

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 4 July 2025
10.00pm

Veronika Eberle violin
Pierre Génisson clarinet
Adrian Brendel cello
Dénes Várjon piano

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) Quatuor pour la fin du temps (1940-1)

I. Liturgie de cristal

Vocalise pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps

III. Abîme des oiseaux

IV. Intermède

V. Louange à l'éternité de Jésus

VI. Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes

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

VIII. Louange à l'immortalité de Jésus



UNDER 35S

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In the early summer of 1940, as Nazi Germany conducted a military campaign through France, the 31-year old organist and composer Olivier Messiaen, who had been drafted into the medical corps, was among a small group captured by German soldiers.

Messiaen was subsequently transported to a prisoner-of-war camp, Stalag VIII-A at Görlitz in Silesia. Here he found himself among several musicians: the cellist Étienne Pasquier (his military superior), clarinettist Henri Akoka and violinist Jean le Boulaire. While Messiaen would eventually be released the following year, his stay in Stalag brought about one of the most extraordinary musical artefacts of the Second World War: his composition *Quartet for the End of Time*.

After a sympathetic guard brought Messiaen manuscript paper, he was able to pass time composing an 'unpretentious little trio' for his fellow inmates, which they played through for him in the lavatories. With plenty of time on his hands, Messiaen then decided to compose five more movements, and arrange two others from earlier works, to create an hour-long quartet, augmenting the forces with a piano part for himself.

The camp authorities allowed a performance of the *Quartet* to take place in Stalag on 15 January 1941. It's an event which must count as one of the most remarkable premières in the history of classical music, as an audience of several hundred guards and prisoners, some of the latter injured, crowded into a freezing cold hut to attend. As Messiaen later put it, 'I was never listened to with such attention and understanding'.

The story of that concert has acquired a legendary status, a symbol of hope and civilisation amidst the inhumanity of war. But the *Quartet* – a progressive and idiosyncratic work, which brings diverse influences together in magpie fashion – seems to utterly transcend the circumstances of its composition. Certainly, Messiaen was bolstered by his profound Catholic faith during captivity, something which is reflected in his later claim that 'in the midst of thirty thousand prisoners, I was the only man who was not one'.

For any prisoner, of course, the experience of time changes drastically. But the work's curious title arose from Messiaen's interest in 'the abolition of time itself, something infinitely mysterious and incomprehensible to most philosophers'. From a technical point of view, this meant experiments with rhythm and metre informed by his studies of Plainsong, alongside methods from Greek and Indian musical traditions, which divide and emphasise time in irregular ways. The same is true of his fascination with birdsong, which, when evoked in the *Quartet*, shows a similar desire to escape the strictures of bar lines. In other parts of the work, time seems to be suspended altogether in music of extreme slowness.

The score is inscribed 'In homage to the Angel of the Apocalypse, who raises a hand towards Heaven saying: "There shall be time no longer."' This refers to the Book of Revelation, whose 'great and marvellous lights' and

'solemn silences' Messiaen adored. The striking visual and musical elements of the scripture – rainbows and pillars of fire, fateful trumpet blasts – is mirrored in the rather psychedelic language of the composer's own commentary, which in turn connects to his experience of synaesthesia, in which he perceived sounds as colours.

Mixed into this heady brew is Messiaen's sensuous harmonic language, drawing on composers of the French school, but incorporating his own esoteric 'modes of limited transposition' – collections of notes which dissolve familiar structures of harmony, analogous to the work's irregular rhythmic procedures.

The first movement, 'Crystal liturgy' is inspired by the dawn chorus, which Messiaen likened to the 'harmonious silence of heaven'. The clarinet and violin imitate birdsong, while cello and piano play repeating patterns of different lengths, superimposed on top of each other. In the following 'Vocalise for the Angel who announces the end of time', a spiky introduction gives way to a roaming, plainsong-like melody in violin and cello, accompanied by gentle piano chords.

A clarinet solo movement, 'Abyss of birds', begins as a quiet meditation, but soon exploits the instrument's wide range of pitch and dynamics, most memorably in several drawn-out crescendos on a single note. After this expressive intensity, the short 'Interlude' that follows – that first compositional essay of Stalag – provides witty and humorous relief.

In 'Praise to the eternity of Jesus', marked 'infinitely slow', a high cello line is supported by hypnotic piano chords. Messiaen's faith did not preclude pragmatism – this music was recycled, rather incongruously, from the 1937 *Festival of Beautiful Waters*, a public commission for a night-time display of waterspouts along the river Seine. The subsequent 'Dance of fury for the seven trumpets' could not be more contrasting. Here harmony is banished altogether to represent the alarming fanfares of the apocalypse, as the whole ensemble plays a single, rhythmically complex line with 'granite-like' intensity, an extremely demanding act of concentration.

The following 'Tumult of rainbows' reworks and develops material from the second movement, culminating in a variation of its plainsong melody, now transformed into an ecstasy of trills. Messiaen's commentary turns especially rhapsodic here, with evocations of 'dizziness', 'swords of fire' and 'blue-orange lava'. Finally, a second 'Praise' movement, 'to the Immortality of Jesus', concludes the work. This ethereal violin solo is transcribed from an early organ piece, *Dyptique*, with a bell-like rhythm added to the piano accompaniment. One can only imagine what the audience of Stalag thought and felt that day, as the violin line soared higher and higher in the final bars, before vanishing into silence.

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