

# Sounds of the End: Music and Eschatology in Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time* and the Tibetan Practice of *gCod*



Journal of Interreligious Studies  
March 2024, Issue 41, 8-19  
ISSN 2380-8187  
[www.irstudies.org](http://www.irstudies.org)

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to bring into conversation the musical vision of the French composer Olivier Messiaen (1908–92) and the role played by music in the Tibetan practice of *gCod* (spelled phonetically as *chöd*), a traditional tantric ritual aimed at the suppression of negative influences and the recovery of primal awareness. The comparison illumines the distinctive claims that the two traditions make on eschatology and individual redemption, while also exploring the role that music can play in the broader context of comparative theology. Messiaen and *gcod* practitioners draw inspiration from other forms of sacred music and ritual performance, but ultimately create an idiosyncratic musical genre that disrupts conventional boundaries between eternity/ultimate reality, on one hand, and temporality/ordinary reality, on the other. A conversation between these two musical visions discloses a variety of surprising points of contact between their claims as to individual transformation and the role of transcendence, but also a number of irreducible differences concerning their distinctive soteriological and cosmological visions.

## Keywords

Messiaen, *gcod* (*chöd*), tantric, Tibetan, eschatology, music, soteriology, cosmology

Charles Taylor's 2007 study *A Secular Age* popularized the image of the "immanent frame"—the notion that, as a consequence of the fading away of metanarratives, the triumph of disenchantment, and the emergence of the buffered self, individuals inhabiting the realm of postmodernity mostly live in so-called "closed world structures" based on pragmatism, utilitarianism, and ultimately secularism. Indeed, Taylor claims that most people who embrace these "closed world structures" never actively defend their worldviews, which "function as unchallenged actions." Within this perspective, questions about ultimate meaning or transcendence are never engaged, or really are never raised at all; individuals who affirm their

allegiance to traditional religious belief systems appear not to be giving the wrong answer to a reasonable question, but to be asking a meaningless question altogether.<sup>1</sup>

As this immanent frame is entirely self-referential, it appears to exclude not just the notion of transcendence, but also the very possibility of an eschatological horizon that would confer meaning and purpose to our daily struggles. If not only the early generations of Christians but also the Medieval church and the reformers were mesmerized by the apocalyptic narrative of the Book of Revelation, many contemporary believers are less than enthused by its violent and threatening imagery; a frenzied fear of the “Last Day” may remain a fringe phenomenon among evangelical fundamentalists, but mainstream churches may have redirected their focus towards more prosaic and immanent goals. Within academic theology, reflection on eschatology takes place as an analysis of what has been affirmed in the pages of Scriptures or the early Fathers, rather than in a speculative, constructive mode—and even the few exceptions, such as Johann Baptist Metz, appear to decline this theme in line with broader socio-political preoccupations.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I wish to discuss the different ways in which religious traditions articulate their understanding of eschatology by way of music to illustrate how the Christian vision of the last things and the Tibetan Buddhist intimations of an immanent, already-realized transcendence find musical expressions in the works of the French composer Olivier Messiaen (1908–92) and in the Tibetan practice of *gcod*—a traditional tantric ritual aimed at suppressing negative influences and recovering primal awareness.<sup>3</sup> The comparison will illumine the distinctive claims that the two traditions make on eschatology and individual redemption, while also helping us reflect more broadly on the role music can play in the context of comparative theology.

Olivier Messiaen (1908–92) served as the chief organist of the Église de la Sainte-Trinité for over sixty years and is one of the most influential composers of music for organ of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> Trained in the third and fourth decade of the twentieth century, he viewed his role as first and foremost a servant of the classical liturgy of the Roman rite, with its fixed texts and musical melodies that had been handed down for centuries from generation to generation. In particular, he drew inspiration—and indeed, great spiritual consolation—from the *Liber Gradualis*, the receptacles of Gregorian melodies prescribed for singing the Propers of the liturgy on Sundays and other days of great solemnity. These melodies had been the inspiration for the great Renaissance polyphonic composition of Palestrina and Messiaen used them with great inventiveness as the basis for many compositions as well as for the improvisations he would play at the console of his instrument Sunday after Sunday.<sup>5</sup> One should remember though that

<sup>1</sup> See Charles Taylor, Ch. 15, “The Immanent Frame,” in *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), especially 539–48.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of eschatology in contemporary Christian thought, see Steven Rodenborn, *Hope in Action: Subversive Eschatology in the Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx and Johann Baptist Metz* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> The spelling *gcod*—which follows the Wylie transliteration system—is used most often in academic publications; popular literature tends to use phonetic spellings such as *chod* or *chöd*.

<sup>4</sup> The most comprehensive biography of Messiaen is Christopher Dingle, *The Life of Messiaen* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007); another work that draws extensively on his diaries and notebooks is Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Messiaen* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> The traditional *Graduale Romanum* that would have been used by Messiaen was substantially different from its post-Vatican II replacement, though in the years since Pope Benedict XVI’s 2007 *motu proprio Summorum Pontificum* the older books have experienced a significant revival. See *Graduale Romanum 1961* Vol. I–II (Church Association of North America: McMinnville, TN: 2021).

Messiaen was not merely an organist, but also a skilled composer for numerous other instruments, as we can see from the numerous orchestral suites that he left behind. One of them—*Quartet for the End of Time* (*Quatuor pour la fin du temps*)—was penned in late 1940 and early 1941 during Messiaen’s imprisonment in a German concentration camp in Goerlitz. Having befriended a clarinetist, a violinist, and a cellist among his fellow prisoners, and having obtained paper and pencil from a friendly guard, Messiaen initially wrote a trio for his three friends, which became a quartet with the addition of himself on the piano. The conditions at Goerlitz were actually rather humane in comparison with the extermination camps in the East: the camp’s commanding officer, who was passionate about chamber music, even provided extra food rations for the musicians and allowed Messiaen to move to an isolated barracks to be able to compose in privacy. The first performance of the quartet took place on January 15<sup>th</sup>, in front of a few hundred prisoners assembled for the occasion. Despite the bond that the four musicians had formed during their imprisonment, this was the only time that they would ever perform this quartet in public.<sup>6</sup>

Even on that first day, Messiaen prefaced the performance with a lecture during which he explained the religious inspiration of his work. The work was inspired by a passage in Revelation 10:1–7, where an angel swears “by him that lives forever” that “there shall no longer be time.” The work is divided into eight movements that imaginatively narrate the cessation of time and its absorption into eternity by the manifestation of the eternal Word. The first section (*La liturgie de crystal*) is meant to evoke an awakening of birds before the dawn, as well as the harmonious silence of heaven. Messiaen had long been fascinated with Greek music, which sought to follow the quantity of the vowels in the text which provided its structure, and therefore turned rhythm into a series of “meters” that had the values of prime numbers (5, 7, 11). Before the war, Messiaen had also studied the *Saṅgīta Ratnākara* (“The Ocean of Music and Dance,” or “The Jewel-Mine of Music”), Śārṅgadeva’s 13<sup>th</sup>-century treatise on Indian music that explored a bewildering variety of rhythmical patterns.<sup>7</sup> From the very beginning of the *Quartet*, one detects the influence of these different traditions in Messiaen’s relentless experimentation with rhythm, which try to disrupt all sense of predictability, shortening or lengthening different beats in an apparently random and arbitrary fashion. In Messiaen’s own words, this rhythmic strategy is closer to the way the natural world actually functions—in his words, “in nature, rippling water is uneven, waving tree branches are uneven, movements of clouds are uneven”. The purpose is to banish the temporal and evoke eternity, creating “an iridescent music” that delights all the senses. Indeed, in the second section (*Vocalise pur l’Ange qui annonce le fin du Temps*) Messiaen describes the intricate interplay of violin and cello as “the ineffable harmonies of heaven” surrounded by “soft cascades of orange-blue chords.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The literature on the *Quartet* is immense, and there are various accounts of the first performance—this, on account of Messiaen’s well-known tendency to offer different versions of the same story to different audiences. An engaging account is given by Alex Ross, “Revelations: Messiaen’s Quartet for the End of Time,” in *The New Yorker* (March 22, 2004), available at [https://www.therestisnoise.com/2004/04/quartet\\_for\\_the\\_2.html](https://www.therestisnoise.com/2004/04/quartet_for_the_2.html) (accessed on February 21, 2024). See also Rebecca Rishin, *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> See Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen* (London: Omnibus Press, 2009), particularly Ch. 2, “The Development of Messiaen’s Musical Language.”

<sup>8</sup> Messiaen’s observations on the meaning of the *Quartet*’s music can be found in Oliver Messiaen, *Notes to the Fernandez/Deplus/Niels/Petit Quatuor LP* (Erato STE 50156, 1963), quoted in Peter Gutman, *Oliver Messiaen: Quartet for the End of Time* (Classical Notes, 2018), available at <http://www.classicalnotes.net/classics6/quatuor.html> (accessed February 21, 2024).

Perhaps the most striking section of the whole *Quartet* is what follows this angelic salutation, viz., a clarinet solo that introduces the audience into *l'abîme des oiseaux* (the abyss of the birds), where Messiaen explores the tension between the abyss (symbolizing the weariness of time) and the birds (symbolizing our desire for light, stars, and temporal joys). Messiaen claimed that the songs of the birds recalled the melodies of Gregorian chant, with extraordinarily elaborate, but always very precise and clear rhythms, while also using a whole plethora of untempered intervals that can in no way be replicated by musical instruments. Elsewhere, Messiaen calls birds “servants of immortal joy” that surpass our human imagination in creativity. Much as the great Renaissance composers used Gregorian melodies as the backbone for their polyphonic settings of the set parts of the Mass, Messiaen resorted to birds—his “true masters”—for inspiration, seeking ways, so to speak, to break through the boundary of temporality in an ecstatic contemplation of the cosmos.<sup>9</sup>

The last section (*Louange à l'Immortalité de Jésus*) sees a cello melody floating above a constant rhythm of piano cords. Messiaen views the piano accompaniment as representing “the anguish and useless torment of life,” whereas the violin intimates “the peace and charity of Christian paradise.” The whole section represents the ascent of the Son of God towards the Father, and at the same time the ascent of each one of us towards God. This section, the eighth, is associated with ‘the last day’ of Christian eschatology, which was traditionally signified by the number eight—the “day of the Lord” that would bring to completion the original creation unfolding over the six days and the day of rest from the beginning of Genesis. Messiaen’s preoccupation with “the last things” was partly a reflection of his experience of hardship during the war—something that would mark him for the rest of his days. This intimacy with death, and the reality that every day could be one’s last, at the mercy of an overlord knowing neither reason nor pity, ensured that even after the war, Messiaen would always look for musical outlets for his aspirations to transcendence and hope for eternal life. This last section of the *Quartet*, where the eternal Son of God opens the way to eternal peace, was actually criticized by some for being too peaceful, or somehow not sufficiently “apocalyptic.” Messiaen responded that the second coming of Christ would not just bring about death and destruction, but also introduce humanity to the embrace of God’s eternal peace, and that this is what he sought to represent.<sup>10</sup>

Messiaen makes extensive use of the modes of limited transposition, i.e., scales fulfilling specific criteria as to their inner symmetry and the repetition of interval groups, which are based on the ordinary tempered system of twelve semitones, but whose use marks a shift away from the conventional system of the keys in use since the early modern era.<sup>11</sup> The introduction of equal temperament, which artificially erased the distinction between chromatic and diatonic semitones and paved the way for classical period compositions using the system of keys most modern audiences are familiar with. If one looks at organ pieces written before the introduction of equal temperament, such as Frescobaldi’s liturgical sonatas or variations on the music of the *Graduale* (the bread and butter of junior organists),<sup>12</sup> one will see that the choice of Gregorian mode is

<sup>9</sup> R. Johnson, *Messiaen*, Ch. 12, *Catalogue d’oiseaux*.

<sup>10</sup> See Peter Gutman, *Oliver Messiaen: The Quartet for the End of Time*, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> For a theoretical discussion of the modes of limited transposition, see Jack Douthett and Peter Steinbach, “Parsimonious Graphs: A Study in Parsimony, Contextual Transformations and Modes of Limited Transposition,” in *Journal of Music Theory* 42.2 (Fall 1998), 241-63.

<sup>12</sup> See Bernard Focroulle, *Frescobaldi: Organ Works* (Ricercar, March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2017).

what determines the “mood” of the piece. After the shift to the key system, the character of the piece is given by the author’s choice to remain in the key signature or to modulate into adjacent keys using accidentals, possibly—but not always—returning to the key signature at the end. Twentieth-century music was characterized by a broad move away from the tonal strictures of the classical system, and Messiaen’s *La Technique de Mon Langage Musicale* (initially published in 1944) shows the influence of other similar attempts of deconstruction, such as the dodecaphonic movement that ends up rejecting equal temperament entirely to experiment with new modes of expression.

The move away from the traditional keys certainly reflected Messiaen’s fascination with the Gradual’s pre-modern world of Gregorian modes. His chromatic scales did not set out to deconstruct the achievement of equal temperament; rather, he sought to recover the Gregorian system’s association of specific modes with particular “moods” or spiritual states. As a result, Messiaen’s experimentation was neither a rejection of the tradition’s development over time, nor an exercise in musical archeology. Much as Poulenc did not just reach back to the seventeenth century, but actually incorporated contemporary stylistic elements into his *Concert Champêtre* for harpsichord written in 1928–29, Messiaen set out to create new modes within a system that presupposed equal temperament.<sup>13</sup> In his own words:

Based on our present chromatic system, a tempered system of 12 sounds, these modes are formed of several symmetrical groups, the last note of each group always being common with the first of the following group. At the end of a certain number of chromatic transpositions which varies with each mode, they are no longer transposable, giving exactly the same notes as the first.<sup>14</sup>

These actual modes then function within the same tempered system as classical music, but fulfill alternative specific criteria relating to their symmetry and the repetition of their interval groups; while they can be transposed to all twelve notes of the chromatic scale, at least two of these transpositions must result in the same pitch classes. This is what “limited transpositions” actually means.

As an example, the whole scale contains the notes C, D, E, F#, G#, A#; transposing this mode up a semitone produces C#, D#, F, G, A, B. Transposing this up another semitone produces D, E, F#, G#, A#, C, which is the same set of notes as the original scale.



Within the tempered system, there are seven such limited transposition modes. The point is that these alternative tonal arrangements express the irruption of a wholly “other” reality within the boundaries of an ordered world that appear self-enclosed, harmonious, and self-explanatory.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See Carl Schmidt., *The Music of Francis Poulenc (1899–1963): A Catalogue* (Oxford, 1995: Clarendon Press).

<sup>14</sup> Oliver Messiaen, *La technique de mon langage musicale* (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1944), 58.

<sup>15</sup> See Donald Street, “The Modes of Limited Transposition,” in *The Musical Times* 117 (1604), Oct. 1976, 819–23.



Instead, this world contains within itself the potential for self-transcendence, in a move that respects tonal and semitonal intervals but transposes them to another order of reality, gesturing at the universe that exists beyond equal temperament and actually sustains it. The creative exhaustion of the classical system at the beginning of the twentieth century was an indication that like all elements of the created order, equal temperament had come into being, had flourished, and had started to wither. Like a plant throwing out new blossoms, however, the chromatic scale can nurture new forms of life; the modes of limited transposition are the afterlife, the *zōē aiōnios* of equal temperament. To amplify the same metaphor, you could say that neoclassical music compositions are attempts at snatching a *bios aiōnios* for a musical system that has reached extraordinary heights in the past, but is now—so to speak—well past its prime.<sup>16</sup> One should not forget that Messiaen’s work as a church organist was also impacted by the long wave of Pius X’s 1903 document on church music *Tra Le Sollecitudini*, which discouraged the practice of orchestral Masses and affirmed the primacy of Gregorian chant—at the same time leaving the door open for cautious experimentation in line with the tradition.<sup>17</sup> Paradoxically, Messiaen’s highly experimental sacred music was an attempt to move forward while remaining rooted in the legacy of the past- to use a contemporary term, a sort of hermeneutic of continuity.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Messiaen was profoundly displeased when regular use of the *Liber Gradualis* and the traditional rite of Mass were phased out in the 1960s, while more modern musical styles were introduced into church music as part of the broader liturgical reform that followed the Second Vatican Council.

Apart from these historical considerations, *La Technique de mon langage musicale* was a text that did not just set out to call for creative disruption in continuity with the tradition, but also sought to subvert the boundaries between different modes of sensory perception—a subversion that simultaneously affirmed their fundamental unity as a channel of transcendence. The *Quartet’s Abîme des oiseaux*, for instance, was not just the springboard for Messiaen’s mode of limited transposition, but also showcased his life-long passion for birds, which for him were always messengers of the divine and were able to speak with God’s voice without worrying about tones, rhythm, or mode. Indeed, it was not just the angel of the second section—“his hair a rainbow, his clothing mist”—that was associated with a visual experience; indeed, in many of his scores—notably in *Couleurs de la cité céleste* and *Des canyons aux étoiles*—Messiaen jotted down the color of specific passages of music, as aid for the conductor and the performers.<sup>19</sup> In his multi-volume music treatise *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d’ornithologie* (“Treatise of Rhythm, Color and Ornithology”), Messiaen discusses the synesthetic character of music already intimated in the second part of the *Quartet*, associating specific chords with specific colors. The different modes of musical transposition are also associated with color and shapes, sometimes described in striking detail. Music, ultimately, was about much more than just modes or rhythm:

<sup>16</sup> *Bios aiōnios* would be an endless continuation of earthly life with all its contingency and limitation, whereas *zōē aiōnios* entails a transposition to a higher eschatological level; it is the latter that Christians are promised in Romans 6:23.

<sup>17</sup> Pope Pius X, *Motu Proprio ‘Tra le Sollecitudini’ on Sacred Music*, November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1903, available at [http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-x/it/motu\\_proprio/documents/hf\\_p-x\\_motu-proprio\\_19031122\\_sollecitudini.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-x/it/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-x_motu-proprio_19031122_sollecitudini.html) (accessed February 21, 2024).

<sup>18</sup> This notion was introduced by Pope Benedict XVI in his *Address to the Roman Curia* (Dec. 22, 2005), available at [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf\\_ben\\_xvi\\_spe\\_20051222\\_roman-curia.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia.html) (accessed February 21, 2024).

<sup>19</sup> Robert S. Johnson, *Messiaen*, Ch. 11, “Birdsong.”

[This] music is like blue-violet rocks, speckled with little grey cubes, cobalt blue, deep Prussian blue, highlighted by a bit of violet-purple, gold, red, ruby, and stars of mauve, black and white. Blue-violet is dominant.<sup>20</sup>

If traditional keys are associated with only one color, Messiaen's music is an intimation of the eschatological vision sketched by influential Christian monk and ascetic, Evagrius Ponticus, in some of his writings, where at the culmination of one's spiritual trajectory, the soul will take the color of the rainbow, and one will have a noetic intuition of the divine beyond the reach of the senses.<sup>21</sup> In this way, musical performance is an instance of realized eschatology, anticipating in the present what will come at the end of time, but also uncovering the seeds of eternity in this world, like a butterfly silently growing in a chrysalis. The unique character of Messiaen's compositional style blends mode and rhythm to intimate the irruption of eternity into this world, but also the embrace of ordinary creation by the divine. Eternity is not a continuation of the present without the looming threat of an endpoint—a sort of *bios aiōnios*; rather, it is a *zōē aiōnios*, an irreducibly “other” mode of being that embraces and transfigures every aspect of the natural order, allowing it to blossom into the promise of the divine. To use the language favored by the Eastern tradition, though not exclusive to it, creation is deified; yet the irruption of the divine energies does not jeopardize its ontological integrity, but transposes it to a different level, respecting its original texture and identity, so that what makes every aspect of the natural order what it is continues to exist—so to speak—in this exalted manner.

Turning to the other partner in this conversation, we will discover a very different way of reflecting on the inner dynamic of immanence and transcendence, and of course uncover the culturally contingent character of the connotations of this term. *gCod* is a spiritual practice found in the Bön tradition of Tibet as well as in the Nyingma and Kagyu schools of Tibetan Buddhism, where it is classed as Anuttarayoga Tantra.<sup>22</sup> Based on the *Prajñāpāramitā* or “Perfection of Wisdom” sutras, the goal is to expound the “emptiness” concept of Buddhist philosophy, and *gcod* is sometimes explained as a symbolic offering of one's body to a plethora of wrathful deities so as to propitiate them and more speedily attain enlightenment.<sup>23</sup> In fact, according to a distinction attributed to Milarepa, this kind of practice is only “internal *gcod*” and is merely a preparatory practice. “Ultimate *gcod*,” on the other hand, seeks to “realize the true nature of the mind and cut through the fine strand of hair of subtle ignorance.”<sup>24</sup> The demons to whom one's body is offered are hypostatizations of the adventitious defilements that obscure our Buddha nature, even if some practitioners may find it useful to consider them as real

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<sup>20</sup> From Oliver Messiaen, *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d'ornithologie* (Paris: Alphonse Le De, 2005), 134, quoted in English translation in Jack Howell, “Color, Tonality and Synaesthesia” (Musicians of PSO, Dec. 31, 2018), available at <https://www.musiciansofthepso.org/color-tonality-and-synaesthesia/> (accessed February 21, 2024).

<sup>21</sup> Evagrius Pontikos, *On Discrimination*, 18, 23, in G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (eds.), *Philokalia- Vol. 1* (London: Faber & Faber, 1979), 49, 52.

<sup>22</sup> For an exploration of the pre-Buddhist origins of *gcod*, see Alejandro M. Chaoul, *Chod practice in the Bon tradition* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publication, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> The most comprehensive exploration of *gcod* is found in Jérôme Edou, *Machig Labdrön and the Foundations of Chöd* (Ithaca, N.Y.: 1996).

<sup>24</sup> See the Venerable Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, “Chod: The Introduction and a Few Practices,” in the *Tibetan Buddhist Encyclopedia*, [www.tibetanbuddhistencyclopedia.com](http://www.tibetanbuddhistencyclopedia.com). The attribution to Milarepa is most likely apocryphal, but the distinction reflects Milarepa's tendency to link specific ritual practices to spiritual insights gained in meditation or in everyday life.

supernatural entities thwarting one's practice; ultimately, this process ensures that the body is purified of all samsaric attachments and becomes a worthy receptacle of Buddhahood.

Who was the founder of *gcod*? Tradition points to the figure of Ma gcig Lab sgron (Machig Labdron) (1055-1149), one of the most important female mystics and teachers in the history of Vajrayana Buddhism.<sup>25</sup> Herself considered to be a reincarnation of Yeshe Tsogyal, one of the wives of the dharma king Trisong Detsen and the “mother” of Tibetan Buddhism, she might have come from a Bon family, which would explain the presence of numerous shamanistic elements in her practice; according to the recently deceased Nyingma master Namkhai Norbu (1938–2018), however, her practice was conceptually and devotionally rooted in the Dzogchen tradition of the great perfection.<sup>26</sup> Iconographically, Machig Labdron is represented as wearing the so-called Six Ornament associated with Indian charnel grounds, holding a drum (*damaru*) in her right hand, and a bell (*ghanta*) in the left. Machig Labdron's biographical trajectory was most unusual, as she became a committed student of Buddhism in her early youth, but after an encounter with the Indian *pandita* Topa Bhadra, she lived with him as his consort for a number of years, giving birth to two sons and a daughter, only to return to live as a renunciant at the age of thirty-seven. It is at this time that Machig Labdron developed *gcod* as a visionary Buddhist practice, whose goal was to cut attachment to one's corporeal form. This means that *gcod* practitioners (both men and women) offer the mandala of their own body in a *ganachakra* (Tib. *tsog*, or ritual banquet) rite. The practitioner works with their own mind, visualizing the offering, and—by practicing in lonely and dreaded places, like sky burial locations—works to overcome all fear of illness, aging, and death, embracing the ultimate transitoriness of all phenomena. *Gcod pas* and *gcod mas* (practitioners of *gcod*) seek to transcend all fear by retrieving ritual bells, drums, and human thighbone trumpets from the grounds used for sky-burial. It may be interesting to note that Machig Labdron's Buddhist teachings were traditionally considered to be the first to originate in Tibet instead of having come from India, although contemporary scholars tend to qualify this claim and suggest a more complex genealogy for this practice going back to the *doha* tradition of Sanskrit poetry and the *gur* (*mgur*) tradition of spiritual poetry and recitation.<sup>27</sup>

What is important for our conversation is that all *gcod* practices are accompanied by music, and that the musical performances and visualizations that accompany *gcod* are not a mere entertainment; they are supposed to aid this realization and “cut through” not just the obfuscations of samsara, but all forms of dualism between subject and object, form and emptiness, conventional reality and ultimate reality. Much like the Catholic Mass, *gcod* is a liturgical ritual with different parts that culminates in a climatic section, when one's body is symbolically offered to appease demons and other threatening supernatural beings. In the same way as the *Gradual* assigns music to the liturgical propers, each section of the *gcod* ritual will have musically appropriate settings that accompany the liturgical action, in stark contrast with the tendency of Vajrayāna liturgical music to use monotonous syllabic chanting. The different sections are punctuated by the exclamation “Phat!” and by the sound of the thighbone trumpet, which alert the listener to pay careful attention to the different steps in the ritual. While the repeated use of this seed syllable may not have any equivalent in the tradition of the *Gradual*,

<sup>25</sup> See Karenina Kollman-Paulenz, “Ma gcig Lab sgron ma. The Life of a Woman Tibetan Mystic between Adaptation and Rebellion,” *The Tibet Journal* 23.2 (1998): 11–32.

<sup>26</sup> See Chogyal Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche, *Chod: Cutting Through Dualism* (CD. Amiata Records, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> See also Tsultrim Allione, “The Biography of Machig Labdrön (1055–1145),” in *Women of Wisdom* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 1984/2000), 165–220.



Messiaen's insertion of certain dissonant chords into the score of the *Quartet*, or his deployment of rapid shifts from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo*, serve an analogous purpose as they startle the audience into a different state of awareness. The use of these strategies underscores the fact that these musical compositions have first and foremost a transformative intent, accompanying listeners on the different stages of their spiritual itinerary.

In a religious vision that is not framed by a linear eschatological narrative, or where the ultimate soteriological insight can be attained in the here and now, the performance of *gcod*, with all its attendant musical and visionary practices, becomes a performance of the unity between samsara and nirvana, where the individual practitioner is dissolved in the embrace of the all-encompassing Buddha-nature. As noted by Jeffrey Cupchik, all aspects of the practice are given symbolic meanings: the drum (*damaru*) symbolizes emptiness, the clappers symbolize the ultimate nature of the mind, the bell symbolizes emptiness, and the trumpet symbolizes impermanence.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the melody, mantric utterance, and rhythmic flow play important symbolic functions: singing the melody (*rta*) is an act of performing guru-yoga, because one is invoking the blessings of the lineage lamas; the melodies are said to be the “actual wisdom of the Buddhas”; finally, the rhythm of the music indicates the constancy of practice in an impermanent world. Different melodies evoke a different mood (*rasa*) appropriate to the meditation, which are also accompanied by visualizations inspired by passages of the *Prajñāpāramitā*. In Cupchik's words, “the melodies for the subrituals are not interchangeable; rather, each is part of a deliberate compositional strategy to enliven the liturgy for the worshiper at particular moments—on specific words, syllables, and key melodic phrases in certain sections within an emotional arc that is architecturally appropriate to the dramaturgical narrative and weight of particular themes”.<sup>29</sup> While many song-poems from the *gur* tradition use only one musical tune on a single theme such as impermanence (*mi rtag pa*), the *gcod* ritual draws on a variety of themes suggesting different philosophical concepts; on one hand, it is informed by a Madhyamaka reading of the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras* that emphasizes the emptiness of all phenomena, and on the other hand, it reflects a rDzogs chen understanding of the pure basis of all phenomena (*rig pa*) as a reality that permeates every moment of awareness. The melodies are themselves an instance of guru-yoga because they invoke the blessings of the lineage lamas and they can be considered to be “the actual wisdom of the Buddha” manifest in the conventional world, whereas the constancy of the drums anchors the practitioners in the practice, but also emphasize the pure ground of the Buddha nature that undergirds the flux of phenomena. While singing the melodies elicits different emotions, these emotions are supposed to train the conventional self that is producing them and remind the practitioner of the ultimate emptiness of all subjects.<sup>30</sup>

How is this practice supposed to be transformative? In the Vajrayāna tradition of Tibet, the awakened state is not understood as a spiritualizing flight from the senses as in the early Tripiṭaka scriptures, but as fundamentally identical with our samsaric reality—it is only the ignorance and attachment weighing down most sentient beings that obfuscate their awareness of this truth. In this perspective, the purpose of practice is not to leave behind a particular ontological condition to enter a separate realm, but merely to purify our understanding so as to

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<sup>28</sup> Jeffrey Cupchik, “Buddhism as Performing Art: Visualizing Music in the Tibetan Sacred Ritual Music Liturgies,” in *Yale Journal of Music* Vol. 1, no. 1 (2015): 31–62.

<sup>29</sup> Cupchik, 36.

<sup>30</sup> Cupchik, 42–44.

achieve an insight into our own nirvanic character. The higher Buddhology characterizing later Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna schools added to this reading of nirvana the claim that the whole of the natural order was encompassed by Buddhahood, the “Buddha nature” that was the ground of awakened reality. Whether this assertion was a development of the original Buddhist vision or a substantial “betrayal” of the notion of emptiness influenced by Hinduism is a vexed question; Tibetan Buddhism is sufficiently flexible to accommodate a *rang stong* (self-empty) understanding of Buddha nature that emphasizes its emptiness and a *gzhan stong* (other-empty) alternative which affirms enlightenment’s ontological presence at all times. What both these readings of the tradition share, however, is a belief in the universality of the Buddha nature; coupled with the teaching of skillful means, this ensured that all local deities from the older Bon tradition could be reimagined as manifestations of the Buddha’s ongoing activity on behalf of all sentient beings. As such, even traditions such as *gcod*, with their ostensible shamanistic elements, could be understood as manifestations of Buddhahood, and as a propaedeutic performance that introduced one into the depths of the Machig Labdron’s compassionate care.

In the context of this cosmological vision, music, song, and visualization practices constitute a wholistic form of practice that manifest the accessibility of nirvana in this samsaric reality. Traditionally, mantras to specific bodhisattvas and tantric deities were believed to be an embodiment of the supernatural being they invoked; as in other dharmic traditions in India, the recitation of the words of the mantra made the bodhisattva or the deity present in the very being of the practitioner. In the context of *gcod*, the melodies themselves that are associated with the text of the practice acquire this same nirvanic character, evoking specific aspects of the Buddha nature such as compassion or wisdom and thereby intimating their presence in the very being of the performer. This kind of elaborate adoration, where the practitioner summons and appeases a whole plethora of wrathful beings, but is simultaneously identical with them, turns the musical performance into an ongoing *aide-mémoire* of the ongoing presence of awakened reality, opening a vision of transcendence in a world where no “other” beyond the flux of samsara is understood to exist. In a context without an eschatological horizon, liberation is found in the circumstances of the present, even in—and in fact, *especially* in—those that most appear to be subject to the sway of disordered and threatening passions.

This brief discussion omits many aspects of the two traditions, but their juxtaposition helps us reflect on the way in which the two traditions envisage transcendence and eschatology in analogous ways. Messiaen’s notion of the last things hinges on a traditional Christian linear narrative stretching from creation to the manifestation of the celestial Jerusalem via the pivotal event of the Incarnation, which transforms the ontological structure of the universe and opens it up to the reception of God’s redeeming and deifying grace. While there is a chasm between the transcendent otherness of God and the immanent reality of creation, the latter is a receptacle of the divine promise that leads to an all-embracing transformation at the end of time. Messiaen’s transition from the classical key system to the modes of limited transposition while preserving the organizing framework of equal temperament gestures towards the eschatological transformation of the cosmos in Christ, where all aspects of the natural order in their plurality and diversity are preserved in their ontological integrity even as they blossom into a radically “other” divine dimension. What Messiaen is able to accomplish is not the erasure of difference between time and eternity, nor is he gesturing towards a spiritual horizon that would turn away from the classical linear eschatology of the Christian tradition; rather, his music captures the reality of

mystical experience where the present and the eschatological future are both simultaneously present.<sup>31</sup>

Musical performance—even that of so-called “profane” music like the *Quartet* written in the shadow of the Holocaust—can thus become an instance of realized eschatology that anticipates in the present what can only come at the end of time. In the practice of *gcod*, however, there is no creation or redemption or second coming—only an endless chain of co-dependent origination where the flux of samsaric phenomena conceals, and yet is ultimately equivalent to, the purity of Buddhahood’s nirvanic basis.

One aspect that could be discussed at length is the fact that the liturgical practices which inspired Messiaen and the tradition of *gcod* similarly center on a ritual that foregrounds the enactment of a bodily sacrifice seeking to recover a disturbed cosmic equilibrium. Whether the Eucharistic sacrifice is understood through the lens of a Western atonement theology, where the sacrifice of Christ is offered to the Father, or from the perspective of a *Christus victor* angle, which stresses Christ’s defeat of death and the devil in the resurrection, this dynamic is still primarily external and historically grounded, in contradistinction to *gcod*’s emphasis on an inner purification from all defilements and the recovered awareness of one’s own indestructible Buddhahood. In the Tibetan tradition, ritual performance can neither represent liturgically a redemptive act from the past, nor anticipate a final transformation of all reality; in the absence of eschatological expectation, liberation is always something that is already present in this world, hidden by adventitious defilements, like a diamond cast in mud. The music and the instruments are then tools reminding practitioners of their awakened potential and the all-encompassing character of the Buddha nature, which does not require to be redeemed or uncovered at the end of time, as it always rests undefiled and only awaits our awakening. If according to Machig Labdrön, true liberation only becomes possible when we cherish our demons, Messiaen’s invocation of eternity in the midst of the horrors of war goes even further into the depths of being, where no evil can suffocate humanity’s promise of immortality.<sup>32</sup>



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<sup>31</sup> See for instance Raimon Panikkar’s discussion of liturgical time and “tempiternity” in his article “Time and Sacrifice: The Time of Sacrifice and the Ritual of Modernity” in J.T. Frazer, N. Lawrence and D. A. Park (eds.), *The Study of Time* (Springer: New York, 1978), 683–727.

<sup>32</sup> See Lopön Charlotte Z. Rotterdam, *Cutting through Views: Three Practice Verses by Machig Labdrön* (Lion’s Roar: January 12, 2021), available at [www.lionsroar.com](http://www.lionsroar.com).

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