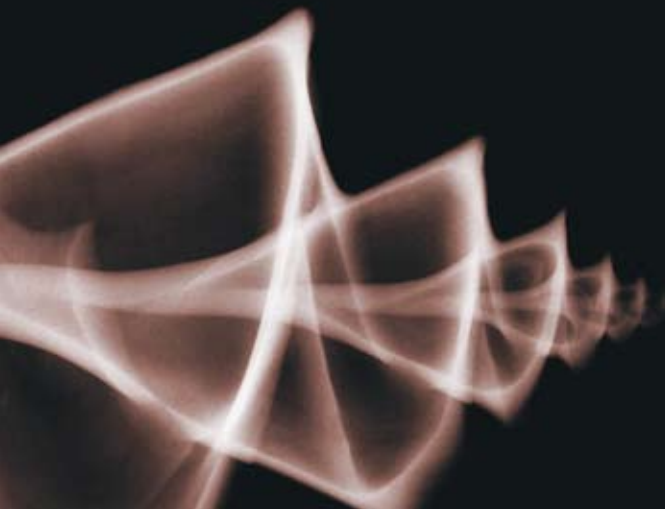


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sequence

Messiaen

Quartet for the End of Time



Messiaen: Quartet for the End of Time

Few pieces in the canon of Western classical music have had a genesis quite as extraordinary as that of Messiaen's Quartet for the End of Time. Created in a German prisoner-of-war camp in Silesia in 1940-41, its eight movements united four remarkable artists and brought into focus many ideas that would be central to Messiaen's music for the rest of his life.

Olivier Messiaen, serving as a medical orderly in the French army, was captured in northern France in June 1940. Also among the prisoners were the cellist Etienne Pasquier and the clarinetist Henri Akoka, a Jewish-Algerian communist of indomitable spirit and phenomenal musicianship. Before the French prisoners were transported to Silesia, they were forced to wait long days in summer heat, with little water. Messiaen passed the time by writing a clarinet solo for Akoka, entitled *Abime des oiseaux* – birdsong was chief among his musical obsessions. Akoka read through the solo in the field and declared it too difficult; with Messiaen's encouragement he eventually mastered it. This was the start of a creative relationship that profoundly affected the Quartet.

In Stalag VIII A at Görlitz, the three musicians soon encountered a fourth, the violinist Jean Le Boulaire. They also encountered near starvation and the burden of potentially infinite captivity. Messiaen's religious faith sustained him throughout, but his heightened sensory state of hunger, cold and exhaustion may also have heightened his imagination. In an astounding intervention, a German guard, Karl-Albert Brüll, brought him manuscript paper and pencils and released him from hard manual labour, telling him that as he was a composer, his work was to compose.

Messiaen based the Quartet on a passage from Chapter 10 of the Book of Revelations:

I saw a mighty angel, descending from heaven, clothed in a cloud, with a rainbow on his head. His face was like the sun, his feet as columns of fire. He placed his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land, raised his hand towards heaven and swore by Him who lives for ever and ever, saying 'There will be no more Time; but on the day of the trumpet of the seventh angel, the mystery of God will be fulfilled'.

He drew on pieces he had recently written involving the ethereal-sounding ondes martenot for the 'Louange à l'éternité de Jésus' and the 'Louange à l'immortalité de Jésus'; as for the lively 'Intermède', this was written for his three colleagues before the rest; they played it through in the washrooms. The 'end of time' was partly a play on words; Messiaen was already fascinated by traditional rhythmic systems from Indian and Indonesian music, and his exploration of these came to symbolise the end of measures of time within the western classical tradition.

The Quartet was premiered in the Stalag on 15 January 1941 for an audience of prisoners and guards, in freezing temperatures and with makeshift instruments. Nevertheless, Messiaen later recalled: 'Never have I been heard with as much attention and understanding.'

The composer insisted that he wrote the work as a distraction from his grim situation, and that the 'end of time' was not a reference to the end of time in captivity. However, the Quartet has been transformed into an iconic symbol of the strength of the human spirit in adversity, of inner

freedom maintained against all odds through spirituality and art. 'The greatest benefit that I drew from it,' Messiaen wrote, 'was that in the midst of thirty thousand prisoners, I was the only man who was not one.'

In his preface, Messiaen provided the following commentary for the movements:

1. Liturgy of crystal.

Between three and four o'clock in the morning, the awakening of the birds: a blackbird or a solo nightingale improvises, surrounded by efflorescent sound, by a halo of trills lost high in the trees...

2. Vocalise, for the Angel who announces the end of Time.

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 violoncello.

3. Abyss of the birds.

Clarinet alone. 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.

4. Interlude.

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

5. Praise to the Eternity of Jesus.

Jesus is considered here as the Word. A broad phrase, infinitely slow, on the violoncello, magnifies with love and reverence the eternity of the Word, powerful and gentle, ... "In the beginning was the Word, and Word was with God, and the Word was God."

6. Dance of fury, for the seven trumpets.

Rhythmically, the most characteristic piece in the series. The four instruments in unison take on the aspect of gongs and trumpets (the first six trumpets of the Apocalypse were followed by various catastrophes, the trumpet of the seventh angel announced the consummation of the mystery of God). Use of added [rhythmic]

values, rhythms augmented or diminished... Music of stone, of formidable, sonorous granite...

7. A mingling of rainbows, for the Angel who announces the end of Time.

Certain passages from the second movement recur here. The powerful angel appears, above all the rainbow that covers him... In my dreams I hear and see a catalogue of chords and melodies, familiar colours and forms... The swords of fire, these outpourings of blue-orange lava, these turbulent stars...

8. Praise to the Immortality of Jesus.

Expansive solo violin, counterpart to the violoncello solo of the fifth movement. Why this second encomium? It addresses more specifically the second aspect of Jesus, Jesus the Man, the Word made flesh... Its slow ascent toward the most extreme point of tension is the ascension of man toward his God, of the child of God toward his Father, of the being made divine toward Paradise.

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The Fibonacci Sequence is now well established as one of the foremost chamber ensembles in Britain. Founded by the pianist Kathron Sturrock, The Fibonacci Sequence is composed of musicians of international repute, and distinguished by the variety and imagination of its programming which makes full use of the range and versatility of the chamber music repertoire. The Fibonacci Sequence was ensemble-in-residence at Kingston University for eight years, where they were sponsored by the Stanley Picker Trust. Kingston University is continuing to support the Fibonacci Sequence with sponsorship of their ongoing Deux-Elles CD project. The ensemble is named after Leonardo of Pisa, known as Fibonacci, a great mediaeval mathematician. The series of numbers named after him occurs throughout the natural world in the most extraordinary way, appearing as if by magic in petals of flowers, branches of trees, spirals, and many more complex ways. The relation of the numbers to each other is directly connected to the Golden Section, held by many to determine the most harmonious proportions in art and music.



Jack Liebeck	violin
Julian Farrell	clarinet
Benjamin Hughes	cello
Kathron Sturrock	piano

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DXL1133

- 1 Liturgy of crystal 2:39
- 2 Vocalise, for the Angel who announces the end of Time 5:19
- 3 Abyss of the birds 7:32
- 4 Interlude 1:48
- 5 Praise to the Eternity of Jesus 9:29
- 6 Dance of Fury, for the seven trumpets 6:27
- 7 A mingling of rainbows, for the Angel who announces the end of Time 7:46
- 8 Praise to the Immortality of Jesus 6:06

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