

Programme Note by Chris Darwin: use freely for non-commercial purposes

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (1940–41)

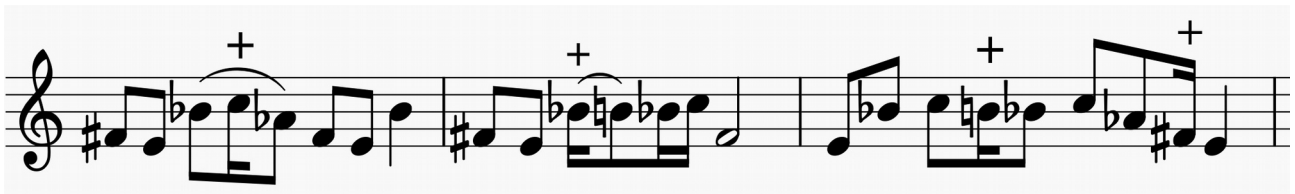
- 1 Liturgie de cristal
- 2 Vocalise, pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps
- 3 Abîme des oiseaux
- 4 Intermède
- 5 Louange à l'Éternité de Jésus
- 6 Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes
- 7 Fouillis d'arcs-en-ciel, pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps
- 8 Louange à l'Immortalité de Jésus

Messiaen was unique. Although he was undoubtedly influenced by Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky and Bartók, he created his own systems of scales and of rhythmic structure which he used primarily to compose music celebrating, through the Catholic church, the divinity of Christ. *"His was a theology of glory. He was attracted by those moments in the Gospel stories when Christ's divinity stood apparent: the Nativity, the Transfiguration, the Resurrection and the Ascension."* (Paul Griffiths, Grove).

Within Messiaen's output, the *Quartet for the End of Time* is also unique. It was written and performed while he was interned for about a year in a Silesian POW camp and was the most substantial piece he had yet written. Its unusual combination of instruments was dictated by what instrumentalists were also in the camp. A helpful camp guard, Carl-Albert Brüll, helped obtain instruments, relieved the musicians of camp duties and provided additional firewood, a pencil, paper and isolation to help its composition; subsequently, he forged papers with a stamp made from a potato to help the performers be liberated shortly after the performance. After the war, Brüll visited Messiaen, but was devastated when he was refused an audience.

What gives Messiaen's music in general and this piece in particular its distinctive sound? Two factors are its modes and its time-structure. A conventional diatonic scale (eg C major) has a different set of notes for each starting note: it can transpose into many different keys. Messiaen, though, composed according to a number of "*Modes of Limited Transposition*". A simple example of such a mode is the whole-tone scale (eg CDEF#G#A#C). There are only two different sets of notes that make up whole-tone scales – the other one starts a semitone higher on C# rather than C. If you transpose up another semitone to D you have the same set of notes as you started with – hence *limited* transposition. Messiaen uses six other such modes (that is all there are), each with a repeating simple pattern of intervals (eg tone-semitone-semitone). Wikipedia on "*Modes of Limited Transposition*" will tell you more. Limited transposition confers a stasis on the music above the shifting conventional harmonies from the reordering of the mode's notes. Such stasis evokes "the end of time".

A more literal interpretation of "end of time" comes from the piece's time-structure. Many of the movements have no time-signature, and although there are bars, Messiaen does not tell you how long they are, and the chances are that they are of some weird length thanks to Messiaen's penchant for slipping in an extra semiquaver now and again (what he called "Added value"). In the following example - the opening of the sixth movement *Dance of Wrath* - each bar is basically 4 crotchets long but with one or two added semiquavers (marked by +). The first seven notes of the piece are also a simple example of another of Messiaen's rhythmic tropes: palindromic rhythm'.



The inspiration for the work was a passage from the Book of Revelations (10:1–2, 5–7) *"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 ... "*

As well as being a devout Catholic and a synaesthete – he saw music as colours - Messiaen was also an ornithologist.

1 Crystal Liturgy

Bird species are first named in Messiaen's work in this movement: the clarinet is the blackbird and the violin plays nightingale. *"Transpose this onto a religious plane and you have the harmonious silence of Heaven."* The lower instruments provide a different approximation to eternity. The cello cycles through the same five-note melody (using the pitches C, E, D, F-sharp, and B-flat) and a repeating pattern of 15 durations while the piano plays a 17-note rhythmic pattern permuted strictly through 29 chords.

2 Vocalise, for the Angel Announcing the End of Time

"The first and third parts (very short) evoke the power of this mighty angel... 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." (This and the following quotations are translations of Messiaen's own commentary).

3 The Abyss of the Birds **Solo clarinet**

"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."

4 Interlude **Violin, cello, clarinet**

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

5 In Praise of the Eternity of Jesus **Cello, 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.' "

6 Dance of Wrath, for the Seven Trumpets

"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 [i.e.

palindromic] 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."

7 Tangle of Rainbows, for the Angel Announcing the End of Time

"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 colours 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 colours. These swords of fire, this blue-orange lava, these sudden stars: there is the tangle, there are the rainbows!"

8 In Praise of the Immortality of Jesus **Violin, 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."