

Olivier Messiaen – Quartet For The End Of Time (2000)

Written by bluesever

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I. Liturgie de cristal II. Vocalise pour l'ange qui annonce la fin du temps III. Abime des oiseaux IV. Intermede V. Louange a l'eternite de Jesus VI. Danse de la fureur VII. Fouillis d'arcs-en-ciel VIII. Louange a l'immortalite de Jesus Gil Shaham - violin Paul Meyer - clarinet Jian Wang - cello Myung-Whun Chung - piano

Olivier Messiaen's Quartet for the end of time is probably better known for its origins, the story of its first performance and its magnificent title than it is as a piece of music. Like, for instance, Joyce's Ulysses - known of and spoken of with respect but seldom actually read. The history of the Quartet's gestation and events surrounding the work is worth repeating. In June 1940, the conscripted Messiaen was taken prisoner by the Germans and sent to a camp in Silesia, and it was there he wrote the work. Initially the only instrument in the camp was a clarinet, then a violin followed, a piano with sticky keys appeared and following a collection by fellow prisoners enough was raised to buy a cello from the nearby town. The quartet was first performed in a crowded prison hut in January 1941.

Fortunately Messiaen had first-rate players available. A transcript of an interview with the cellist, Etienne Pasquier, is included with the disc and it makes fascinating reading. He tells how Messiaen wrote a piece for the clarinetist (a member of the French National Orchestra) who insisted the piece was too hard but received no sympathy from the composer - the piece eventually became the third movement of the Quartet. He (the cellist) insists his instrument did not have just three strings as Messiaen apparently liked to claim - "a piece as difficult as this could not be played on just three strings. It was Messiaen's way of pointing out the inadequacies at this first performance". Subsequently the four performers were sent back to France by the Germans - "As musicians you had no guns" quoted from a German officer. This was preferential treatment as many of their fellow prisoners spent several more years in captivity.

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Whatever the circumstances of its birth - perhaps they helped - the work is a deeply felt, intense piece from a man whose Catholic faith was strong and unwavering. He chose as his theme for the Quartet an extract from the Revelations and their foretelling of the writer's (St.John) vision of the Day of Judgement and its reference to "mighty angels". The work has eight sections - the number is not a random choice but was based upon the six days of the creation, the Sabbath followed by eternity.

The other staple of Messiaen's music was his use of birdsong - here in the opening Section Liturgie de cristal with the clarinet as a blackbird and added trills from the other performers representing daybreak and the birds awakening. Two short ensemble passages, with loud prominent piano chords open and close the second movement and frame a middle section of gently repeated phrases by the piano against hushed strings. Abyss of the birds, a clarinet solo beginning in contemplative, wistful mood then switches to chirpy birdsong to contrast joy with the weariness of time before returning to its melancholy.

A brief scherzo-like interlude leads to the Fifth Section Eulogy to the Eternity of Jesus. The slow, lingering cello part, full of sustained notes (John Tavener comes quickly to mind) and sparse piano writing make an intense, powerful statement in this longest part of the work. Unison playing dominates the Dance of Frenzy, for the seven trumpets and the appearances of the Angel in section seven is in the form of violent interjections into dreamy violin and piano duets. The closing Eulogy is not unlike the cello writing in the fifth movement - here changed to piano supporting the violin in a long lined melody.

This is a piece that does not give up its secrets easily, the listener must work hard but the end result is worth it. The performance and recording are first class and the issue is well worth investigating. --- Harry Downey, musicweb-international.com

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