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Messiaen

QUATUOR POUR LA FIN DU TEMPS

ANTHONY POPLÉ

Messiaen

QUATUOR POUR LA FIN DU TEMPS

The *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* (*Quartet for the End of Time*) is among the best-known compositions by Olivier Messiaen (1908–92). Like virtually all of his works, it combines the striking technical achievement of Messiaen's rich and attractive musical style with a deeply felt theological inspiration – in this case from the apocalyptic events described in the Book of Revelation, leading to the end of time itself. Composed while Messiaen was a prisoner-of-war and premiered under extraordinary conditions in Stalag VIIIA in 1941, the work retains the powerful immediacy that has made it a favourite of performers and audiences alike. Anthony Pople's book provides an introduction to Messiaen's style through an examination of this great work, showing how it came to be composed and giving an in-depth assessment of each of its eight movements.

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Messiaen, 1952.
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Messiaen: *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*

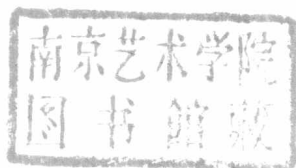


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Messiaen: *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*

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for Flora

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book is dedicated to Flora, who is not yet old enough to know. I trust that when the time comes she will take the dedication as it is meant: a token of loving hope and faith in her future.

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Introduction

In May and June 1940 the German Chancellor Adolf Hitler conducted a remarkable campaign of war which culminated in an Armistice treaty signed with the French government of Marshal Pétain in a railway carriage north-east of Paris on 22 June. The military thrust which led to this notorious but pragmatic political settlement had begun at dawn on 10 May with an invasion of the Netherlands and Belgium. By the end of the month both countries had fallen; British troops had fled to the coast in their thousands and were being evacuated from Dunkirk by a vast flotilla of boats large and small. At the same time, several hundred miles to the east, many French troops were taken prisoner as the German armies moved relentlessly onward from the Belgian border.

One of these was the young composer and organist Olivier Messiaen. He was thirty-one years of age, round-faced and bespectacled, and was serving in a menial capacity for the medical corps. Messiaen and three companions were captured in a forest by German troops as they reached the end of a journey by foot from Verdun to Nancy.¹ Together with countless others he was held in an open-air camp pending transit from the war zone to the heart of Hitler's empire,² and after a long and arduous journey by rail arrived at a prisoner-of-war camp known as Stalag VIIIA, at Görlitz, a small town in Silesia about 55 miles east of Dresden.

In captivity, Messiaen was stripped of his uniform but managed somehow to retain a haversack containing a small and eclectic collection of pocket scores – from Bach's Brandenburg Concertos to the *Lyric Suite* by Alban Berg. This library, he said later, 'was to be my solace at a time when I would suffer, as the Germans themselves suffered, from hunger and cold'.³

Messiaen's early career

At the time of his capture Messiaen already had several major works behind him. Born in 1908 to artistic parents and precociously talented, he had entered the Paris Conservatoire at the age of 11 and had won first prizes there in counterpoint (1926), piano accompaniment (1927), organ (1929) and composition (1930). Devoutly religious, he had been appointed organist at l'Église de la Trinité in Paris in 1931 – a conventional office curiously at odds with his radical musical sensibilities.

Even before leaving the Conservatoire, Messiaen had composed two works of great imagination and distinction – *Le banquet céleste* for organ (1928) and the eight Preludes for piano (1928–9) – and others, notably the orchestral work *Les offrandes oubliées* (1930) and *L'Ascension* (for orchestra, 1932–3; rewritten for organ, 1933–4) would soon follow. These works are recognised today (though hardly at the time) as remarkably mature in their absorption of a wide range of influences, some of them exotic. Paris in the 1920s was a giant melting-pot of cultures, and whilst in music that decade has come to be dominated in hindsight by the works of Stravinsky and the composers of the group 'Les six', there was in fact a vast range of other strands in Parisian musical life, on some of which Messiaen seems likely to have drawn.⁴

First, there are the influences Messiaen himself acknowledged, such as his composition teacher Paul Dukas (1865–1935). Dukas allowed few of his works to survive, and the popularity of *L'Apprenti sorcier* does not necessarily show him to posterity in his best light. Far more impressive and influential, both on Messiaen and on others – such as those Viennese musicians, including Berg for example, who saw it produced there in 1908 – was his opera *Ariane et Barbe-bleue*.⁵ This work shares with Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* its origin in a play by the Belgian symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck, but it is more inscrutable than Debussy's work and its tone is altogether darker. Messiaen knew *Pelléas* perhaps even more thoroughly than *Ariane*, as its score had been a tenth-birthday gift from his boyhood harmony teacher Jehan de Gibon (whom we should thank also):

A provincial teacher had placed a veritable bomb in the hands of a mere child. ... For me, that score was a revelation, love at first sight; I sang it, I played it, and sang it again and again. That was probably the most decisive influence I've received ...⁶

Messiaen would later recall that as a student at the Conservatoire he was the only one who possessed the scores of Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire* and Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. But these modernist talismans were not at the centre of his musical world: 'I was closer to Debussy. I remained loyal to my childhood loves: Debussy, Mozart, Berlioz, Wagner.'⁷ Messiaen's love of Debussy's music and his admiration for Dukas as man and artist meant that despite his appreciation of Honegger and Milhaud,⁸ the origins of his style lay firmly with the generation of French musicians that preceded 'Les six' rather than with the post-war innovations of that group.

Among other influences that Messiaen was to acknowledge from his teachers the most far-reaching was that of Marcel Dupré and Maurice Emmanuel, who between them introduced him to ancient Greek rhythms and trained him in their musical application.⁹ Dupré (1886–1971) was both Messiaen's organ teacher and his link with the great French organ tradition exemplified in the 1920s also by Widor and Tournemire. He used improvisation on Greek rhythms as a pedagogical tool and wrote about them in his *Traité d'improvisation*, which was published in 1926 while Messiaen was still a pupil at the Conservatoire. Emmanuel (1862–1938) was Messiaen's music history teacher, though he regarded himself primarily as a composer. His course on Greek metre, though of a year's duration, merely whetted Messiaen's appetite, encouraging him to visit libraries in search of further information from which he developed his own understanding of the subject. In Messiaen's own words:

Greek metres rely on a simple and essential principle: they are composed of shorts and longs; the shorts are all equal and a long equals two shorts. ... Metre is quite simply the grouping of two feet, the foot being a rhythm composed of a certain number of short and long values each having a precise name.¹⁰

He goes on to explain how one foot may be substituted for another – not necessarily of the same overall length – and how the total of the note-values in a verse is thus not infrequently a prime number. These observations underpin what Messiaen terms his 'secret predilection for prime numbers (5, 7, 11, etc.)' in his preface to the score of the *Quatuor*.¹¹

Translated from poetry to the domain of musical rhythm, this view of metre as a consequence of the interplay of long and short values may

be seen as a foundation of something highly characteristic of Messiaen's style from the mid-1930s onwards. Instead of the even beats and bars which are the traditional basis of Western musical metre, Messiaen worked, in effect, with beats of irregular length: not, for example, regular crotchets, but groups that are three, four or five semiquavers in length, all juxtaposed in apparent freedom.¹² There is still an underlying regular pulse, but it is at the level of this tiny 'short' value rather than that of the slower perceptible beat, which is delightfully uneven.

Messiaen's study of Greek metre was not the only catalyst for this stylistic development, for he had also made a study of classical Indian rhythms through a chance encounter with the *Saṅgītaratnākara* ('The Ocean of Music'), a thirteenth-century treatise authored by Śārngadeva.¹³ Although the *Saṅgītaratnākara* is only one of many ancient Indian sources on Saṅgīta – the art of song, instrumental music and dance¹⁴ – it was on this treatise that he alighted and from which he learned of the *deçi-tālas* ('regional rhythms'). These were rhythmic formulæ not dissimilar to the Greek 'feet' in their combination of short and long values to produce effects quite alien to the Western classical tradition, and which Messiaen clearly found both fascinating and musically invigorating. He used the *deçi-tālas* in his own compositions and also took from a study of the *Saṅgītaratnākara* the principle of 'non-retrogradable rhythm':

Whether one reads from right to left or from left to right, the order of their values is the same. This peculiarity is found in all rhythms divisible into two groups each of which is the retrograde of the other, with a 'shared' central value.

For example ... A succession of non-retrogradable rhythms (each bar contains one such rhythm):



This is used in the sixth movement of the *Quatuor*: 'Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes'¹⁵

The synthesis of Indian and Greek elements that developed in Messiaen's mind is shown by his keen identification of a non-retrogradable

long-short-long pattern in rhythms typical of the dance music of Crete.¹⁶ To this mix should be added his devout appreciation that the neumes of plainsong were similarly liberated from the bars and beats of Western music.¹⁷ Messiaen's understanding of this wealth of ancient precedent allowed him to acknowledge Stravinsky's use of additive rhythm, most famously in *The Rite of Spring*, without being beholden to Stravinsky as a source of his own style.¹⁸

It was nonetheless through the Franco-Russian cultural axis that Messiaen – who 'didn't approve' of the musical æsthetics inspired among a generation of French composers by Jean Cocteau's *Le coq et l'arlequin* (1918) and *Le rappel à l'ordre* (1926)¹⁹ – may have come to be influenced by a group of musicians younger than Debussy and Dukas. Links between Russian and French music from the latter part of the nineteenth century onwards were legion, including Debussy's formative contacts in Russia with Tchaikovsky's patron Nadezhda von Meck and her family in the early 1880s, and the seminal visits of Sergei Diaghilev's company to Paris that began with a series of concerts in 1907 and developed into the *Ballets Russes* – giving the world such works as *The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, *Daphnis et Chloë*, *Jeux* and *The Rite of Spring*. Messiaen's own enthusiasm both for Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov* and for Russian folksong is well recorded.²⁰ Martin Cooper has compared Dukas's work, and *Ariane et Barbe-bleue* in particular, with the style of Rimsky-Korsakov,²¹ but Messiaen's connection with Rimsky comes about more by virtue of the fact that both men associated the senses of sight and sound through synæsthesia – seeing colours when they heard music. A more recent Russian composer who shared this capacity was Alexander Scriabin (1872–1915), who in a series of grandiose and ultimately apocalyptic projects had presented his own creative force as an expression of the divine, inspired initially by the theosophical writings of Helena Blavatsky.

The detailed spiritual content of Scriabin's work must have been repugnant to Messiaen, which may explain why his only public acknowledgement of Scriabin's existence is in connection with synæsthesia.²² But the points of technical contact between Scriabin's late style and elements of Messiaen's 'musical language' are highly evident (see chapter 2); and, as Paul Griffiths has noted, a number of younger Russian composers strongly influenced by Scriabin were among the

émigrés working in Paris in the 1920s in the aftermath of the 1917 revolution and the civil war that closely followed it. One of these was Ivan Vishnegradsky (1893–1979), whose habitual use of quarter-tones in his mature music was certainly known to Messiaen.²³ Another was Nikolai Obukhov (1892–1954), whose works were considerably more bizarre in their spiritual dimension even than Scriabin's own, frequently relishing as if masochistically the physical details of quasi-Christian martyrdom. It is difficult to believe that Messiaen knew any of this music closely; but he will surely have been aware of the presence and activities of these composers and of other musicians associated with Scriabinism, such as the gifted musical commentator Boris de Schloezer.²⁴ And whatever his misgivings about their specific beliefs, he would also not have failed to notice their conviction that music had a spiritual dimension – something which set them in significant contrast to the group of 'Les six' and all it stood for.

By the mid-1930s Messiaen was himself preparing to join forces with other French composers in a named group with its own manifesto. This was 'La jeune France', which gave its inaugural concert in June 1936. Its members, other than Messiaen, were André Jolivet (1905–74) – the most prominent in the group at its formation – and two lesser-known composers, Daniel Lesur and Yves Baudrier. Their stated intention was to present 'a living music, having the impetus of sincerity, generosity and artistic conscientiousness',²⁵ but as Antoine Goléa points out, only Jolivet and Messiaen were intent on achieving this through new musical means.²⁶ This grouping of four men, always disparate, was made irrelevant by the war, but Messiaen evidently retained his admiration for Jolivet's piano work *Mana* (1935), which in its exotically magical subject matter seems to anticipate some of Messiaen's post-war music.²⁷

Messiaen's pursuit of the spiritual through an innovative musical language drawing on many sources continued in the mid- and late 1930s. The four major works of these years stand close to the *Quatuor* in style, and were likewise cited liberally by the composer in *Technique de mon langage musical*, a two-volume treatise written on his repatriation to France and published in 1944, in which he set out the main elements of his rhythmic, melodic and harmonic techniques, together