

The End of Time:
Tragedy and Religious Devotion Reflected in Messiaen's Quartet

I. Introduction

- a. "...[L]ittle music has emerged as a direct expression of the prison camp ordeal...Even more intriguing, while many World War II-inspired works have understandably been absorbed with the problem of the *Deus Absconditis* [the absence of God], Messiaen's *Quartet* is not. The message the *Quartet* radiates is not one of despair, but, on the contrary, one of resounding reaffirmation...[I]n an environment that provoked depression and suicide among many of his fellow inmates, the source of Messiaen's inspiration is compelling...Attesting to the eternal freedom of the spirit over the temporal captivity of the body, the piece illustrates how captivity paradoxically set free a work that became a testament to creativity, to the unshakable faith of a devout Catholic, and to the aspects of belief exemplified in the lives of Messiaen's fellow musicians who premiered the *Quartet*."¹

II. Olivier Messiaen

- a. General Biography
 - Born 10 December 1908 in Avignon, France, to Pierre Messiaen, an English teacher and translator of Shakespeare, and Cécile Sauvage, a poet.²
 - Studied at Paris Conservatory...
 - "A devout Catholic, Messiaen combined a passion for his religion and an interest in mysticism with a love of nature and the supernatural."³
 - "It was the score to Debussy's *Pelléas et Melisand*...that Messiaen claimed had 'the most decisive influence' on him."⁴
 - "Rather than a mystic, he was a *scholastic*, in the medieval sense of the term. Like Saint Thomas Aquinas, he sought to embody the mysteries of faith in a rational and influential discourse."⁵
 - Called to military service on 25 August 1939, captured by Germans summer of 1940 and sent to a camp for prisoners of war.

III. Story of the Quartet

a. The First Musicians – Fateful Meetings

▪ Etienne Pasquier (cello)

- “Pasquier was a wry, gentle man who might have had a major solo career if he had desired one.”⁶
 - Child prodigy...mobilized into military service on 3 September 1939, was later transferred to the citadel of Vauban in Verdun where a theater orchestra had been created by a French general for his soldiers. Pasquier became the corporal of the orchestra and had four other Frenchmen under his command, one of whom was Olivier Messiaen. “It was there...that our friendship began.”⁷
 - Messiaen’s interest in ornithology prompted him to request that Pasquier arrange their military watches together to hear the birds at dawn, which would inspire the composition that was to become Movement 3 of the *Quartet*.

▪ Henri Akoka (clarinet)

- “Akoka,...vibrant and unpredictable...was an Algerian-born Jew who survived the war through blind luck and mad 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.”⁸
 - A member of the Paris-based Orchestre National de la Radio, when in 1939 he was “mobilized and sent to play in a *théâtre aux armées*, a military orchestra at the citadel of Vauban near Verdun. There, another fortuitous encounter took place.”⁹
 - “Messiaen and Akoka became fast friends as well. Prodded by Akoka, who had brought his instrument with him, Messiaen immediately went to work. Thus, recalled Pasquier, it was not at Stalag VIII A [the German prison camp] that the *Quartet for the End of Time* began, but at Verdun. There, where listening to the waking of the birds had become a daily ritual, Messiaen began writing his famous ‘Abyss of the Birds’ for unaccompanied clarinet.”¹⁰

b. Capture!

- 10 May 1940, Germany launched a blitzkrieg against Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. The three musicians (Pasquier, Akoka, and Messiaen) were forced to flee, but were captured on June 20 before they could reach their destination. In the open field near Nancy, “where the Germans quartered their prisoners before transporting them to the prison camp in Germany”, Akoka first played “Abyss of the Birds”.¹¹

- But Wait! Messiaen's version of the story of the *Quartet's* creation is a little different!
 - “In Stalag there happened to be a violinist, a clarinetist, and the cellist Etienne Pasquier. I wrote for them at once a short trio without anything larger in mind, which they played for me in the lavatories...Emboldened by these first sounds, I retained this little piece as an interlude [Movement 4] and added to it in succession the seven movements that surround it...”¹²
 - Why the discrepancy?
 - “If the two accounts are to be reconciled, one must surely conclude that the music which Akoka sight-read in a field simply formed the basis for a more developed piece that Messiaen finalised in Stalag VIII A at a later date. This would in fact strengthen the comparison to be made between the third movement and the other two ‘solo’ movements...both of which were transcribed from pre-existing works by Messiaen after he had resolved to compose the *Quatuor* as a multi-movement work in which his instrumental forces would be varyingly deployed.”¹³
- Stalag VIII A
 - “Once it became known that Messiaen was a famous composer...he was immediately exempted from prisoners’ duties and placed in a barrack so that he could compose in peace... ‘All of the critics agreed that he was absolutely extraordinary. When the Germans learned of this, they put him in a barrack and told him: “Compose. You’re the one who’s a composer, so compose. We won’t let anyone disturb you.” So, we would bring him things to eat. It was out of the question for Messiaen to work. He was composing all the time.”¹⁴
 - “There was the quasi-angelic figure of Karl-Albert Brüll, a music-loving guard at Stalag VIII A. Excited by the presence of a significant composer, Brüll gave Messiaen pencils, erasers, and music paper, and had the composer stationed in an empty barrack so that he could work undisturbed. A guard stood at the door to turn away intruders. After the première, Brüll arranged for Messiaen’s rapid return to France, conspiring in the forging of documents. A German patriot with anti-Nazi tendencies, he kept a sympathetic watch over Jewish prisoners, repeatedly advising them not to try to escape, because they would be safer in Stalag VIII A than in Vichy France.”¹⁵

- Jean Le Boulaire (violin)
 - “Le Boulaire, moody and withdrawn, later abandoned the violin for acting... 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.”¹⁶
 - Born 2 August 1913, his father was summoned to fight in WWI; Le Boulaire carried with him ugly images of war he wished to forget.
 - He loved the violin and studied at the Paris Conservatory the same time as Messiaen, though the two never actually met during that time.
 - Remobilized in military service in 1938, he was forced to flee to England June 1940. While struggling to return to Paris, he was taken prisoner. Sent to Stalag VIII A, Le Boulaire “took refuge in books or in shower baths” to escape boredom. “But Le Boulaire had gotten a lucky break in the barracks assignment, for he found himself in the very same bunk as a certain French clarinetist. It was Henri Akoka who informed him that Messiaen was in the same camp. Word was passed on to the composer, and before long the trio became a quartet.”¹⁷
- Acquiring Instruments/Rehearsing the *Quartet*
 - “‘We were extraordinarily lucky to have a camp commandant, a German, who loved music...he arranged for Messiaen to have a piano, for Le Boulaire to have a violin, and for me to have a cello’...Pasquier was afforded the privilege of selecting an instrument himself...going with two armed guards to a dealer...to buy a cello, bow, and rosin using the sixty-five marks that the prisoners had generously donated out of their earnings from chores.” The prisoners were so elated upon his return that they begged him to play for hours.¹⁸
 - The piano arrived sometime in November. “As the four men tackled this extraordinarily difficult work, their technique, their musicality, their relationship, and their thinking became transformed. At the center of their musical universe revolved a

mysterious composer whose...unshakable faith in the face of the seemingly hopeless surroundings often raised puzzling questions.”¹⁹

c. Debut!

- Famous quote by Messiaen about premiere of work: “Conceived and composed during my captivity, the *Quartet*...was premiered in Stalag VIII A, on 15 January 1941...Never before have I been listened to with such attention and understanding.”²⁰
- Quote of a prisoner’s recollection of the debut: “...There were tears in his eyes and it took some time for him to regain his composure. He had been present at the first performance and vividly recalled the atmosphere in the large freezing hut where hundreds of prisoners...assembled to hear the piece. Apparently, there were even wounded prisoners, brought from the hospital block, lying on stretchers at the front of the audience. He remembers his fellow-prisoners remaining in complete silence for the hour or so that it took to perform the piece. He himself had been deeply moved by the experience.”²¹

IV. The Quartet Itself

a. General Outlook of the *Quartet*

- “In the middle of a prison camp, a prisoner unsure if he would ever again see his family or home again, Messiaen composed a vision of heaven where anger, violence, vengeance, and despair are not so much repressed as irrelevant. This work has nothing to do with war, or prison, or ‘man’s inhumanity to man.’ This piece is entirely about the work of God and the glory of Jesus. There is no darkness here. There is no bitterness. There is no rage. Instead there is power, light, transcendence, ecstasy, and joy eternal.”²²
- Could this be because Messiaen was treated differently in his incarceration?
 - “In general, conditions in Stalag VIII A improved as German victories mounted and as France continued to collaborate” ...The camp was described as “a veritable university” with a “civilized” ambience, “with its many cultural and recreational outlets”...Also, preferential treatment in Stalag VIII A “was partially determined not only by nationality (They would strike the Poles with clubs, but “strike the French, never”, recalls Pasquiel), but by profession, and musicians were especially privileged, a disposition probably due to Germany’s long musical tradition”.²³

- However, the Germans also did this as an example to the world that they were taking good care of the prisoners, therefore “you have no choice but to collaborate”.²⁴
- After all, this is not the only work to arise from a prison camp in WWII. “Perhaps the most dreadful story of this kind is that of the Czech composers Pavel Haas, Hans Krása and Viktor Ullmann, whose incarceration in the concentration camp town of Terezin was merely a staging post on their journey to the gas chambers...But Messiaen’s focus of attention was significantly different from that of the Terezin composers, just as his imprisonment was not the same as theirs in nature. Whereas they knew for certain that they were living on borrowed time...Messiaen was driven to contemplate time in a quite different way, focusing on theological truths about the end of *all* time in contrast to the uncertain end of his incarceration. The musical result [the *Quartet*] went along with a feeling of detachment from his physical circumstances...”²⁵
- Nevertheless, Messiaen’s faith and music were certainly an inspiration to everyone around him.
 - “The musicians of the *Quartet* represented a wide range of religious, philosophical, and political views...Yet these four men shared a musical mission that united them and spawned a friendship that transcended their differences.”²⁶
 - Le Boulaire’s confession that, while an aesthete, “all this made an extraordinary impression on me...with Messiaen’s music I suddenly said to myself: ‘God...’”²⁷
 - During preparations for a daring escape, Akoka “went to see Messiaen: ‘So shall we go tomorrow?’ ‘No...I’m staying here, because God has willed that I be here.’”²⁸

b. Musically Structural Points

- Instrumentation
 - Clarinet, violin, cello, and piano
- The Movements²⁹
 - *I. Liturgie de cristal* [Crystal Liturgy]: entire quartet
 - “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...”³⁰
 - *II. Vocalise, pour l’Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps* [Vocalise, for the Angel Who Announces the End of Time]: entire 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 violoncello.”³¹

- *III. Abîme des oiseaux* [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.”³²
- *IV. Intermède* [Interlude]: violin, cello, and piano
 - “Scherzo, of a more individual character than the other movements, but linked to them nevertheless by certain melodic recollections.”³³
- *V. Louange à l’Eternité de Jésus* [Praise to the Eternity of Jesus]: cello and piano
 - “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.’”³⁴
- *VI. Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes* [Dance of Fury, for the Seven Trumpets]: entire quartet
 - “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...”³⁵
- *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]: entire quartet
 - “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...”³⁶
- *VIII. Louange à l’Immortalité de Jésus* [Praise to the Immortality of Jesus]: violin and piano

- “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.”³⁷
- [Relevant analysis of movements]
- “Where Messiaen is right is where he says that we’re prisoners of rhythm.”³⁸
 - “Messiaen had rediscovered a medieval device called ‘isorhythm,’ in which unequal patterns of chords, pitches, and rhythms revolved around each other...By avoiding metrically defined phrases and patterns of stressed and unstressed beats, these isorhythmic ‘wheels within wheels’ destroyed any sense of meter, and thus created a piece of music outside of ‘time’...Messiaen’s purpose was more than just to be ‘progressive.’ In performance, should those multiple patterns be allowed to cycle through all their possible combinations, the movement would take about two hours. But Messiaen cut it off after only two and a half minutes for a theological purpose. This music functions as does an icon in Orthodoxy. Just as the icon isn’t primarily an aesthetic object to be enjoyed but rather a ‘window’ through which the devout glimpse the holy reality of the saint portrayed, so too the ‘Liturgy of Crystal’ gives the listener a glimpse into the reality of the heavenly Jerusalem, a place beyond ‘time.’”³⁹

V. Later Performances

- a. 1956 recording of Olivier Messiaen on piano, Jean Pasquier on violin, Andre Vacellier on clarinet, and Entienne Pasquier on cello. (Musidisc/Accord30: RC 719/461 744-2)
- b. “Probably the one overseen by Messiaen’s widow, Yvonne Loriod, at the piano is the most authoritative recording (EMI Classics CDC 54395).”⁴⁰
- c. Amici Ensemble Recording
- d. Tashi group: “RCA markets a wonderful performance on its Gold Seal label (7835-2-RG) that features Peter Serkin on piano and Richard Stolzman on clarinet.”⁴¹
 - Reviews:
 - “What they [the Met] lacked was the total unanimity that makes a great performance of the Quartet seem like a mind-

reading séance. (The group Tashi achieved this in an as yet unsurpassed recording, on the RCA label).”⁴²

VI. Conclusion

- a. “...let us have *true* music...that is to say, spiritual, a music which may be an act of faith; a music which may touch upon all subjects without ceasing to touch upon God; an original music, in short, whose language may open a few doors, take down some as yet distant stars.”⁴³
- b. “In the end, Messiaen’s apocalypse has little to do with history and catastrophe; instead, it records the rebirth of an ordinary soul in the grip of extraordinary emotion. Which is why the *Quartet* is as overpowering now as it was on that frigid night in 1941.”⁴⁴

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- ¹ Rebecca Rischin, *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 6.
- ² *Ibid.*, 4
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 4-5
- ⁵ Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 230.
- ⁶ Alex Ross, "REVELATIONS: The Story Behind Messiaen's 'Quartet for the End of Time,'" *The New Yorker* (22 March 2004), in www.newyorker.com/critics/music/articles [on-line], accessed 11 Dec 2006.
- ⁷ Rischin, *For the End of Time*, 10.
- ⁸ Ross, "REVELATIONS".
- ⁹ Rischin, *For the End of Time*, 11.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 16.
- ¹³ Anthony Pople, *Messiaen: Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 9.
- ¹⁴ Rischin, *For the End of Time*, 28.
- ¹⁵ Ross, "REVELATIONS".
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ Rischin, *For the End of Time*, 33.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ²¹ Pople, *Messiaen*, 6.
- ²² Michael R. Linton, "Music for the End of Time," *First Things*, 87 (1998), accessed 11 Dec 2006.
- ²³ Rischin, *For the End of Time*, 24-5.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.
- ²⁵ Pople, *Messiaen*, 14-5.
- ²⁶ Rischin, *For the End of Time*, 43.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, xi-xii.
- ³⁰ Elaine Chew, "MESSIAEN: Quartet for the End of Time (Program notes)"; available from <http://www-rcf.usc.edu/~echew/performances/messiaen-qtet.html>; Internet; accessed 11 Dec 2006.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Rischin, *For the End of Time*, 39

³⁹ Linton, "Music for the End of Time."

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ross, "REVELATIONS".

⁴³ Taruskin, *Oxford History*, 229.

⁴⁴ Ross, "REVELATIONS".

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