

## 4 Forms of love: Messiaen's aesthetics of *éblouissement*

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Je n'ai pas besoin d'être 'intéressé'. Rien ne m'intéresse'. Je demande seulement à aimer et à être aimé.<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Olivier Messiaen often alludes to the subject of love in his works. Many pieces possess a 'theme of love' or a reference to love as a biblical or theological motif. The years between 1945 and 1948 are of especial importance with regard to this subject. During this period, Messiaen created the 'Tristan trilogy', consisting of the song cycle *Harawi*, the *Turangalîla-Symphonie* and the *Cinq Rechants* for choir a cappella. According to the composer, the central concern of this trilogy is love as 'a reflection – a pale reflection but nevertheless a reflection – of genuine love, divine love'.<sup>2</sup> He associates 'divine love' with mythical couples such as Tristan and Isolde, Pelléas and Mélisande and Merlin and Vivian. The trilogy thematises the physical, passionate and spiritual life of an imaginary loving couple, their journeys and their ultimate love-death.<sup>3</sup>

In a musical sense, the 'love music' can be seen as one of the fixed 'types' of music Messiaen's oeuvre has generated. In her comprehensive study of his works, Aloyse Michaely gives a description of a number of general characteristics that the various 'love themes' and 'love movements' share.<sup>4</sup> For instance, Messiaen tends to express the subject mostly in a slow or very slow tempo, in

<sup>1</sup>'I don't need to be "interested". Nothing "interests" me. I only want to love and to be loved.' Claude Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen, Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, trans. E. Thomas Glasow (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1994), pp. 46–7.

<sup>2</sup>Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color* 30–1.

<sup>3</sup>On this period, see, for instance, Audrey Ekdahl Davidson, *Olivier Messiaen and the Tristan Myth* (Westport and London: Praeger, 2001). On the interaction between the various

levels of love, see Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), pp. 124–42 and in particular p. 139, and Antoine Goléa, *Rencontres avec Olivier Messiaen* (Paris Genève: Slatkine, 1984), notably chapter 7.

<sup>4</sup>Aloyse Michaely, *Die Musik Olivier Messiaens: Untersuchungen zum Gesamtschaffen*, Hamburger Beiträge zur Musikwissenschaft, Sonderband (Hamburg: Karl Dieter Wagner, 1988), pp. 497–566, especially p. 566.

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his Modes 2 and 3. These 'colour modes' can be associated with a number of major keys. The most important one Messiaen uses for the love music is F  $\sharp$  major, which is the key of the luscious sixth movement of *Turangalîla*, 'Jardin du sommeil d'amour'.<sup>5</sup> Michaely also describes how Messiaen tends to use overarching melodic curves, and the way in which he ends phrases with a recurring melodic turn, consisting of a rising minor seventh or octave followed by a falling fourth. A beautiful example can be found in *Regard de l'église d'amour*, the last movement of Messiaen's *Vingt Regards sur l'enfant-Jésus* (1944).<sup>6</sup>

However, the subject of love cannot only be found at the level of themes, symbols, allegories, references or performance indications, but also at a much deeper level in his work.<sup>7</sup> This can best be illustrated with works from a later period in which the physical and subjective explicitness of love songs like the *Cinq Rechants* seems to have disappeared altogether. Already in his Tristan works, Messiaen evoked images of a cosmic, non-human nature, but at that time only as a canvas on which to express the romantic condition. After 1948, it seems as though the human subject leaves this romantic subjectivity behind in his work, and becomes in a sense more decentred, indeed more formal. The keyword to the aesthetic of this period is the notion of *éblouissement*, exemplified, according to Messiaen, in his own music, and thereby setting it apart from any other form of religious music.<sup>8</sup> The notion refers to a blinding of the inner senses (a dazzlement), which, he says, some of his works have been especially designed to produce. To Messiaen's (inner) eyes and ears, *éblouissement* represents the epitome of musico-religious experience.

To talk about love is probably as difficult as to talk about music. And it is even more difficult to talk about love, music and religion at once. Yet this is what Messiaen's work demands. Therefore, the challenge is to understand the logic that binds the three together. In an attempt to take a step in that direction, in the following study a number of complementary theoretical

<sup>5</sup>In the composer's mind's eye, this key produced, as he expressed it, 'a sparkling of all possible colours'. Almut Rößler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen, with Original Texts by the Composer*, trans. Barbara Dagg, Nancy Poland and Timothy Tikker (Duisburg: Gilles und Francke, 1986), p. 118.

<sup>6</sup>To my knowledge, it is unknown whether Messiaen had any symbolism in mind regarding the meaning of this melodic figure.

<sup>7</sup>For this latter, see, for example, Messiaen's *Les Offrandes oubliées* from 1930, part of which is to be played 'avec un grand amour'.

<sup>8</sup>Messiaen implies this when he discusses the phenomena of *son-couleur* and *éblouissement* in *Lecture at Notre-Dame, Conférence de Kyoto* and elsewhere. Although he mentions several musical examples of 'musique colorée' in Claude Samuel's *Music and Color* (Wagner, Chopin, Stravinsky, Debussy), he does not give a single musical example of where *son-couleur* and *éblouissement* meet mystically as they allegedly do in his own works (notably, according to the composer, in *La Transfiguration* and *Saint François d'Assise*). See below for further details.

tools will be employed. Following this introduction, in the second section I will briefly describe the topos of *éblouissement* in the writings of Messiaen, and then, in the third section, I will discuss Messiaen's references to musical examples relevant to the experience of this phenomenon. In my fourth section I turn to the aesthetic ideal of the sublime as a possible tool for the analysis of *éblouissement*. Leaving the sublime behind, in a fifth section I discuss *éblouissement* in terms of the French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion's ideal of idolatry. In my sixth section I attempt to develop this new approach by using the notion of *Gestalt* from the theological aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar. And in the final section, I will sketch the logic of love from the perspective of the previously discussed four key elements: *éblouissement*, the sublime, the idol and the iconic *Gestalt*.

### The topos of *éblouissement*

Messiaen for the first time addresses the question of the experience of *éblouissement* in his *Couleurs de la cité céleste* (1963). In the preface to this score, he refers to its biblical derivation:

The sound-colours [*son-couleurs*] . . . symbolise the 'Heavenly City' and 'He' who inhabits it. Outside of time, outside of space, in a light without light, in a night without night . . . That which the Apocalypse, being even more terrifying in its humility than in its vision of glory, designates only by a dazzlement [*éblouissement*] of colours . . .<sup>9</sup>

Messiaen often likens *éblouissement* to the stained-glass windows of medieval churches and chapels. It was during a visit to the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris, when he was around 10 years of age that the dazzling effects of these windows first made a deep impression on him.<sup>10</sup> As he later explained, 'when one sees a stained-glass window, one does not immediately see all the figures. One has a sensation of colour, and one is dazzled [*on est éblouit*]. One has to shut one's eyes.'<sup>11</sup> And describing the experience in even greater detail in his Notre-Dame lecture from 1977:

What happens in the stained-glass windows of Bourges, in the great windows of Chartres, in the rose-windows of Notre-Dame in Paris and in the marvellous,

<sup>9</sup>See score, 'Première note de l'auteur'. Later references to *éblouissement* include the scores of *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum* and the score of *Méditations sur le Mystère de la Sainte Trinité*. Before he ever used the term, Messiaen described aspects of the experience in the preface to the score of the *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*.

<sup>10</sup>See Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color*, p. 37; Rößler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen*, pp. 43–4; Messiaen, *Conférence de Kyoto* (Paris: Leduc, 1988), pp. 5–6; Messiaen, *Lecture at Notre-Dame* (Paris: Leduc, 2001), p. 9.

<sup>11</sup>Olivier Messiaen, in *Olivier Messiaen: A Music of Faith*, documentary film (London Weekend Television, 1985).

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incomparable glasswork of the Sainte-Chapelle? First of all there is a crowd of characters, great and small, which tell us of the life of Christ, of the Holy Virgin, of the Prophets, and of the Saints: it is a sort of catechism by image. This catechism is enclosed in circles, medallions, trefoils, it obeys the symbolism of colours, it opposes, it superimposes, it decorates, it instructs, with a thousand intentions and a thousand details. Now, from a distance, without binoculars, without ladders, without any object to come to the aid of our failing eye, we see nothing; nothing but a stained-glass window all blue, all green, all violet. We do not comprehend, we are *dazzled!*<sup>12</sup>

Messiaen wanted to translate this extraordinary visual experience into music. For this purpose, he was able to make use of his special synaesthetic sensitivity, which gave him a largely involuntary correspondence between colour and sound. Messiaen claimed to see particular colours in his mind's eye when hearing certain combinations of tones: 'When I hear a score or read it, hearing it in my mind, I visualise corresponding colours which turn, shift, and combine, just as the sounds turn, shift, and combine, simultaneously.'<sup>13</sup> In the course of his career, this correspondence proved to be stable enough to be used as a compositional tool.<sup>14</sup> It allowed him to compose pieces like *Un vitrail et des oiseaux*, in which he portrays stained-glass windows and colourful birds.

However, in a number of cases Messiaen does not only imitate the colours of stained glass, but actually attempts to give himself – and probably also his ideal listener – the actual experience of *éblouissement*. His reasons are not merely musical or pictorial, but rather religious and, in a certain sense, even mystical. Messiaen believed *éblouissement* to be a genuinely mystagogical, transformative and religious experience.<sup>15</sup> He chose to use it as a model for a musico-religious aesthetics, turning music into an instrument of transformation:

Coloured music does that which the stained-glass windows and rose-windows of the Middle Ages did: they give us dazzlement [*éblouissement*]. Touching at once our

<sup>12</sup> Messiaen, *Lecture at Notre-Dame*, p. 13 (translation slightly amended). See also his remarks in Samuel, *Oliver Messiaen: Music and Color*, pp. 63 and 139. Messiaen's account of *éblouissement* is also published on CD; see *Olivier Messiaen: les couleurs du temps* (INA/Radio France, 2000), CD 2, track 4.

<sup>13</sup> Samuel, *Oliver Messiaen: Music and Color*, p. 37. For a general introduction to and bibliography of the subject and cultural history of synaesthetics, see Nicholas Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 24–56.

<sup>14</sup> For these correspondences, see notably volume VII of Messiaen's *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d'ornithologie* (TRCO) (Paris: Leduc, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> Messiaen, *Lecture at Notre-Dame*, p. 12: 'The more the sounds strike and knock the inner ear, and the more these multicoloured things move and irritate our inner eye, the more a contact is established, a rapport (as Rainer Maria Rilke said) with another reality: a rapport so powerful that it can transform our most hidden "I", the deepest, the most intimate, and dissolve us in a most high Truth which we could never hope to attain' (translation amended).

noblest senses: hearing and vision, it shakes our sensibilities into motion, pushes us to go beyond concepts, to approach that which is higher than reason and intuition, that is, FAITH.<sup>16</sup>

According to Messiaen, this capitalised faith continues into the new life after resurrection. In this new life, the faithful will have been given new, transfigured bodies, and they will undergo an '*éblouissement perpétuel*' in and through which they will know their Lord Christ. However, Messiaen does only refer to this theological idea in his musical works; he actually crosses a line that almost no one before him had crossed. Messiaen links the supernatural experience of *éblouissement* to his own music in an apparently non-metaphorical way, turning it into an exceptional vehicle for religious experience.<sup>17</sup> In a summary of his tenet in the *Conférence de Notre-Dame*, Messiaen explains why he puts the music of 'sound-colour' and *éblouissement* above any other form of religious music: 'Finally, there is that breakthrough towards the beyond [*la percée vers l'au-delà*], towards the invisible and unspeakable, which may be made by means of sound-colour [*son-couleur*], and is summed up in the sensation of dazzlement [*éblouissement*]'.<sup>18</sup>

This idea gradually turned into a topos in his writings. Dazzlement became a highly significant possibility in its own right, a speculative musico-religious event different from its initial association with stained-glass windows. In the last scene of the opera *Saint-François d'Assise*, for instance, when St Francis is taken up into heaven, Messiaen calls upon the notion of *éblouissement* to describe this act of grace. He makes Francis exclaim, 'Lord, illuminate me with your Presence! Liberate me, intoxicate me, dazzle me [*éblouis-moi*] with your excess of Truth . . .'.<sup>19</sup> After these words, as the stage directions in the

<sup>16</sup>Messiaen, *Lecture at Notre-Dame*, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup>The question whether this should or should not be interpreted as a metaphorical relation is crucial. As I argue below, the theological (and, for that matter, musicological) tendency to restrict the scope of musical experience by relegating it to the realm of metaphor does not do justice to the difference Messiaen rightly makes between 'religious music' and 'sound-colour and dazzlement' (see Messiaen's *Lecture at Notre-Dame*). The instability of the border between the 'literal' dimension of religious truth and the 'metaphorical' dimension of its artistic 'representation' is what should interest us here. It is this very problem which makes music, according to Henry Chadwick's *bon mot*, 'indispensable, but dangerous' (for example, because it upsets the *ordo* of signification, literality and truth), and which reveals the truly Augustinian dimension of Messiaen's work. Relegating *éblouissement* to the realm of metaphor

effectively destroys the significance of his project, turning it into the production of mere 'images', and evading the profound question of religious mediation, see Sander van Maas, *Doorbraak en Idolatrie: Olivier Messiaen en het geloof in muziek (Breakthrough and Idolatry: Olivier Messiaen and Faith in Music)* (Delft: Eburon, 2003).

<sup>18</sup>Messiaen, *Lecture at Notre-Dame*, p. 4 (translation amended).

<sup>19</sup>Messiaen, *Conférence de Kyoto*, p. 18. It should be noted that Messiaen does not always use the *son-couleur* even when the subject matter calls for it. For instance, in the fifth scene of *Saint François d'Assise*, although Messiaen compares it to Saul's confrontation with Christ on the way to Damascus (Acts 9:3–9), St Francis's mystical breakthrough is not accompanied by the music of *éblouissement*. He does not even use the word; according to Messiaen, Saul is blinded (*aveugle*) by the experience, not dazzled (*ébloui*).

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score prescribe, the spot where François had laid is to be flooded by a blinding, white light.<sup>20</sup> *Eblouissement* pervades the drama, the stage setting and the music alike, extending possibly to the audience. Later in 1989, Messiaen suggested to Brigitte Massin that 'The summit of contemplation is an *éblouissement*, therefore an excess of truth', and his music, so he seems to suggest, participates in this veritable excess.<sup>21</sup> But how is the musical elaboration of such a religious and mystical possibility to be understood? How does Messiaen actually compose this music of *éblouissement*? What makes music and religion relate so intimately?

### The music of *éblouissement*

Messiaen has provided some answers to these and related questions, which give rise to a number of additional, even more pertinent questions. In November 1985 he visited Japan and gave a lecture in Kyoto. In this lecture, published as the *Conférence de Kyoto*, Messiaen again addressed the issue of *éblouissement*. This time, however, he made a remarkable reference to two specific works that, according to Messiaen, are 'directly related' to the experience.<sup>22</sup> One of these is *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ*, from which he quotes five particular passages. The following brief analysis of the first of these will offer some insight into the way Messiaen actually composed his music of *éblouissement*.

Messiaen composed *La Transfiguration* between 1965 and 1969. The work is written for seven instrumental soloists, choir and orchestra. Its form is reminiscent of Bach's passions or the eighteenth-century oratorio, consisting as it does of a number of vocal 'recitatives', 'commentary' movements and two closing chorales. Its fourteen movements are grouped into two '*septénaires*', the second running at twice the length of the first. The text of the work is a patchwork of scriptural and theological fragments, all addressing some aspect of the transfiguration of Christ as related in the Gospel of Matthew. In the 'recitatives' of *La Transfiguration*, Messiaen sets the text of Matthew's account of Jesus's transfiguration on Mount Tabor (Matt. 17:1–13). Each of

<sup>20</sup> 'Everything disappears, everything darkens. The choir positions itself before the backdrop. A single bright white light illuminates the spot where until moments before St Francis had laid. That light should gradually become more intense until the conclusion of the act. When the light becomes blinding [*aveuglante*] and unbearable, the curtain drops'. *L'Avant-scène opéra*, Hors série no. 4, 'Saint François D'Assise' (Paris: Premières Loges, 1992),

p. 100. The music here features a corresponding 'white' C major triad, played by massive orchestral and vocal forces.

<sup>21</sup> Brigitte Massin, *Olivier Messiaen: une poétique du merveilleux* (Aix-en-Provence: Alinéa, 1989), p. 191.

<sup>22</sup> Messiaen, *Conférence de Kyoto*, pp. 14–16. The other four passages from *La Transfiguration* he refers to are: Part VII (entirely); Part IX, fig. 50–51; Part XII, fig. 9–10; Part XIV (entirely).

these ‘recitatives’ (in Latin) recounts a part of the principal verses of Matthew’s account. The verse sung in the third ‘recitative’ (Part VIII) is the one recounting how Peter, Jacob and John, standing on top of the mountain and witnessing Christ’s transfiguration, were overshadowed by a luminous cloud: ‘He was still speaking when suddenly a bright cloud covered them with a shadow, and suddenly from the cloud there came a voice which said: “This is my Son, the Beloved; he enjoys my favour. Listen to him”’.<sup>23</sup>

Messiaen’s musical setting of this scene reveals a number of details that are important for a deeper understanding of the music of *éblouissement*. In the same way as in the other three recitatives, this third recitative is introduced by a strongly ‘syncopated’ percussion section passage featuring the temple block, leading into an enormous explosion of tam-tams, gongs and a long trill on the chimes. The instrumentation and above all the unusual rhythmic engagement between the instruments in this section are reminiscent of Southeast Asian musical traditions. It is an illustration of Messiaen’s great love of metallophones with long and rich resonances which, according to the composer, ‘add a certain mystery’ to the music, and evoke an ‘unreal quality’.<sup>24</sup>

After this introductory gesture, the choir of tenors starts singing the biblical texts. Its musical setting strongly evokes the Gregorian antiphon, followed by an equally ‘liturgical’ piece of recitative *recto tono* (on one note only). This pseudo-monastic passage is followed by eleven measures of uneven ascending and descending clusters in the strings, some of which are played in harmonics (representing, according to Messiaen, the moving cloud). These alienating elements lead to the passage he quotes in *Conférence de Kyoto* as being related to *éblouissement*. This passage starts at fig. 5 and extends into the tenor recitative: ‘*Et ecce vox de nube, dicens: Hic est Filius meus dilectus* [And behold the voice of the cloud, saying: This is my beloved Son]’. At this point in the score (fig. 6), there is a remarkable footnote referring to the figurative character of the music.<sup>25</sup> In fact, the footnote adds technical instructions to the general idea of the piece, which Messiaen had already described in the short analyses that preface the score. The relevant analysis reads as follows:

Rhythmical introduction (varied). Continuation of the evangelical text in the recitative. The luminous cloud is represented by groups of glissandi in the strings, glissandi of various lengths and tempi. The ‘Voice’ from the cloud is accompanied by the multicoloured, undulating chords, the colours of which move at different speeds.

<sup>23</sup> Translation quoted from *The New Jerusalem Bible* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1990).

<sup>25</sup> Messiaen, *La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ* (Paris: Leduc, 1972), Part

<sup>24</sup> Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color*, VIII, at fig. 6. p. 57.

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The trills of the triangle and chimes join the harmonics of the strings, emphasising the shivering of the light.<sup>26</sup>

Messiaen wants his music to represent a number of things, beginning with the presence of God. Messiaen depicts this in a thoroughly apocalyptic way, with the images of shivering light (cloud and Son) and colour (Father), that can be found in Revelation 4:3, and, secondly, the Voice of God coming from the cloud. According to the footnoted instructions in the score, the choir (*ppp*) should sound as if coming from very high up and far away, and remain so. Thirdly, Messiaen's textures are to represent the triumph and glory of the Trinity and the 'victorious third' which refers to the g–b interval in the double basses and the fifth and sixth cellos, which is audible throughout the passage and becomes ever more prominent from b. 42 onwards following the crescendo in the score.<sup>27</sup>

Before this musical depiction comes to life, Messiaen orders a 'moment of silent expectation': a short pause, which he prepared two measures earlier with a two-beat rest. After that, the music gradually builds up with a foreboding recitative and expectant rests, until at figure 6 a sudden clarity ensues. The instrumentation of this *éblouissement* passage consists of sopranos and tenors, first and second violins, violas, double basses and percussion. The richness of timbre as well as the verticality of structure contrast sharply with the sober, unison singing of the tenors that precedes the sudden change. Messiaen fills the vertical space of his sound painting with materials that belong to the tradition of religious music, such as a drone (the B ♮ in the lowest and highest strings, used also as a harmonic), organ-like clusters (reminiscent of the *voix céleste's* effect of arid transparency and harmonic saturation), the fairy-tale sound of the triangle and the 'mystery' of the chimes. In the high and middle registers the strings produce chromatic chords that can be identified as belonging to Messiaen's paradigmatic turning chords (*accords tournants*).<sup>28</sup> The heterogeneous sound image that results from these trills, clusters, resonances and harmonics is relatively stabilised by the identifiable continuity of the drone, and the 'turning chords' that revolve around themselves and saturate the sound spectrum.

The passage, which is only six measures long, is played in a mesmerisingly slow and perfectly constant beat of 20 M.M., so that its timing and form contrast sharply with its context. The creation of this sort of 'window' is typical of most musical passages that Messiaen mentions as examples of *son-couleurs* and *éblouissement*. A situation is created in which a sudden

<sup>26</sup> Messiaen, score of *La Transfiguration*.

<sup>27</sup> Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color*, p. 149, and *Conférence de Kyoto*, p. 15.

<sup>28</sup> See Messiaen, *TRCO*, Tome VII, 277–80 and 166–72. See also Michaely, *Die Musik Olivier*

*Messiaens*, pp. 115–22, in particular her comprehensive harmonic analysis of Part VIII on p. 121.

change in the musical context occurs, which leads into a completely different (contrasting, opposing) musical situation.<sup>29</sup> Immediately after the 'breakthrough', the music returns to its previous style, which in general is less complex and more homophonic. It could well be argued that besides any consideration of synaesthetic colour, this very window-form itself produces the effect of 'breakthrough'. In Part VIII of *La Transfiguration* (at the beginning of the second *septénaire*), after the sudden introduction of the music of *éblouissement*, the music changes back to soprano-and-tenor recitative, and loses all luminosity, complexity and heterogeneity. And, it should be added, it loses all reference to religious 'breakthrough', too, for Messiaen does not even mention his setting of the remainder of God's own sentence, '*in quo mihi bene complacui: ipsum audite* [he enjoys my favour. Listen to him]'

What is to be concluded from all this? In the first place, it should be kept in mind that, according to Messiaen, *éblouissement* has little to do with the representation of religious ideas by visual or musical means. The music of *éblouissement* certainly possesses many pictorial features, but its most important religious moment lies in the very erasure of these figurative elements (the apparent 'content' of the passage), in a way similar to the erasure of the figures in the stained-glass windows. Secondly, on a musical-technical level, it should be noted that the structure of both this and other musics of *éblouissement* employ a strategy of sudden change, by which the form of the passage comes to resemble a 'window' surrounded by sharply contrasting music. This reinforces the impression that the music of *éblouissement* is in fact not to be found in the actual content of the contrasting section, but rather in the enveloping form. In the third place, from Messiaen's references to it in *Conférence de Notre-Dame*, *éblouissement* seems to depend strongly on notions of grace and even of the miraculous (which strongly depend on singularity). Yet the effect of repeatable, musical-technical structures, of a rhetorical strategy of sorts, seemingly reduces any *éblouissement* to the trick of a musical illusionist.

Should this, in the final analysis, lead to the conclusion that Messiaen's testimony with regard to *éblouissement* is in fact little more than musical theatricality? Or should his testimony be understood as a contemporary reference to a musico-religious possibility that Enlightenment aesthetics and certain theologies taught us to forget? What is there to be said about *éblouissement* as a phenomenological or musico-religious figure outside of the confines of musicological interpretation? And ultimately, how can the

<sup>29</sup> See the passages Messiaen quotes from Parts VIII and XII in particular. The passage from Part IX also involves a grand scale change in texture, but here the new texture

builds up more gradually. Obviously, the concept of sudden change does not apply to the chorals Messiaen mentions (Parts VII and XIV).

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formal emptiness of the music of *éblouissement* be related to the theme of divine love, which after all forms the horizon of Messiaen's work?

### The shattering of form

The threefold turn to form in the music of *éblouissement* – found in the erasure of specific content, the sudden textural changes and the emergence of rhetorical structures – seems to lead away from notions of interiority, feeling and content typically associated with love. But there is more to be said about *éblouissement*, as well as about music qua religion, and about love. On closer inspection, the 'turn to form' that characterises Messiaen's postwar music is not a turn to form as concrete, unified and meaningful, but a turn to form as a way of *fragmentation*. This 'shattering of form' that characterises Messiaen's postwar work is present at both the level of musical form – Messiaen likens his juxtapositions of fragments to, for instance, Stockhausen's experiments with moment form – and at the level of musical aesthetics.<sup>30</sup> This multi-level change from unified to shattered form has already been signalled by writers such as Alain Michel and Wilfrid Mellers. Both authors describe Messiaen's music in terms of the sublime, an aesthetic notion that from the late seventeenth century onwards has fascinated philosophers and artists alike. Michel recounts how the lyrics used by Messiaen for the twelfth part of *La Transfiguration* evoke the idea of the mind's movement from visual light to intelligible light. 'In order to arrive at this transition, [Messiaen] uses a quite recent experience of nature. It had only been a short time ago – say, since about the beginning of the romantic era – that European intellectuals had made the effort to perceive the sublimity of the high mountains.'<sup>31</sup> Writing about the same work, but focusing on the effect the music has on its listeners, Mellers observes that 'purely aural sublimity – as distinct from any presumptive psychological "content" – could hardly be carried beyond this point'.<sup>32</sup>

The aesthetics of Messiaen's music very often seem to invoke the sublime. Not only do Messiaen's titles, mottoes and commentaries refer to classical examples of the sublime, such as starry heavens, the abyss or alpine mountains, but also the very style and design of much of his music inclines to typical gestures towards the sublime, such as the overpowering, the majestic

<sup>30</sup> Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color*, p. 187.

<sup>31</sup> Alain Michel, 'La Transfiguration et la beauté: d'Olivier Messiaen à Urs von Balthasar', in *Bulletin de l'Association Guillaume Budé* (December 1974). Reprinted in *Hommage à Olivier Messiaen*

(La recherche artistique, November–December 1978), pp. 86–9, especially p. 87.

<sup>32</sup> Wilfrid Mellers, 'La Transfiguration de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ', in *The Messiaen Companion*, ed. Peter Hill (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 458.

and the unimaginable. Messiaen's music is not only a music of beautiful proportion, elegant design and good taste; it very often seeks to transcend human measure. It aspires towards the divine, or at least to the worldly traces thereof, through an arsenal of grand musical gestures, some of which may be quite violent and even repellent to the ear. This music brings forth *negative* forms of representation: it presents that which cannot be presented in positive form (in an analogy from the domain of language: the name of God) through shattered or shattering forms (faltering speech, ineffable words) or by falling silent altogether. Traditionally, the sublime has been thought of as that which overpowers the human mind and may be thought to testify to (and perhaps, as Messiaen suggests, lead the mind towards) the ineffable domains of divine mystery.

In Kant's *Critique of Judgment* – the *locus classicus* of modern aesthetics – the sublime is analysed in a fashion more appropriate to Enlightenment aesthetics, setting a limit to the domain of sense perception with regard to religion.<sup>33</sup> The sublime is construed as a feeling, which indicates that the object of perception is unrepresentable to the subject's imagination. The sublime shatters the mind's power to synthesise the intuitions it receives into a unified representation of the object; in other words, to give it a unified form. According to Kant, the first moment of the sublime is characterised by the experience of displeasure (*Unlust*), which accompanies the overpowering of the imagination. After this initial moment, reason responds to this negative moment by making available to the subject its supernatural destiny which is expressed by reason's three transcendental ideas: God, Infinity and Immortality. In this second moment, the subject elevates itself above its finitude and subordination to the forces of nature, and thus pleurably (*Lust*) overcomes its initial painful break with the world by realising the superiority of its own destiny (i.e. freedom). The idea or feeling of the sublime has been a major source of inspiration for artists, in particular to the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup>

In his classic book on the relation between religion and art, the phenomenologist theologian Gerardus van der Leeuw describes a variety of ways in which the sublime may be present in music:

Music attains sublimity by slowness of tempo. But this is not the only means, nor does it offer a guarantee for true sublimity, as many 'religious' composers seem to

<sup>33</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (1790), transl. J. H. Bernard (Amherst: Prometheus, 2000), sections 23–9.

<sup>34</sup>See, in particular, Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, *The Musically Sublime: Infinity, Indeterminacy, Irresolvability* (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2002; published on <http://www.ub.rug.nl/eldoc/>

dis/arts) and Jan Christiaens, "Kunstreligion" en het Absolute in de muziek: Olivier Messiaen's tijdsmetafysica (1949–1951) en het ontstaan van het serialisme (Karlheinz Stockhausen, Karel Goeyvaerts)', Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 2003; unpublished dissertation.

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think. To slow tempo belongs majestic reserve, chaste restraint. And even this remains nothing unless everything points to an emotion which admits no more violent expression . . . If we ask whence it comes that the massive, the sublime, often moves us religiously, indeed seems to be an expression of the holy, we find that this lies in its overpowering character. We cannot escape it; we find ourselves in the presence of the wholly other.<sup>35</sup>

Drawing on Rudolf Otto's classic *Das Heilige* (*The Idea of the Holy*), van der Leeuw iterates that if art is to express the Holy by means of the sublime, both of its constitutive moments, the *fascinans* and the *tremendum*, should be present. It is not enough for art either to 'enchant, captivate, illuminate, remove a burden from the heart' or to 'oppress, bring fear, cause horror and terror'. As he puts it, 'it may be that terror dominates, but fascination must not be absent. It may also be that we are so enchanted that we revel in bliss; but if every tremor is lacking, it is a false bliss, even if we may be confronted with real beauty.'<sup>36</sup> It is not difficult to find examples in Messiaen's music in which either of these elements dominates – or in which some equilibrium is maintained.<sup>37</sup>

It seems appropriate to apply the problematic of the sublime to much of Messiaen's work. Not only does his music often use musical-technical gestures belonging to the tradition of the musically sublime; his imagination and aesthetic thought also tend to remain within the domain of this notion. However, the notion of the sublime cannot account for a number of specific aspects of *éblouissement* as enumerated by Messiaen. Firstly, Kant seems almost to understand the sublime as an engagement of the subject with itself, thereby greatly reducing the role of sense experience. Therefore he cannot account for that which remains of perception in the experience of *éblouissement*: the saturation of colour and sound, despite the erasure of the figurative. Secondly, the sublime does not fully coincide with the religious aspects of *éblouissement*. Even if Rudolf Otto describes the sublime as a historical 'schematisation' or distant echo of the original experience of 'the

<sup>35</sup> Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art* (New York Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 231. For listeners to Messiaen's music, this may not sound unfamiliar. Two short examples could be given, both from his early organ repertoire. The first is the extremely slow piece *Le Banquet céleste*, notated in quaver +52, with its endless final chord, especially as played on Messiaen's recording. The second example is *Apparition de l'église éternelle*, a piece which is characterised by the gestures of laborious swelling and expansion from its first seconds onwards, and which reaches its tremendous, triumphant climax on a giant C major triad midway through.

<sup>36</sup> Van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty*, p. 232. In his account of *éblouissement* and 'breakthrough' in *Lecture at Notre-Dame*, Messiaen not only mentions the dazzling intensity of this experience, which corresponds to Kant's idea of the dynamical sublime, but also the overwhelming number of 'intentions' and 'details' ('*mille intentions, mille détails*') included in the stained-glass windows, which corresponds to Kant's idea of the mathematical sublime.

<sup>37</sup> See, among many other possible examples, the seventh scene of *Saint-François d'Assise* ('Les Stigmates'), notably 'la voix du Christ'.

numinous' or 'the wholly Other', these phenomena cannot be reduced to each other.<sup>38</sup> Messiaen does not talk aesthetics; he talks religion. And despite the fact that the difference between the two is not always clear (not in general, and certainly not in a work as 'postmodern orthodox' as Messiaen's), I will argue that this heterogeneity is necessary and constitutive, and that it points towards the ways in which Messiaen's music of *éblouissement* reconfigures the complex idea of 'sacred music'. So, to begin with, what is the specific theological-aesthetic logic behind the music of *éblouissement*?

### Reinterpreting *éblouissement*

Messiaen's account of *éblouissement* implies a basic distinction between ordinary and extraordinary aural experiences. The event of dazzlement and 'breakthrough' does not belong to the ordinary range of musical experiences, but is an exception with a more or less transcendent and, to that extent, normative status. This raises the question as to what happens exactly when this exceptional potential of musical experience becomes reality. How does 'normal' audibility change, and how can the specific listening experience of *éblouissement* be characterised? The philosopher Jean-Luc Marion suggests one answer to this question. Elaborating from a phenomenology of the idol, Marion describes a perceptual logic that to a great extent parallels the phenomena Messiaen refers to. As will become clear, this logic reveals a number of aspects that remain hidden when these phenomena are analysed from the perspective of the sublime.

Traditionally, idolatry refers to the religious error of giving divine worship to anyone or anything other than the true God. It may concern the religious adoration of an image or statue that is thought to embody a divinity, or to possess divine powers. Music and the theatre are also sometimes thought to harbour the idolatrous power of substitution for the true object of worship or of leading the faithful astray. Augustine is famous for his concerns about the theatre and the song of 'beautiful voice', which according to him tend to draw attention to themselves rather than referring, through gesture and words, to the ultimate realm of divine truth.<sup>39</sup> In Marion's phenomenology of the idol, however, idolatry is not located in an object (a statue, song, etc.), but in a certain mode of perception.<sup>40</sup> Anyone or anything can become an

<sup>38</sup>Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige: über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (Munich: Beck, 1997), p. 61.

<sup>39</sup>See, for example, *The Confessions of St Augustine*, Book X, section 33.

<sup>40</sup>Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), pp. 9–15.

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idol when it falls under the régime of the idolatrous gaze. Marion's analysis focuses on visual phenomena in order to criticise the conceptual idolatry of philosophy. This need not concern us here. For present purposes it will suffice to note that the visual is essential in Messiaen's account of *éblouissement*. To this extent, the logic of the idol may help articulate the structure of dazzlement (a term which Marion uses, too), and inspire further analysis of aural phenomena.

In a phenomenological sense, the idol is characterised by its sheer visibility; in other words, by the very fact that it is visible. It does not hold anything back; it gives itself *as pure visibility*. According to Marion, it is this which dazzles the beholder. The idol appears in the field of normal vision, which is characterised by the fact that I gaze beyond it and see nothing in particular. The gaze 'transpierces' the visual; it sees nothing because it renders indifferent all meaningful differences:

But here the idol intervenes. What shows up? For the first (and last) time, the gaze no longer rushes through the spectacle stage without stopping, but forms a stage in the spectacle; it is fixed in it and, *far from passing beyond*, remains facing what becomes for it a spectacle to *re-spect* [sic]. The gaze lets itself be filled: instead of outflanking the visible, of not seeing and rendering it invisible, the gaze discovers itself as outflanked, contained, held back by the visible. The visible finally becomes visible to the gaze because, again literally, the visible dazzles the gaze. The idol, the first visible, from the beginning, dazzles a gaze until then insatiable.<sup>41</sup>

The idol is the first truly visible phenomenon, and nothing more than that. It saturates my gaze completely with its splendour, i.e. its sheer excess of visibility. It marks the extreme limit of what my gaze can bear in terms of visibility – and it *dazzles* me.<sup>42</sup> The gaze is fascinated, arrested, and moved to adoration by the intense and exclusive sensibility of the idol.<sup>43</sup> Dazzlement is accompanied by, as Marion puts it, a feeling of 'success, glory, joy'.<sup>44</sup> It is associated with the notion of being dazzled by an 'excess of truth' (Messiaen-Aquinas), like the truth of the One whom no one can see without dying.<sup>45</sup> Or by the truth of Ideas: the Light that makes us see worldly

<sup>41</sup> Marion, *God Without Being*, pp. 11–12 (italics added).

<sup>42</sup> As mentioned above, dazzlement differs from mere blinding by the fact that it presupposes clear visibility: *éblouir* is the opposite of *aveugler*. See also Jean-Luc Marion, *Etant donné: essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation*, 2nd edition (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998), p. 285, where he states that 'When my gaze cannot bear what it sees, it suffers dazzlement [*éblouissement*]. For not being

able to bear it is not simply the same as not to see; one first of all has to perceive, even to see clearly, to know what cannot be born. [*Eblouissement*] is about a sight which our gaze cannot bear.'

<sup>43</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *De surcroît: études sur les phénomènes saturés* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000), p. 73.

<sup>44</sup> Marion, *De surcroît: études sur les phénomènes saturés*, p. 73, and Marion, *Etant donné*, p. 286.

<sup>45</sup> Exodus 33:20.

shadows, but which itself can only be seen by those whose eyes have already been filled with Light (Plato).<sup>46</sup> Messiaen, too, interprets the experience as exclusively joyous, beneficial, and as an ascent towards truth.

Marion, however, emphasises that the saturating event of dazzlement leaves an essential thing behind. The idol obfuscates the fact that phenomena are *given*, through maximising their mere *appearance*. The idol prevents any reference to the deeper dimension of divine givenness by prioritising the gripping and immersive power of the sensible spectacle. As Plato put it in the *Phaedrus*, 'for beauty alone this has been ordained, to be most manifest [*ekphanéstaton*] to sense and most lovely of all'.<sup>47</sup> But, one has to add (as Plato did himself) that perhaps this phenomenon is also the most dangerous. For the rapture of beauty may hide the saturating richness of the things that appear before us: their endless historical resonance, their infinitely rich signifying potential, their irretrievable moment of origin, all of which according to Marion do not result from their self-contained autonomy, but from their saturating givenness (by the Other).

Discussing the organ cycle *Les Corps glorieux*, Paul Griffiths once remarked that much of Messiaen's music needs a (correcting) verbal clue in order to realise its religious intentions:<sup>48</sup> 'Indeed, the objects and musical states that Messiaen offers to our inspection in *Les Corps Glorieux* are so very singular that we may well be disinclined to accept them as invitations to meditate on something else, preferring to make of them the centre of our contemplation.'<sup>49</sup> Griffiths here refers to the classic, Augustinian dilemma of idolatry, which should discourage any credulous interpretation of Messiaen's music, the examples he gives of *éblouissement* and 'break-through' included. The examples from *La Transfiguration* given above show precisely the kind of arrest and adoration typical of the phenomenological idol. The most pertinent among these are perhaps the two chorales, which present the listener with densely chromatic chords that saturate the aural spectrum and often seem to contradict the melodic progress of their

<sup>46</sup>The reference to Plato pertains to *Republic* 515c and 517a. It is interesting to note that the Aquinas phrase 'excess of truth' Messiaen often alludes to is actually a mixture of several different *questiones*. The most important of these sources is *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q. 101, 2, ad 2, which deals with the relation between poetical and divine realities. With regard to the splendour of the idol, see also Jean-Luc Marion, *De surcroît: études sur les phénomènes saturés*, p. 73.

<sup>47</sup>Plato's *Phaedrus*, 250d, trans. R. Hackforth, in E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (eds), *Plato: The Collected Dialogues* (Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 497.

<sup>48</sup>Messiaen defined the ultimate intention of his oeuvre as 'the illumination of the theological truths of the Catholic faith'; Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color*, p. 20.

<sup>49</sup>Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, p. 70.

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form.<sup>50</sup> The fascinating scintillations of these 'sound-colours' draw the ear into their inner world, presenting a phenomenon that does not retain the particular aural negativity found in tonal chord progressions (due to a stress on the functionality of harmonies rather than their sonorous qualities), but exhausts itself in and through its sheer audibility.<sup>51</sup> A similar effect of arrest is put into play in the other three examples, all of which involve a sudden change from linear musical discourse to simultaneous, resonant complexes that arrest and saturate the ear. As Messiaen describes it with reference to the passage from Part XII, the listener is thrown into an 'abyss of sweetness', being arrested by a quasi-falling motion rather than a self-conscious projection of a pathway along the musical trajectory.<sup>52</sup>

However ravishing and totalising these aural experiences of arrest, excess and adoration may be, Marion warns against their hidden limitations. The idol does not come into being through an act of grace, but, uniquely, is produced by the human gaze.<sup>53</sup> It operates as an invisible mirror, which confronts the gaze with its limitations, and thereby reveals that the divine, insofar as it is perceived, has only been perceived according to the measure and capacity of the *human* gaze. In the final analysis, the idol, which articulates the logic behind the experience of *éblouissement*, is constituted by the subject's gaze, which is fascinated and dazzled by the resplendent reflection of *itself* – without knowing it.<sup>54</sup> According to this interpretation, dazzlement is an expression of the exact opposite of what Messiaen and his sources speak of. It results from human incapacity, and could accordingly be interpreted in terms of lack, sin and suffering. It should be well noted that *éblouir* can also mean 'to deceive' and 'to mistake'. The idol does not accomplish the 'conversion' that would reverse the perspective of the gaze

<sup>50</sup> My aural analysis based on the CD recording of *La Transfiguration* by Reinbert de Leeuw and others (Montaigne MO 782040). Technically speaking, chromatic saturation can be found in the harmonic sequence of Part XIV, b. 5. It occurs ever more frequent over the course of the piece. What interests me here, however, is found in the same movement, e.g. in b. 9–10 or b. 60–3. In both these passages, another kind of saturation makes its appearance. The harmonies no longer appear as 'harmonic', but rather display an irreducible *aural excess*. Along the horizontal axis, something similar happens to the choral melody: see, for instance, b. 17–18 or b. 40–2, in which the melodic line is disseminated in its ('interior' or 'exterior' – this border becomes undecidable) spectral field, and becomes literally *ecstatic*. In places like these, Messiaen's 'musical language' is not

*destroyed*; rather, it is saturated, transfigured, it becomes ecstatic, consumed.

<sup>51</sup> The opening chord of *Adoro te* (the first piece of *Livre du Saint Sacrement* (1984) as recorded by Hans-Ola Ericsson on JADE 74321 30295–2) is another example.

<sup>52</sup> Messiaen, *Conférence de Kyoto*, p. 15.

<sup>53</sup> Marion relates it to a certain tiredness, an exhaustion that is caused by the great effort to perceive the divine. 'The idol offers the gaze its earth – the first earth upon which to rest. In the idol, the gaze is buried.' In other words, the idol reveals a shortcoming in the gaze: it prefers, or is forced, to rest, and resting in the idol, it marks the border between the visual (i.e. the idol) and the opening toward another dimension (i.e. the icon and divine revelation), which, however, remains beyond the gaze's idolatrous reach. See Marion, *God Without Being*, p. 13.

<sup>54</sup> Marion, *God Without Being*, pp. 10–11.

and show the human gaze the gaze of the (divine) Other, which constitutes it. According to Marion, this kind of reversal remains the privilege of *the icon*, a figure to which I turn in the next section.<sup>55</sup>

The phenomenology of the idol suggests that the experience of *éblouissement* may well be of a particular nature, but at the same time remains within the coordinates of the modern subject. This it shares with the Kantian sublime. Both the idol and the sublime imply a certain narcissism (a turn of the subject to itself) as well as a certain idolatry. Yet, by reading the idol from the reverse perspective of ‘saturation’ – i.e. from the wholly different, non-subjective principle of (divine) givenness – Marion at once shows a possible ‘breakthrough’ towards the beyond of a merely subjective idolatry or sublimity. As seen earlier, Wilfrid Mellers already used the notion of saturation in his discussion of *La Transfiguration*. Marion offers a complement to his description by demonstrating the limitations of the idol as well as of the vision of iconic ‘conversion’. However, what remains to be thought through is this vision as such: how can we understand that, according to Messiaen, the dynamics of *éblouissement* do not dissipate before an idolatrous ‘invisible mirror’ (Marion), but break through to the other side? In other words, does Messiaen indeed gesture towards a *musical icon* beyond the logic of the idol (and, for that matter, a corresponding *transfiguration of the ear*)? And, if so, how should this musical iconicity be understood? For a possible answer to this question, one must turn to the religious thinker whose work has been a major reference point for both Marion and Messiaen, the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar.<sup>56</sup>

## The iconicity of aural form

A very thin line connects Messiaen to Hans Urs von Balthasar. The latter’s name is mentioned only a few times in the texts written by the composer, but whenever he speaks of Balthasar it is in an extraordinarily laudatory tone.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup>Iconicity *not* understood here in the usual musicographical sense (referring, among others, to musical depiction) but in Marion’s sense of ‘transparency’ and ‘reversal of the listening perspective’. That is to say, from a different angle, an experience of music *not* as constituted by the listening subject (as in the case of the musically sublime or the aural idol), but as already *given* (in a phenomenological sense) in the manner of an icon. The theological notion of the ‘musical icon’, as implied by

Messiaen, can also be found in the music of John Tavener and Arvo Pärt.

<sup>56</sup>On the interrelations between the musical thought of Marion and Balthasar, see Sander van Maas, ‘On Preferring Mozart’, in *Bijdragen: International Journal in Philosophy and Theology*, no. 65 (2004), 97–110.

<sup>57</sup>Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color*, pp. 17 and 211. Massin, *Olivier Messiaen: une poétique du merveilleux*, pp. 73, 105–6, 151. As far as I know, Messiaen has never directly quoted Balthasar in his writings and interviews.

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Although the influence of Messiaen's theological reading on his work remains indirect, he appears to have liked interpretations of *La Transfiguration* based on Balthasar.<sup>58</sup>

In a general sense, Balthasar's theology is of import to an interpretation of the arts because he has put the notion of beauty back on to the theological agenda. As Balthasar attempts to show in the first part of *The Glory of the Lord* (*Herrlichkeit: eine theologische Aesthetik*), the notion of beauty has gradually been marginalised under the influence of protestant theology (Luther's, and more particularly by Kierkegaard's). To many theologians, he contends, the aesthetic has become synonymous with empty appearances and unethical styles of living. As he claims, in contrast to its perfect embedding in the One, True and Good in ancient and Hellenic theology, Beauty has become isolated.<sup>59</sup> In the first volume of *The Glory of the Lord*, entitled *Seeing the Form*, Balthasar criticises the de-aestheticisation (*Ent-ästhetisierung*) of theology and pleads for a revaluation of Beauty in theological thought. He aims to formulate a 'theological aesthetics' in which Beauty is once again thought of as being transcendental, the equal of the True and the Good.

Balthasar describes his theological aesthetics as an attempt to practise aesthetics in the field of, and using the methods of, theology. It sets itself against aesthetic theologies, in which 'the theological content is betrayed and sold out to the usual conceptions of immanent aesthetics'.<sup>60</sup> The early romantic cult, which became known as *Kunstreligion* (religion of art), can be posited as the supreme opposite to this project, but Balthasar does not explicitly mention it. His prime target seems to have been the philosophical aesthetic that was developed from the religion of art, notably by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. In order to articulate his theological aesthetics, Balthasar relies most heavily on the notion of form or figure (*Gestalt*). As he contends, 'the words that try to express beauty, first of all revolve around the mystery of the *Gestalt* or the created. *Formosus* stems from *forma*, *speciosus* from *species*. But at the same time the question arises of the "great radiance [*Glanz*] from within", which illuminates the form from within. And then there is the created,

<sup>58</sup>To my knowledge, Balthasar himself did not write on Messiaen. Others, however, have attempted to relate his thought to the composer's oeuvre. See Michel, 'La Transfiguration et la beauté', and his *La Parole et la beauté: rhétorique et esthétique dans la tradition occidentale* (Paris: Les belles lettres, 1982), 144–5.

See also Pascal Ide, 'Olivier Messiaen, musicien de la gloire de Dieu', *Communio* Vol. 19, no. 5 (September–October 1994), 97.

<sup>59</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit: eine theologische Aesthetik* (Einsiedeln–Trier: Johannes Verlag, 1988), vol. I, p. 47.

<sup>60</sup>Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit*, vol. I, p. 35.

and that which makes it radiant, which turns it into something valuable and loveable.<sup>61</sup>

These two moments of beauty relate to the subjective moments of the perception of beauty and the being enraptured by it: 'For no-one sees truth without being at once enraptured by it, and no-one [can] be enraptured without having perceived it [*wahr-genommen*, (literally) having received the truth]'.<sup>62</sup> According to Balthasar, this dynamics of perception, understood as 'taking the truth', and the kenotic *rapture* (*ecstasis*) of the faithful spectator, firmly links Beauty with the True and the Good respectively.<sup>63</sup> The acceptance of truth in and through the appearance of the *Gestalt* goes together with an ethical 'giving oneself' (*Hingabe*) to, and in the service of, this truth.<sup>64</sup> Balthasar even understands this experience to be the very core of the Christian faith. 'Being swept along [*Hingerissenwerden*]', as he formulates it, 'is the origin of Christianity'.<sup>65</sup> It is the original response of faith to the figure of Christ (*die Christusgestalt*); that is, to the Son who is the image (*eikon*, *Gestalt*) of the Father.<sup>66</sup>

Criticising the viewpoint that, to the Christian faith, the hearing of the Word is more important than the seeing of the *Gestalt*, Balthasar argues that perception (*Wahr-nehmung*), as 'an acceptance of a Truth that offers itself', comprises and implies both hearing and believing.<sup>67</sup> This primacy of the visual translates into music as a special interest in musical form. According to Balthasar, music's spiritual powers are to be found in the contours of *melody*. A melody, he argues, is both material and – because it can be transposed – spiritual. It embodies the virtues of the *Gestalt*. Melody represents the creational element, which refers beyond itself to the archetype of all

<sup>61</sup> Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit*, vol. I, p. 18. See also p. 111: 'The *Gestalt* is only beautiful because the gratification it gives stems from the profound truth and goodness of reality which shows itself as something endlessly and inexhaustibly valuable and fascinating. The appearance as manifestation of the depth is inextricably both at once: true presence of the depth, of the whole, as well as a real reference beyond itself to this depth.'

<sup>62</sup> Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit*, vol. I, p. 10. Here he further contends that 'this is equally true for the theological relation between faith and mercy, because faith, while surrendering itself, understands the *Gestalt* of revelation, and mercy has already taken the faithful up into the world of God'.

<sup>63</sup> The theological notion of *kenosis* refers to the 'self-emptying' of Christ when he took 'the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are, . . . accepting death' (Phil. 2:7–8). In the

present context, it refers to an analogical 'self-emptying' on the part of the listener.

<sup>64</sup> See Mario Saint-Pierre, *Beauté, bonté, vérité chez Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1998), pp. 259–63.

<sup>65</sup> Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit*, vol. I, p. 30.

According to Balthasar (p. 114), this experience should not be understood in a merely psychological way, but as 'the movement of the whole of man's Being . . . away from himself or herself, by Christ, [in]to God [*in Gott hinein*]'. Accordingly, *Hingerissenwerden* is understood in terms of *eros* and *agapē*.

<sup>66</sup> Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit*, vol. I, p. 442. See also Col. 1:15.

<sup>67</sup> Balthasar in fact resists a certain interpretation of the Pauline notion of '*fides ex auditu*' (Rom. 10:17) as found in Bernard of Clairvaux. See, for instance, Bernard's *Sermones in Cantica Canticatorum*, 28:6.

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form: the divine creative principle. More generally, Balthasar adheres to a hylomorphic ('Apollonian') model, setting the *Gestalt* against what he understood to be the pantheistic, Dionysian tendencies in Schopenhauer, Wagner and Nietzsche.<sup>68</sup>

As discussed above, Marion proposes the icon as an alternative to the closure of the idol. This figure depends to a large extent on Balthasar's notion of *Gestalt*. Essential to the logic of *Gestalt*, and also of the icon, is a reversal of perspective, which opens up the standpoint of the 'Other'. *Eblouissement*, despite being the effect of an idolatrous relationship between the spectator-listener and the world, refers to the *beyond* (*au-delà*) of idolatrous closure – as a kind of 'low-water mark' of the divine. The *Gestalt*, or icon, is a theoretical figure that delineates the opening of the beyond (Messiaen's '*percée vers l'au-delà*'), linking the experience of this event to the 'gift' of saturated (and saturating) Form. In the music of *éblouissement* analysed above (in section 3), form contained a variety of levels: forms of musical-pictorial figurations, form in a musical-technical sense, and the formal aspects of repetition and theatricality (section 3). Balthasar suggests that we regard these levels as aspects of a single and unified phenomenon ('Form') which expresses the depth and totality of its own givenness.

What, however, does this significant otherness or 'givenness' of Form consist of? It should be noted that the axiom of Balthasar's theology resides in the aesthetico-theological idea that form – and musical form, too, for that matter – is 'revelation from above'.<sup>69</sup> First and foremost form is 'animated and effective [*lebendige und wirkende*]' form, and this animation articulates the 'depth' of form; that is, its theological dimension.<sup>70</sup> The appeal of the theory of *Gestalt* and icon is the ethical appeal of a *living* instance. In music, Balthasar seems to prefer melody because it evokes the human element, as indeed a vocal melody does most strongly. With respect to this preference for animated form, his theological aesthetics approaches Eduard Hanslick's, whose 'tonally moving forms' are animated by a (metaphysical) *Geist*.<sup>71</sup> Balthasar seems often to lay claim to figures which do not unequivocally belong to the domain of theology, turning them into vehicles which, to a certain extent, facilitate the movement across the fields of faith and the arts.

<sup>68</sup> It is remarkable and highly telling that the 'pantheistic' Schopenhauer favoured the same musical phenomenon – melody – to articulate his metaphysics of music. The consequences of this parallel are analysed in depth in my study *Doorbraak en Idolatrie*.

<sup>69</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Die Entwicklung der musikalischen Idee: Versuch einer Synthese der Musik/Bekanntnis zu Mozart* (Einsiedeln–Freiburg: Johannes Verlag, 1998), p. 48.

<sup>70</sup> Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit*, vol. I, p. 20.

<sup>71</sup> In the first edition of his *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* (1854) Hanslick appeals to metaphysics. In the second edition he shied away from such references, replacing them with references to the natural sciences. See Carl Dahlhaus, *Klassische und romantische Musikaesthetik* (Laaber: Laaber Verlag, 1988), pp. 291–2.

Moving similarly into the area in between the sacred and the secular, Marion even more consciously avoids committing himself to a theological-dogmatic framework, without sacrificing metaphysical perspectives, however. In his philosophical analysis, the depth of the icon, which reveals its own givenness through saturation, refers to the constitution of the listener. According to his phenomenology, listening to the music of *éblouissement* from the perspective of saturation would mean an encounter with the very origin of oneself in an aural gift that logically precedes any synthetic act of aural cognition. In other words, listening to this music would first of all mean being struck (*éblouit*) by a givenness that precedes and overflows any subjective synthesis of melodies, harmonies or other aspects of musical structure. It opens up a domain of musical experience that resists the division of music into musical languages and genres, such as the 'secular' and 'sacred'. This is the domain Messiaen refers to when he says, 'I believe there is no truly profane music, nor any truly sacred music, but one reality, seen from different angles'.<sup>72</sup> Strictly speaking, the music of *éblouissement* is a sacred music *beyond sacred music*.

### ***Eblouissement* and the logic of love**

When he speaks of *éblouissement*, Messiaen does not refer to sacred music as a mere matter of musical themes, stylistic features, symbolism or lyrical content. Neither does he refer to allegories or metaphors.<sup>73</sup> Musical *éblouissement* and 'breakthrough' are not, as Paul Griffiths proposes, reducible to, on the one hand, the specificities of a musical structure and, on the other hand, a set of private beliefs.<sup>74</sup> As the notion of the sublime indicates, much more can be discovered about Messiaen's work (and also about music and musical experience in general) than would result from an analysis in terms of 'what parades in sound and time', excluding 'the intentions that may crowd around it'.<sup>75</sup> Messiaen's music is too rich to be reduced to formal structure, and his ideas are too challenging to be reduced to beliefs. Insofar as

<sup>72</sup> Messiaen, in Goléa, *Rencontres avec Olivier Messiaen*, p. 41.

<sup>73</sup> Even the stained-glass windows should not be understood as a metaphor in this respect. In *Lecture at Notre-Dame*, Messiaen accords his music of *éblouissement*, the windows and all the other references equal status according to the open, juxtapositional logic of a metonym – and necessarily so. Firstly, because his 'music' (i.e. *sound-colour*) evades monomedial distinctions which would allow a transfer of a visual 'metaphor' to the aural

domain. And secondly, as I have tried to argue, because it exceeds simple distinctions in terms of 'literal-versus-metaphorical'; the relation between Messiaen's music and its referents (truth, *éblouissement*, etc.) calls for a metonymical, participatory and resonant logic rather than a logic of exclusion.

<sup>74</sup> Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, 51.

<sup>75</sup> Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, 51.

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his music is understood as sacred music (a notion he himself did not accept as a pure category), it is sacred music beyond 'sacred music' in the derivative sense of music featuring 'religious' themes, purveying symbols of 'religion', etc. Such determinations remain secondary with regard to the events Messiaen refers to as 'breakthrough' and *éblouissement*, as does the trivialising interpretation of these events as musical allegories. The abandonment of the major–minor system may well represent an image of 'experiences beyond the normal', as they take place *outside* of the musical domain (Griffiths), but it does not account for the way these experiences should be thought *within* it.<sup>76</sup>

Love in Messiaen's work is not primarily a matter of theme, emotion or 'content'; it is also a matter of form. It is the depth of form (on numerous levels) that overwhelms its listener with givenness. As Balthasar writes, the experience of love is *ecstatic*; it is a response to a singular gift. The decisive musical expression of this gift is the 'purely aural sublimity' (Mellers) that shatters the unity of form in the technical sense. A technical analysis of this music from its representation in a score can never account for the liminal character of the music of *éblouissement*, which breaks through the score's suggestion of synthetic coherence in terms of time, space and structure. It should be reiterated that this shattering of form has little or nothing to do with might or power. As Messiaen often reveals, the music of *éblouissement* need not be loud or violent in terms of volume or style. Saturating and dazzling a listener does not require deafening him or her. Nor need the music be fragmentary or pure chaos to produce such an effect. The form of the music is not 'broken' from without, but from within, ever expanding the music's universe. Saturating and enveloping the listener with its ecstatic joy, it calls for his or her affirmation through an aural 'leap of faith', a transfiguration of the ear.

Messiaen's music without a doubt is music in the spirit of the *theologia gloriae*, a fact which is sometimes used as an argument against Messiaen's aesthetics.<sup>77</sup> However, such a criticism presupposes that the pitfalls of musical idolatry can be avoided. It approaches Messiaen's work from within the long tradition of suspicion against the powers of theatricality and rhetoric, which certainly remain characteristics of his work. Here a more profound line of questioning presents itself: can theatricality, idolatry, even blasphemy, be avoided, and should they be avoided? This is not the place to begin this discussion, but it would be wise to put Messiaen's work and thought into a context that is as broad as possible. Neither musicology nor theology have

<sup>76</sup> Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, 51.

<sup>77</sup> Rößler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen*, p. 51.

yet recognised the profoundly interdisciplinary and intermediary character of his work.

Fundamental questions are raised by Messiaen's work, which both traditional disciplines must address: with regard to the status of music as a medium (e.g. for 'sacred subjects'), and with regard to religion as a reality independent of (musical) mediation. As I have tried to outline, the phenomenology of *éblouissement*, through the introduction of new analytical strategies, points into new directions. First, it enables the analysis of how Messiaen's music *sounds* and *acts*. It allows the description of the interaction between sound and listener, particularly as a process in which the listener is actively involved, and to which he or she brings a horizon much wider than it is generally assumed to be. And second, paradoxically, it demonstrates the value of a number of figures originating from theological traditions for the analysis of sacred music as *not* just an artistic medium conveying stable religious meaning, but rather as a critical phenomenon residing *in between* music and religion.