

Quatour pour la Fin du Temps

Olivier Messiaen

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Olivier Messiaen was one of the most original and profound composers of the twentieth century. Born in Avignon in 1908, he studied organ and composition in Paris, and became a professor at the Paris Conservatoire in 1942. Messiaen's musical excellence extended beyond composition into the areas of performance and education: he was a brilliant organist who held a post at the Church de la Sainte Trinité in Paris for almost fifty years, and a highly influential teacher who taught many of the leading composers of the post-war generation. His compositional style is characterized by a complete integration of emotional expressiveness, deeply religious devotion, and a highly organized means of intellectual control. Despite their complexity his works have attracted favourable attention everywhere and inevitably invoke a deep emotional response from the listener.

Messiaen wrote the *Quartet for the End of Time* while he was a German prisoner-of-war in Silesia in 1940-42. He had managed to keep with him some music paper, and the act of composition provided him with a means of sustaining his psychological well-being. The unusual instrumentation of the quartet was determined by the fact that among his fellow prisoners were three musicians, a violinist and a clarinetist who had managed to keep their instruments, and a cellist whom the Germans eventually provided with an instrument, albeit with one string missing. Messiaen wrote the piano part for himself although there was no piano available at the time. Finally, after the work had been completed, an upright piano—sadly out of tune and with many keys that stuck—was brought into camp. The first performance was given in the Stalag VII A on 15th January, 1941 in atrociously cold weather. The audience included five thousand prisoners from all levels of society: priests, doctors, shop-keepers, professional soldiers, workers, peasants. "Never", Messiaen later recalled, "have I been heard with as much attention and understanding."

Following the quotation from the *Book of Revelation*, chapter X, verses 1 to 7, on which the quartet is based, is the composer's description of the music: "And I saw another mighty angel come down from heaven, clothed in a cloud: and a rainbow was upon his head, and his face was as it were the sun, and his feet as pillars of fire. He set his right foot upon the sea and his left foot on the earth, and, standing upon the sea and upon the earth lifted up his hand to heaven and swore by Him that liveth for ever and ever, saying, 'There shall be Time no longer: but on the day of the trumpet of the seventh angel, the mystery of God shall be finished.'"

- I. Crystal Liturgy: Around five o'clock in the morning, a lone bird improvises, surrounded by fine fragments of sound, by a halo of harmony lost high in the trees. Transposing that to a religious-level, you have the harmonious silence of heaven. The piano plays a rhythmic ostinato based on three Hindu rhythms; the clarinet spins out the song of a bird.
- II. Vocalise, for the Angel Announcing the End of Time: The first and third parts (both very short), evoke the power of this strong angel, crowned with a rainbow and clothed in clouds, one foot on the sea and the other on land. The central section deals with the impalpable harmonies of heaven, the piano playing soft cascades of chords: blue and mauve, gold and green, red-violet, blue-orange; all of this dominated by steel-grey. These chords, faraway chimes, surround the plainchant-like melody of the violin and cello.

- III. The Abyss of the Birds: Clarinet solo. The abyss is time, in its sorrows and lassitudes. The birds offer a contrast, symbolizing our yearning for light, stars, rainbows and jubilant voices. The piece begins in sadness. Notice the long tones: *pianissimo*, *crescendo molto* to the most atrocious *fortissimo*. The bird-songs are written in the gay and fanciful style of the blackbird. The return to desolation is manifested in the dark timbre of the clarinet's lower register.
- IV. Interlude: Scherzo. Of a more outgoing character than the other movements, but related to them nonetheless by various melodic references.
- V. Praise to the Eternity of Jesus: Jesus represents, in this context, the word of God. One long, extremely slow phrase by the cello glorifies with tenderness and reverence the eternity of this powerful and gentle Word. Majestically the melody unfolds like a distant memory, tender and all encompassing. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."
- VI. Dance of Wrath, for the Seven Trumpets: Rhythmically the most idiosyncratic movement of the set. The four instruments in unison give the effect of gongs and trumpets (the first six trumpets of the Apocalypse attend various catastrophes; the trumpet of the seventh angel announces the consummation of the mystery of God). Music of stone, formidable sonority; movement as irresistible as steel, as huge blocks of livid fury or ice-like frenzy. Listen particularly, toward the end of the piece, to the terrifying *fortissimo* of the theme in augmentation and with change of register of its different notes.
- VII. Tangle of Rainbows, for the Angel Announcing the End of Time: This movement is dedicated to the angel, and even more so, to the rainbow covering him (a rainbow symbolizing peace, wisdom, and all luminous and resonant vibration). In my coloured dreams I hear and see ordered melodies and chords, familiar hues and forms; then, following this transitory stage I pass into the unreal and submit ecstatically to a vortex, a dizzying interpenetration of superhuman sounds and colours. These fiery swords, these rivers of blue-orange lava, these sudden stars: Behold the cluster, behold the rainbows!
- VIII. In Praise of the Immortality of Jesus: A broad violin solo, balancing the cello solo of the fifth movement. Why this second tribute? It addresses more specifically the second aspect of Jesus—Jesus the man, the Word made flesh, raised from the dead and immortalized to make His life known to us. This movement is pure love. It ascends gradually toward an intense peak, the ascension of man towards God, of the Son of God toward his Father, of the creature become divine towards paradise.

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