

February 6, 2019 at 6PM & 9PM | **Princeton University Concerts**

PERFORMANCES UP CLOSE

OLIVIER MESSIAEN

[1908–1992]

Quatuor pour la fin du temps

Quartet for the End of Time

STEFAN JACKIW, Violin

JAY CAMPBELL, Cello

YOONAH KIM, Clarinet

ORION WEISS, Piano

Concert experience by

Michael Dean Morgan and Wesley Cornwell

Narration

Olivier Messiaen with voice over by Florent Masse

OLIVIER MESSIAEN (1908–1992)

Quatuor pour la fin du temps

Quartet for the End of Time

I. Liturgie de cristal

Crystal liturgy, for the full quartet

Between three and four in the morning, the awakening of birds: a solo blackbird or nightingale improvises, surrounded by a shimmer of sound, by a halo of trills lost very high in the trees. Transpose this onto a religious plane and you have the harmonious silence of Heaven.

II. Vocalise, pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps

Vocalise, for the Angel who announces the end of time, for the full quartet

The first and third parts (very short) evoke the power of this mighty angel, a rainbow upon his head and clothed with a cloud, who sets one foot on the sea and one foot on the earth. In the middle section are the impalpable harmonies of heaven. In the piano, sweet cascades of blue-orange chords, enclosing in their distant chimes the almost plainchant song of the violin and cello.

III. Abîme des oiseaux

Abyss of birds, for solo clarinet

The abyss is Time with its sadness, its weariness. The birds are the opposite to Time; they are our desire for light, for stars, for rainbows, and for jubilant songs.

IV. Intermède

Interlude, for violin, cello, and clarinet

Scherzo, of a more individual character than the other movements, but linked to them nevertheless by certain melodic recollections.

V. Louange à l'Éternité de Jésus

Praise to the eternity of Jesus, for cello and piano

Jesus is considered here as the Word. A broad phrase, “infinitely slow,” on the cello, magnifies with love and reverence the eternity of the Word, powerful and gentle, “whose time never runs out.” The melody stretches majestically into a kind of gentle, regal distance. “In the beginning was the Word, and Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (John 1:1 King James Version)

VI. Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes

Dance of fury, for the seven trumpets, for the full quartet

Rhythmically, the most characteristic piece of the series. The four instruments in unison imitate gongs and trumpets (the first six trumpets of the Apocalypse followed by various disasters, the trumpet of the seventh angel announcing consummation of the mystery of God). Use of added values, of augmented or diminished rhythms, of non-retrogradable rhythms. Music of stone, formidable granite sound; irresistible movement of steel, huge blocks of purple rage, icy drunkenness. Hear especially all the terrible fortissimo of the augmentation of the theme and changes of register of its different notes, towards the end of the piece.

VII. Fouillis d'arcs-en-ciel, pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps

Tangle of rainbows, for the Angel who announces the end of time, for the full quartet

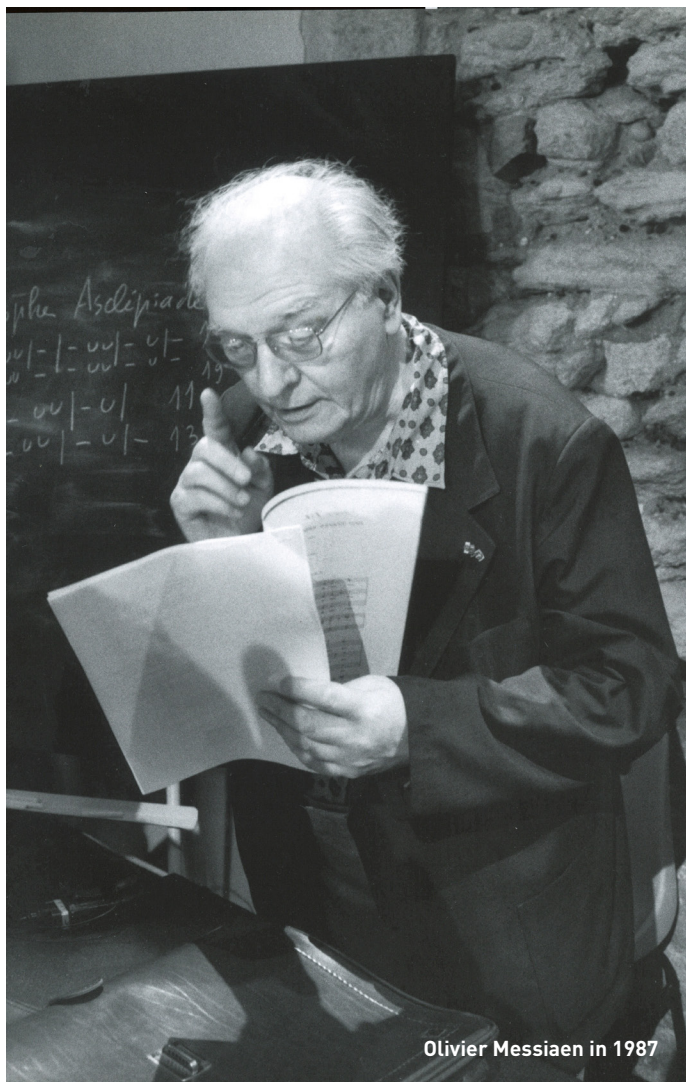
Recurring here are certain passages from the second movement. The angel appears in full force, especially the rainbow that covers him (the rainbow, symbol of peace, wisdom, and all luminescent and sonorous vibration). — In my dreams, I hear and see ordered chords and melodies, known colors and shapes; then, after this transitional stage, I pass through the unreal and suffer, with ecstasy, a tournament; a roundabout compenetration of superhuman sounds and colors. These swords of fire, this blue-orange lava, these sudden stars: there is the tangle, there are the rainbows!

VIII. Louange à l'Immortalité de Jésus

Praise to the immortality of Jesus, for violin and piano

Large violin solo, counterpart to the violoncello solo of the 5th movement. Why this second eulogy? It is especially aimed at the second aspect of Jesus, Jesus the Man, the Word made flesh, immortally risen for our communication of his life. It is all love. Its slow ascent to the acutely extreme is the ascent of man to his God, the child of God to his Father, the being made divine towards Paradise.

—Olivier Messiaen from the preface to the score of
Quartet For the End of Time



Olivier Messiaen in 1987

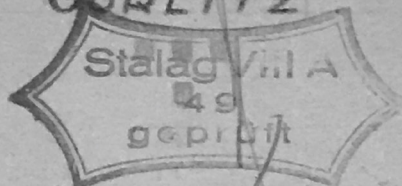
I told them that the quartet was written for the end of time,
for the end of the past and future,
for the start of eternity.
I based it on “Revelation” when Saint John says,...

I saw a mighty angel descending from heaven, clad in mist,
having around his head a rainbow. His face was like the sun,
his feet like pillars of fire. He placed his right foot on the sea,
his left on the earth, and standing thus on the sea and the earth
he lifted his hand toward heaven and swore by Him who liveth
for ever and ever, saying: “There shall be time no longer, but
at the day of the trumpet of the seventh angel the mystery of
God shall be consummated. (Revelation, X)

Conceived and written in the course of my captivity, the *Quartet for the End of Time* was performed for the first time in Stalag VIII A on January 15, 1941, by Jean Le Boulaire, violinist; Henri Akoka, clarinetist; Étienne Pasquier, cellist, and myself at the piano. It is directly inspired by this excerpt from “The Revelation of St. John.” Its musical language is essentially transcendental, spiritual, catholic. Certain modes, realizing melodically and harmonically a kind of tonal ubiquity, draw the listener into a sense of the eternity of space or time. Particular rhythms existing outside the measure contribute importantly toward the banishment of temporalities. (All this is mere striving and childish stammering if one compares it to the overwhelming grandeur of the subject!)

—Olivier Messiaen from the preface to the score of
Quartet For the End of Time

Stalag VIII A
GÖRLITZ



DREMIÈRE AUDITION
DU

QUATVOR
DE LA FIN DU TEMPS

d'

Olivier Messiaen

15 Janvier 1941

exécuté par

Olivier MESSIAEN

Etienne DASQUIER

Jean LE BOULAIRE

Henri AKOKA

Quartet for the End of Time

by Alex Ross

Olivier Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time* is an implacably beautiful work that stems from the dark heart of the twentieth century. Its first performance took place on January 15, 1941, at the Stalag VIII A prisoner-of-war camp, in Görlitz, Germany. Messiaen wrote most of it after being captured as a French soldier during the German invasion of 1940. The premiere took place in an unheated barrack, on a freezing cold night. Messiaen played the piano; he was joined by the clarinetist Henri Akoka, the cellist Étienne Pasquier, and the violinist Jean Le Boulaire, all of whom were interned at Stalag VIII A. Several hundred prisoners attended. The German officers of the camp sat in the front row, shivering along with the rest. It is impossible not to listen to the music without thinking of this extraordinary occasion. Yet the most remarkable thing about the Quartet is how distant it seems from the circumstances of its birth. It is a testament to a creative spirit that overruns the boundaries of time and space.

Messiaen, who lived from 1908 to 1992, is firmly enshrined as one of the greatest religious composers in the history of music—perhaps the greatest since Bach. Like Bach, he was traditional, even reactionary, in his beliefs. He adhered to a form of Catholicism at once strict and musical: he criticized efforts to modernize Catholic liturgy and bemoaned Vatican II. The “end of time” that he depicts in the Quartet is the apocalypse according to St. John the Divine. The score is inspired by Chapter 10 of the Book of Revelation:

And I saw another mighty angel come down from heaven,
clothed with 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: and he had in his hand a little book open: and he set his right foot upon the sea, and his left foot on the earth, and cried with a loud voice, as when a lion roareth: and when he had cried, seven thunders uttered their voices. And when the seven thunders had uttered their voices, I was about to write: and I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, seal up those things which the seven thunders uttered, and write them not. And the angel which I saw stand upon the sea and upon the earth lifted up his hand to heaven, and swore by him that liveth for ever and ever, who created heaven, and the things that therein are, and the earth, and the things that therein are, and the sea, and the things which are therein, that there should be time no longer [*il n'y aura plus de temps*]: but in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, the mystery of God should be finished, as he hath declared to his servants the prophets.

The eight movements of the work bear such titles as “Crystal Liturgy,” “Dance of Fury,” and “Tangle of Rainbows.” Two movements—the fifth and the final one—are titled *Louanges*, or hymns of praise, respectively to the “Eternity of Jesus” and the “Immortality of Jesus.”

But the word “time” is also a kind of pun. It refers to musical time—the steady beat that underpins conventional Western music. Here that sense of regular time is frequently suspended, though it does not disappear altogether. Instead, Messiaen emphasizes rhythms that expand and contract, unfold in irregular repeating patterns, behave like palindromes, and otherwise disrupt the listener’s expectations. Many of these techniques are derived from Messiaen’s close study of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, particularly its volcanic final section, “Danse sacrée.” He also bases his rhythms on Hindustani classical music: the piano part in the opening movement is based on a *tala*, or rhythmic cycle, recorded by the

thirteenth-century scholar Sarangadeva. The harmonies, too, are constructed from a system of multiple modes, refusing to obey the familiar logic of major-minor tonality.

What results is a music that seems perpetually in flux: figures dart this way and that like fish in a pond, never following a straight path. In this respect, Messiaen's Quartet prophesied avant-garde music written in Europe and America after the Second World War. The young composers who came of age during or after the war were scarred by the terrible war they had endured: more than a few had served as young soldiers or as medical orderlies. They could not bring themselves to write works that resembled the music of their youth or that recalled the Romantic tradition. All that seemed tainted by the propaganda of Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy. Messiaen's Quartet is itself a rebellion against march rhythm, against the one-two-three-four of the parade ground. It celebrates a freedom from convention, even as it follows a crisp method of Messiaen's own devising.

Even so, the Quartet does not sound violently radical on its surface. To be sure, it contains a number of eruptive, harmonically aggressive passages. In the "Dance of Fury," the four instruments move in properly ferocious unison, in what Messiaen describes as "music of stone, formidable granite sound; irresistible movement of steel, huge blocks of purple rage, icy drunkenness." But, for the most part, Messiaen's Apocalypse is a peculiarly serene, gentle one. One has the sense of four characters in conversation—a familiar quality in chamber music but heightened here by the unusual nature of the instrumentation, which was dictated by the availability of skilled musicians at the camp. As Rebecca Rischin points out in *For the End of Time*, her absorbing book-length study of the quartet, you can sense the personalities of the players in their parts. Pasquier was a wry, gentle man who might have had a major solo career if he had desired one. Akoka, as vibrant and unpredictable as the

Quartet's long, hyper-intricate clarinet solo, "Abyss of the Birds," was an Algerian-born Jew who survived the war through blind luck and raw courage. He tried several times to escape, and, in April, 1941, he succeeded: while being transferred from one camp to another by train, he jumped from the top of a fast-moving cattle car, with his clarinet under his arm. Le Boulair, moody and withdrawn, later abandoned the violin for acting. He took the name Jean Lanier and appeared in New Wave films such as *The Soft Skin* and *Last Year at Marienbad*. When Rischin interviewed him, she perceived him to be a bitter, unhappy man, but at the mention of Messiaen's Quartet his eyes brightened. "It's a jewel that's mine and that will never belong to anyone else," he said.



Performance by the prisoner orchestra at Stalag VIII A in front of the infirmary. Ferdinand Carrion, a Belgian musician and prisoner-of-war is conducting. Max Beker (concert master) is pictured sitting on the left. (Circa 1940 - 1944 in Görlitz, [Silesia] Germany. From the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Sonia Beker.)

When I first heard the Quartet—my introduction to it was Tashi’s immaculate recording for RCA, which may remain the finest in the catalog—I remember distinctly the astonishment of encountering the two Louanges, one at the midpoint of the work and the other at the end. Each has a drawn-out string melody over pulsing piano chords; each builds toward a luminous climax and then vanishes into silence. The first is marked “infinitely slow;” the second, “tender, ecstatic.” They seem to waft in from another world: their even pulsing patterns are in distinct contrast to the variegated rhythmic patterns that hold sway over the remainder of the work and seem even to contradict the motto of “time no longer.” Yet the sheer slowness of the music and the unvarying quality of the piano pulses bring about a different kind of dissolution of one’s sense of time. Messiaen, in his notes, speaks of “the eternity of the Word, powerful and gentle, ‘whose time never runs out,’” and of “the ascent of man to his god, the child of God to his Father, the being made divine towards Paradise.”

In fact, this music does emanate from another realm—the world before the Second World War. The Louanges are based on earlier works by Messiaen, which he was able to recall from memory in the camp. The first is “Oraison,” from a piece entitled *Fête des belles eaux*, which was composed in 1937 for six *ondes martenot*, one of the first electronic instruments. The second is *Diptyque*, a 1930 piece for organ. The scholar Nigel Simeone tells us that *Fête* was written for the Paris Exposition of 1937, one of whose attractions was a “festival of sound, water, and light.” Women in white flowing dresses played the *ondes* in conjunction with spectacular fireworks and fountain displays. The opening phrase of the first Louange, plaintively sounding on the cello, originally accompanied a colossal jet of water. In that context, it might have sounded Romantic, even kitschy; but in the novel, fluctuating landscape of the Quartet, it changes meaning and glows with otherworldly power.

Perhaps the most moving thread of the story of the Quartet is the spirit of reconciliation out of which it grew. Stalag VIII A was staffed by several German officers who had little enthusiasm for the bloodthirsty ideology of the Nazi regime. As Rischin reveals, one of the guards, Karl-Albert Brüll, advised Jewish prisoners not to escape, since they were safer in the camp than in Vichy France. It was Brüll, apparently, who heard of Messiaen's eminence as a composer and decided that he should write music in the camp. He relieved Messiaen of his duties and placed him in an empty barracks so that he could work undisturbed, with pencils, erasers, and music paper at his disposal. A guard was posted at the door to turn away intruders. Instruments were found for the ensemble to rehearse; elegant programs were printed up.

Many members of the captive audience had difficulty making sense of the music. Messiaen probably did not make matters easier with his preliminary remarks, which mixed the mystical and the technical. One prisoner recalled him saying: "The modes, realizing melodically and harmonically a sort of tonal ubiquity, bring the listener closer to infinity, to eternity in space. The special rhythms, independent of the meter, powerfully contribute to the effect of banishing the temporal." But the crowd seems to have listened in respectful silence, and whether or not they comprehended what they heard, they came away with the feeling that they had witnessed something extraordinary. Messiaen later said: "Never before have I been listened to with such attention and understanding."

Curiously, Messiaen exaggerated the difficulty of the conditions under which the Quartet was first played. He claimed that the keys of the piano kept sticking, when no one else recalled such problems. He said that Pasquier had performed on a cello with only three strings—which Pasquier strenuously denied. He alleged that the crowd had numbered five thousand—more than ten times the real number. The circumstances were dramatic enough without

embellishment. Yet this overstatement registers Messiaen's own sense of wonder at what had happened in Stalag VIII A. There had never been a premiere like that of the *Quartet for the End of Time*, and there has not been one again.

Messiaen returned to France shortly after the premiere; Brüll was mainly responsible for his early release and connived in the forging of documents to make it possible. In 1941 he assumed an eminent position teaching at the Conservatoire. In 1944, a formidable young talent named Pierre Boulez showed up at his door and began studying with him. Later, Karlheinz Stockhausen and Iannis Xenakis joined Messiaen's circle of students. Boulez, Stockhausen, and Xenakis were dominant presences in the avant-garde of the postwar era, which overturned most extant assumptions about what music was and how it should unfold. Although the *Quartet* was among the most daring works of its time, and its unconventional rhythmic patterns dictated a new flow of time in music, Messiaen's students soon outstripped him in audacity, and the teacher later expressed unease over "dry and inhuman" tendencies in contemporary music. He called instead for "a little celestial tenderness."

Celestial tenderness is precisely what enters the *Quartet* in the form of the two majestically serene *Louanges*. Messiaen's habit of combining elements that do not seem to belong together—forbidding complexity and an almost naïve serenity—would become one of the defining characteristics of his music. Subsequent large-scale works such as the *Turangalîla-Symphony*, *The Transfiguration of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, *From the Canyons to the Stars*, and *Saint Francis of Assisi* would stage even more spectacular collisions of utmost dissonance and radiant major triads. Messiaen would thus give a sensation of cosmic completeness that has no precise counterpart in the music of any era.

Several decades later, Karl-Albert Brüll, the Stalag guard, came to Paris and rang at Messiaen's door. For reasons that remain obscure, Messiaen declined to see him. Perhaps he didn't remember who Brüll was; perhaps he was unable to confront this apparition from the past. He eventually tried to correct his mistake and sent a message of greeting to Brüll. But it was too late: Brüll had died in a car accident. One hopes that this renegade German guard was able to take some satisfaction in the fact that he had helped to bring one of music's supreme masterpieces into the world.

—By Alex Ross, ©2018. Alex Ross is the music critic of *The New Yorker* and the author of the books *The Rest Is Noise* and *Listen to This*.

Ghazal for The End of Time (*after Messiaen*)

Break anything – a window, a pie crust, a glacier –
it will break open.

A voice cannot speak, cannot sing, without lips, teeth,
lamina propria coming open.

Some breakage can barely be named, hardly be spoken.
Rains stopped, roof said. Fires, forests, cities, cellars peeled open.

Tears stopped, eyes said. An unhearable music fell
instead from them.
A clarinet stripped of its breathing, the cello abandoned.

The violin grieving, a hand too long empty held open.
The imperial piano, its 89th, 90th, 91st strings
unsummoned, unspoken.

Watching, listening, was like that: the low, wordless humming
of being unwoven.
Fish vanished. Bees vanished. Bats whitened. Arctic ice opened.

Hands wanted more time, hands thought we had time.
Spending time's rivers,
its meadows, its mountains, its instruments tuning their silence,
its deep mantle broken.

Earth stumbled within and outside us.
Orca, thistle, kestrel withheld their instruction.

Rock said, Burning Ones, pry your own blindness open.
Death said, Now I too am orphan.

—By Jane Hirshfield '73, ©2018