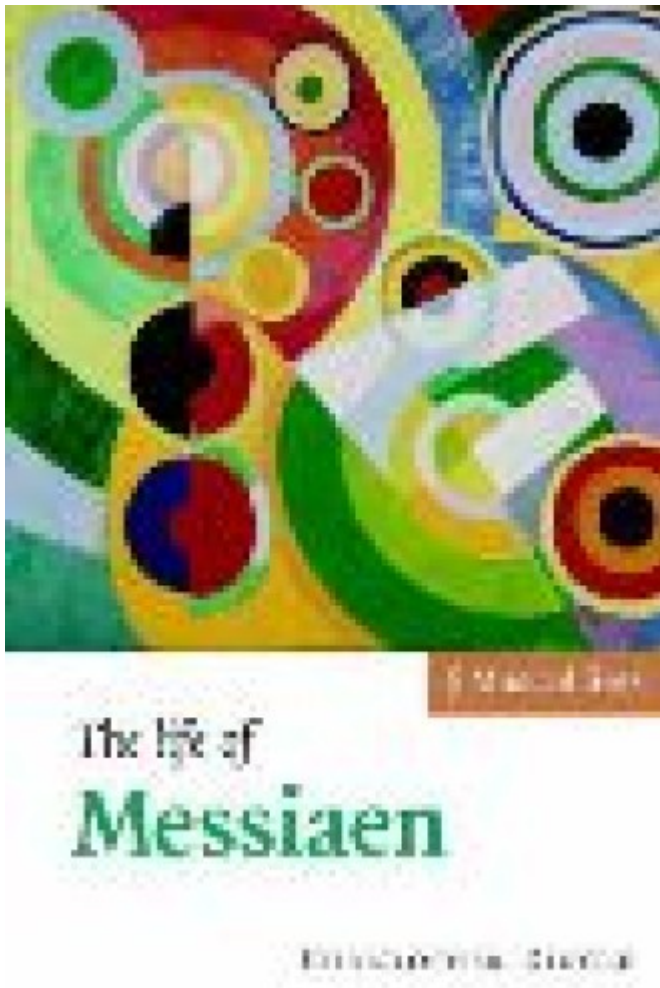


# The Life of Messiaen

reviewed by [Jeremy Begbie](#) in the [September 9, 2008](#) issue

## In Review



## The Life of Messiaen

Christopher Dingle  
Cambridge University Press

There can be little doubt that Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) is the most profoundly theological composer of the 20th century. Virtually all his pieces bear some form of

explicit Christian intent or reference. The titles, the biblical quotations and the ascriptions he attaches to his scores, his spoken commentaries at performances and his writings and interviews all evince a devout and passionate Roman Catholic, eager that the often weighty and dense theological symbolism of his music not be missed and that the listener sense something of God's presence in and through it.

What is especially evident from Christopher Dingle's very fine biography is that Messiaen's faith, though the composer was not of the sort to defend it against skepticism or attack, was anything but naive or superficial. Messiaen had an exceptional theological intelligence without parallel in modern music, nurtured through intensive reading, prayer and reflection. What seems to have grasped Messiaen was neither an eclectic religion nor a broad spirituality nor mysticism (a label he disliked), but the positive, central teachings of the Catholic Church. As he once said: "I love the sound, solid gifts of faith."

Thankfully, Dingle gives serious attention to this aspect of the composer, resisting the temptation—so common in Messiaen scholarship—to adopt a superior and patronizing stance, marginalizing the Christian dimension or treating it as irrelevant to the quality and profundity of the music. Perhaps Messiaen's most significant achievement was to deploy a very diverse musical toolbox that could catch the attention of his modernist and avant-garde musical contemporaries, yet use this toolbox in the service of a focused and orthodox Catholic vision. No other modern artist of any discipline accomplished this to the same degree. The result is a kind of music that, as Dingle puts it, is "instantly recognizable yet never predictable."

Though Messiaen's output was huge, he is probably best known for his numerous organ pieces, and perhaps most of all for the *Quartet for the End of Time*, with its memorable evocation of eternity. Combining musicological and theological commentary on Messiaen's works, Dingle leads us chronologically through the main events of the composer's life—his musical education, his remarkable experience as a soldier (which included time as a prisoner of war, out of which came the famous *Quartet*), his highly influential composition class at the Paris Conservatoire, his gradual rise to international fame and celebrity and his mixed reception among music's critical establishment.

Certain features of Messiaen's personality emerge as especially striking: his childlike love of nature (especially birds), his steady attention to detail and his affection for friends. Most noticeable is what seems to be an extraordinary humility—born, we

might venture to suggest, from a profound sense of his standing before a God from whom he could claim nothing yet to whom he could be thankful for everything. For years he was the faithful church organist of l'Église de la Trinité in Paris. Messiaen could be fiercely independent, yet he was not afraid to be vulnerable and open about his shortcomings. He appears to have had an enormous impact on those he came to know well. Many of his pupils, who included such luminaries as Pierre Boulez, Alexander Goehr and Karlheinz Stockhausen, came to diverge radically from him in outlook and technique, yet even they retained for their master a profound and lifelong respect amounting at times to reverence.

Dingle deals with the more sensitive and tragic aspects of Messiaen's life with gentleness and due reticence. Though with a few notable exceptions Messiaen did not explore life's darker side at any great depth in his music, he was acquainted with the kind of affliction that challenges Christian faith to the core; his wife's early dementia and eventual death (to take the most poignant example) scarred him deeply.

This is without doubt the best midlength introduction to Messiaen currently available: readable, accessible, drawing on the latest research, free of heavy agendas and theoretical ax grinding, and conveying a vibrant sense of a man who lived life to the full and left an inestimable legacy to the musical world.