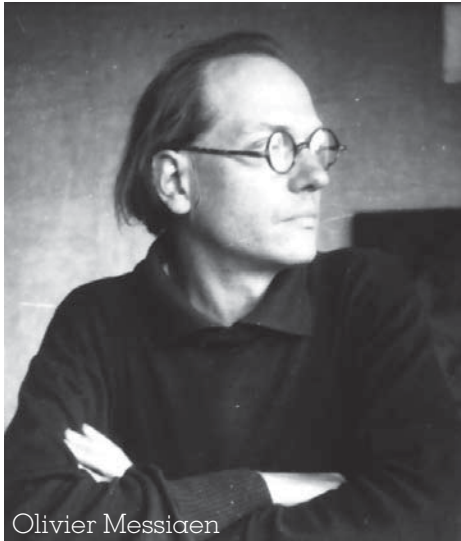


The Quartet for the End of Time



In the 1930's, the organist-composer Olivier Messiaen joined a group of young composers, "Jeune France," in rejecting the worldly, ironic charm of Erik Satie and his followers – the prevalent French aesthetic of the 1920's – and in calling rather for a continuation of the sensuous symbolism of Claude Debussy. In Messiaen's case, his interest in Hindu and Gregorian chant as well as in bird song tied in nicely with Debussy's music, while his fervent and mystical religious preoccupations established links with still older traditions.

By the late 1930's Messiaen's work – some of it rather romantic and old-fashioned, some of it strikingly adventurous – had begun to attract attention. When the war broke out, he joined the French army, was captured by the Germans in 1940 and spent the next three years in a prisoner-of-war camp in Silesia. While in the camp, Messiaen completed a chamber work, *Quartet for the End of Time*, for piano, clarinet, violin and cello for himself to play with three other prisoners. Completed in January 1941, the work became not only Messiaen's single most celebrated achievement, but one of the most influential works of the second half of the century, exerting a profound influence on Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, George Crumb and other prominent figures of the post-war European and American avant-garde.

In a detailed preface to the publication of *Quartet for the End of Time*, Messiaen explained that the work's title derives from a passage in Revelations – a vision of the apocalypse – that includes the lines, "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 that there should be time no longer." The composer also provided descriptive notes for the individual movements:

Liturgie de crystal (Liturgy of Crystal), with its awakening birds a metaphor for the silence of heaven;

Vocalise, pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps (Vocalise for the Angel who Announces the End of Time), with its mighty angel "crowned with a rainbow and clothed with a cloud, who sets one foot upon the sea and one foot upon the earth;"

Abîme des oiseaux (Abyss of the Birds), the abyss representing the weariness of time, the birds "the opposite of Time; they are our desire for light, stars, rainbows, joyful songs!";

Intermède (Intermission);

Louange à l'Éternité de Jésus (Longing for the Eternity of Jesus), Jesus considered here as the Word;

Danse da la fureur, pour les sept trompettes (Dance of Fury for Seven Trumpets), the trumpets of the Apocalypse bringing various catastrophes in their wake;

Fouillis d'arcs-en-ciel, pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps (Jumble of Rainbows for the Angel who Announces the End of Time), with the reappearance of the mighty angel; and

Louange à l'Immortalité de Jésus

(*Longing for the Immortality of Jesus*), Jesus here the man made flesh, "resurrected immortally to give us life. All here is love."

One of the work's most striking features is its novel combination of instruments unusually used, reminding one of Schoenberg's epochal *Pierrot Lunaire*. But the greater novelty concerns its treatment of temporal values, that is, the duration of notes and their relations in time. Except for the *Intermission*, one is not likely to hear any beats in this music, a radical departure from nearly all the musics of the world, and certainly from the tradition of Western art music. Messiaen accomplishes this through a number of strategies, also described at some length in the preface to his score. For example, he often adds or subtracts a note of very small duration so that the listener doesn't settle into any regular pulse. (In his book on Messiaen, Roger Nichols writes that it is tempting to interpret the work's title as meaning, "Quartet for the End of Meter.")

Among other things, such techniques allowed Messiaen, in say the work's first movement, to more literally simulate birdsong than Vivaldi, Wagner, Ravel and other composers who had attempted to incorporate birdsong into more traditional contexts. But Messiaen's avoidance of beat and meter – of rhythm in its more conventional sense – well served his metaphysical visions generally, and proved, moreover, a stimulus to other composers looking for new means of expression.

Howard Pollack