



Olivier Messiaen: Quatuor pour la fin du temps (1940/41)

Olivier Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* tries nothing short of bringing time to a standstill and thus to portray eternity. What is surprising (and perhaps also mysterious) about it is the way in which it succeeds: the laws of time seem to be suspended and "the end of time," as proclaimed by the Mighty Angel from the Book of Revelations, has arrived.

During the Second World War, the young Messiaen – a devout Catholic – had a religious vision amidst the horrors of the war: the light and colours of heavenly harmony at the end of time. He had already started to compose the third movement, for solo clarinet, while working as a sanitary in the French military service. During the time that he kept night vigil close to Verdun, Messiaen studied the singing of birds at dawn and incorporated it into the quartet's first movement. Most of the quartet was composed in the German prisoner of war camp in Görlitz, where Messiaen premiered the piece with other prisoners, outdoors, in January 1941. Despite the rain, poor instruments and inexperienced listeners, the music directly – and deeply – touched its audience.

How did Messiaen succeed in setting the biblical vision of time coming to a standstill to music? There are many technical and formal aspects that come into play, including Messiaen's unique system of rhythm and harmony, which reflects his fondness for prime numbers. In the sixth movement, for example, the flow of music – which one knows well from western music – is largely absent due to the constant presence of additional short note values. This is one of the methods appearing to revoke the steady progression of time. In the fifth and eighth movements, both praising Jesus, the tempo is extremely slow in order to convey the feeling of eternity. An eighth movement joins the perfect, holy number of seven; this is also a symbol of expanding into eternity.

As is usually the case in Messiaen's music, birdsong plays an important role: to him, it represents the opposite of time, the harmonious tranquility of Heaven.

Messiaen was also a distinct synaesthetic: his musical depiction of rainbows and other light effects are conveyed through a wide palette of colours. However, he was especially steeped in his faith and in the inspiration of this music, the glowing angel of the Apocalypse.

Messiaen prefaces his music with the following verse from the Bible:

"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 ... and he set his right foot upon the sea, and his left foot on the earth ... lifted up his hand to heaven, and swore by him that liveth for ever and ever: ... there should be time no longer: but in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, the mystery of God should be finished." (Revelations 10:1, King James Version)