (mostly prime) numbers and religious storytelling. A lengthy preface written by the composer for the published score indicates the main theological ideas: predestination (III); God living and suffering among us (IX and VII); three births – of the Word eternal, of Christ temporal, of Christians (spiritual) (IV, I and V); characters which lend the festival of Christmas a particular poetry (the angels, the Magi, the shepherds); and the motherhood of the Blessed Virgin, symbolised by the work's nine movements. Rather than simply tracing the narrative event by event, therefore, the cycle moves between character portraits (which evoke the main episodes of the story by association) and contemplation of their

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broader significance, perhaps subtly recalling the layers of narrative and devotional meditation in Bach's Passions.

**I La Vierge et l'enfant / The Virgin and child**

The cycle opens with a melody of rapt wonder over sweet mysterious chords (in one of Messiaen's modes) as the Virgin holds the baby in her arms and gazes on him with love and amazement. Contemplation then breaks into joy, as the plainchant *Puer natus est tibi a beatis* is transformed by jubilant flourishes and ornaments into an exultant dance. We return to the opening melody in softer, deeper hues, and just as the piece seems to end there is a beautiful surprise, a delicate light which rises, circles and swirls.

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**II Les bergers / The shepherds** Messiaen portrays the shepherds returning to their fields after visiting the holy Family, marveling and praising God for what they have seen. A mysterious introduction plays magically with the way short sounds sparkle and vanish into the ambience of a resonant acoustic, like tiny lights - and probably evokes an unearthly halo above the manger, still glittering in the shepherds' minds. One of them tries a few tentative calls on his pipe, before launching into a joyful, rustic melody which is repeated and embellished at intervals before fading into the distance.

**III Descente d'Israhel / Eternal Descent** Already we have heard Messiaen exploring some unusual

and magical combinations of sounds from the impressive resources of his beloved Cavaille-Coll organ at La Trinité, now the soft, deep and hollow timbres of quincunx, *cor de nuit*, Bourdon and *voix céleste* join in a hushed meditation, with a single span of melody hovering in defiance of all gravity over shimmering chords.

**IV La Verbe / The Word** A dangerous and urgent flourish introduces a weighty figure in the pedals, furiously, descending with awesome power to the depths. This figure evokes God's descent into the earthly realm as the Word made flesh, and will reappear in increasingly triumphant tones in the first movement, here each appearance follows a more intense preamble, including an *Andantino* with superimposed winds, figures below the first and final descent. After a dramatic climax, total contrast: a long and moving melody over soft sustained chords, and another breathless moment of contemplation. Though wholly transformed into Messiaen's own idiom, the melody is based on another plainchant, *Victimus Pascha*, looking forward to the consummation of Easter.

**V Les enfants de Dieu / The children of God** Theologically this movement follows on directly from the preceding one: to all those who have received it, the Word has given the power to become children of God. An inexorable crescendo rises to a glorious surburd of serenity - unleashing the organ's full power for the first time - after which slow, tender harmonies sink gently down to a deep repose.

**VI Les anges / The angels** There is nothing frail or flimsy about these angels, which dart and sweep through the air, swift and athletic, in a dizzying dance of grace. Messiaen excludes all deep pedal steps from the movement and uses his rhythmic rhythms to create brilliant speeches of sound, constantly re-forming the fireworks.

**VII Jésus accepte le souffrance / Jesus accepts his suffering** The words of the Passion to come are already seen at this moment of incarnation. Two grim, implacable chords provide a pathos-filled response, and we hear how the intensity of Messiaen's unique harmony can express anguish as well as delight. Again we hear the chords and a painfully writhing response, as if the mighty pedal theme is interloped. On their way to the cross, the chords are forced into a more positive shape, now the response is different, rising effortfully with courage and growing strength, to a triumphant conclusion.

**VIII Les berges / The magi** As with the shepherds, we encounter the wise men on their homeward journey after seeing the Christ child. They are following the star, and the hypnotically sweeping rhythms suggest their patient, winding progress through the desert night. A languorous melody in the pedals weaves its way through two layers of perfumed harmony, one smooth and one in pointed 'spiral', as though the warm air is thick with incense.

**IX Dieu parmi nous / God among us** This thrilling movement, the culmination of the entire cycle, owes its vast fame at least in part to the worldwide annual broadcast from Kings of A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols, in which it has featured regularly as the final voluntary. We hear three ideas, the first of them hung down like a gauntlet – it is the powerfully descending pedal theme from 'Le Verbe' that signified God's bodily intervention into the human world. Contrasting with it, a suave and tender phrase in adolescent harmony and then an exuberant bombing like a surfboard, reflecting the virgins and humanity's response, of love and of joy. These three ideas are developed in turn and with growing excitement, leading to a glorious conclusion. In the mighty pedal theme falls interloped, the chords are forced into a more positive shape, now the response is different, rising effortfully with courage and growing strength, to a triumphant conclusion. The triumphal final chords convey a wholehearted joy which is unforgettable.

**Jeremy Thorpe (Balliol College, Cambridge)**

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## PERFORMER'S NOTES

I was boarding a train from Nanjing to Tianjin on the King's Choir tour to China in 2016 when Stephen Dearbury, to my surprise and delight, asked me whether I had some music in mind for a solo recital CD on the College's own label. My very first thought was *La Nativité*. I had it in mind for several reasons. I had been preparing it for a recital in the coming months. It also occurred to me that it is a good length for a CD. More important than these conveniences, however, was my strong feeling that this is a piece of music that has been connected with the Chapel and organ at King's for a long time. It seemed a shame that this connection had never been reflected in a recording of it.

In recent decades, the final *Dieu merci nous* has often followed Bach's *In dulci jubilo* at the end of A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols, broadcast live on Christmas Eve. The organ scholar is allowed to choose the second voluntary, and this particular piece of music fits the brief very well. More often than not, the Organ Scholar chooses something fast and French. Every three years or so the opening line of *Dieu merci nous*

signals the moment when the radio presenter takes over again. It is the last musical glimpse of the Chapel's annual broadcast.

The connection between Messiaen and King's goes deeper than the frequent appearance of *Dieu merci nous* in the broadcast. Simon Preston, a former King's chorister who went on to become Organ Scholar in 1958, was one of the first organists to champion Messiaen's music in England. In 1962 he was asked, at a week's notice, to record *L'Ascension* at King's for the record label Argo. In 1965 his Messiaen collection expanded to include *La Nativité* from Westminster Abbey, where he had become Sub-Organist. As a result, the first recordings of Messiaen by a British organist were made at both *La Nativité* and King's, but the first recording to be issued on the label, *Recordings of La Danseuse, L'Ascension and Les Corps glorieux* from St Albans Cathedral followed.

A remarkable aspect of Preston's recordings in the 1960s is that these four works had existed for nearly 50 years, dating from 1928 (*La Danseuse*) relative to 1929 (*Les Corps glorieux*). Messiaen's progressive style wasn't universally popular over the Channel, particularly in ecclesiastical Paris. There, the musical language of the leading organists of the day – Charles-Marie Widor (1844-1937) at St Sulpice and Louis Vierne (1870-1937) at Notre Dame – lagged behind Stravinsky, Ravel, Satie and the rest of the local avant-garde. Preston's efforts also included his own composition *Alleluia*, an organ work built on Messiaen's modes and rhythms. The piece now has a prominent place in the UK organ recital repertoire.

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It is not clear when this particular piece was first played at A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols, but the first mention of it in a service paper is on Christmas Eve 1965. It's not a stretch to imagine that, since the service has been both broadcast and emulated so widely, it may have contributed to making this final movement of the album what it is. As for performances of the piece, we can't be sure when these first happened or how often; suffice it to say that performances today by the organists at King's are regularly some of the best attended recitals in the Chapel.

It is appropriate that one of the organs included in Preston's set of records, that of St Albans Cathedral, was a pioneering instrument of a new trend of English organ building in the 1960s.

Ralph Downes, who had supervised the design of a new Walker organ for Brompton Oratory in Knightsbridge in 1954, designed a neo-classical specification for the instrument. It included a Cromorne and a large range of mutation stops but forewent Victorian essentials such as an Oboe and a Clarinet. It was also the first to have featured on the previous album. Downes also used the same principles for a greater scale, designing the new Harrison & Harrison organ for the Royal Festival Hall, which – to the lament of many choristers – is probably the largest in the country without a Tuba.

King's had its own rebuild. The 1968 overhaul of the Harrison & Harrison organ included a new 3-rank Temperatura on the Great division and a harsh-sounding Schaeffer on the Pedals. However,

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a major and progressive 19th-century rebuild had already seen the addition of separate mutations to the Choir division, meaning that many of the neo-classical features that might have been added three decades later were already there. That said, the re-voicing of the organ in 1988 also resulted in a mellower tone overall, and the most unforgiving stop – the Choir Dulcien – was replaced in the 1980s with a stuffy spoken Corno di Bassotto. As a result, the organ at King's became highly versatile, but retained its romantic character.

Critically, these changes reflect movements already taking place on the continent. Messiaen, who took up his position at La Trinité in 1931, requested changes to the organ as soon as 1935. To the Positif division he added a Tierce, a Nazard and a Tierce. Another Nazard joined the Grand Division alongside a 3-rank Cymbale, another mutation, and a W Bourdon. One of Messiaen's unusual traits was writing exact registrations into editions of his organ music, rather than the groups seen in Widmer or items that include 'Fonds' (foundation stops) or 'Anches' (reeds). The W Bourdon, a low tube normally found only on the Pedals, is particularly common in his music and its absence on some other instruments can be one of the greatest problems when playing Messiaen elsewhere.

For many listeners, the sound of French organ music is closely connected with the sound of French organs, especially those of Aristide Cavaille-Coll (1810-1899), whose 'orchestral' colours inspired generations of organists to compose prolifically

for the instrument. But attempting authenticity for recordings today is almost futile, even in France. During the twentieth century, so many of the great organs of Paris and the provincial cathedrals underwent tonal alterations with neo-classical influences that very few remain in their original state. An exception is St Sulpice in Paris, which remained virtually unchanged because Widmer and his successor Marcel Dupré, whose combined tenures lasted a century, both had conservative tastes and did not allow it.

In King's College Chapel the organ is essentially an English romantic instrument, albeit equipped with all the necessary resources to obey Messiaen's registrations, and it is voiced to accompany choirs throughout the building with sound. A renovation of 2016 improved the distribution of wind around the organ so much that the loudest stops, some of which had been called in doubt, have become noticeably louder. The combination of some of these improved colours and the famous acoustic creates a sound that may not be French but is certainly a valid alternative. It is perfectly possible to bring Messiaen's music to life and keep reasonably faithful to his registrations, but the stops themselves will always sound distinctly English. Even without a direct link to Messiaen, the organ and organists of King's have done much to promote his music in the UK, and with this recording I hope I can make this my contribution.

**Richard Gowers**

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# RICHARD GOWERS

## Organ



Richard Gowers was born in Cambridge to a family of academics and musicians. He learned the piano from the age of five and joined King's College Choir as a chorister in 2003, later singing the solo in *Once in royal David's city* at the 2007 broadcast of A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols. He took up the organ with Nigel Kerry at the age of ten and subsequently studied the piano with Christopher Hughes and organ with David Goode, becoming a prize-winning Fellow of the Royal College of Organists aged 17.

In 2013 he won the Northern Ireland International Organ Competition and moved to Germany, where he spent a year studying the piano with Alexander Meinel and the organ with Stefan Engels and Daniel Beilschmidt at the 'Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy' Hochschule für Musik und Theater in Leipzig. This was thanks to a generous bursary from the Nicholas Danby Trust.

He was Organ Scholar at King's College, Cambridge between 2014-17 and graduated with a starred first class degree in Music. During his time as an undergraduate, Richard accompanied

the Choir at concerts at Bridgewater Hall, the Aldeburgh Festival, The Concertgebouw, on tours to the US, China and Europe, and at a BBC Prom in 2016. In his final year he played for the 2016 Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols. After leaving King's he won a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music to take a Masters in Piano Accompaniment with Michael Dussek and Joseph Middleton.

His career as a concert organist has not only involved recitals at major British venues but also a variety of performances abroad, including three solo tours to the US and performances in Brisbane, Reykjavik, Dresden and Toulouse. In March 2018 he gave the premiere of Nico Muhly's cycle for organ, *The Lenten Gospels*. As a pianist, organist and continuo player he has performed with several of the country's leading orchestras, including the AAM, Aurora Orchestra, BBC Concert Orchestra, Britten Sinfonia, CBSO, Endymion, Hanover Band, LPO, OAE, Philharmonia, and The King's Consort.

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