

philharmonia orchestra

OLIVIER MESSIAEN

(1908 – 1992)

Quatuor pour la fin du Temps (Quartet for the end of Time)

I. *Liturgie de cristal*

[Liturgy of Crystal]

II. *Vocalise pour l'ange qui annonce la fin du Temps*

[Vocalise for the Angel who announces the end of Time]

III. *Abîme des oiseaux*

[The Abyss of the Birds]

IV. *Intermède*

[Interlude]

V. *Louange à l'éternité de Jésus*

[Praise to the eternity of Jesus]

VI. *Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes*

[Dance of fury, for the seven trumpets]

VII. *Fouillis d'arcs-en-ciel, pour l'ange qui annonce la fin du Temps*

[Cluster of rainbows, for the Angel who announces the end of Time]

VIII. *Louange à immortalité de Jésus*

[Praise to the immortality of Jesus]

Inspired by the visionary language of the Apocalypse, evoked in the movement titles, Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* is one of the most remarkable works to have come out of World War II, composed by a musician whose religious faith was a constant inspiration, even in the most arduous circumstances. In May 1940 the German army entered France, and Messiaen was among the thousands of French soldiers rounded up by the Germans: he was taken to a makeshift camp in a huge field to the west of Nancy. There he met other musicians, including the clarinetist Henri Akoka and the cellist Etienne Pasquier. This produced an immediate burst of creativity from Messiaen: as Pasquier later recalled, 'Messiaen composed a solo clarinet piece for Akoka which was to become the third movement of the Quatuor: *Abîme des oiseaux*'.

In July 1940, Messiaen, Akoka and Pasquier were transported to Stalag VIII-A, a Prisoner of War camp near Görlitz, about 70 miles east of Dresden. Two movements of what was to become the Quatuor had earlier incarnations: the *Louange* for cello reused music from the *Fête des belles eaux* (written in 1937 for an ensemble of six ondes Martenot), and the final violin *Louange* existed in a primitive form as the second part of the *Diptyque* for organ (1930). The *Intermède* was the first movement to be written in Stalag VIII-A, and it was rehearsed by Akoka, Pasquier and the violinist Jean Le Boulaire in the camp's washrooms in September 1940. Once the authorities found a piano for Messiaen, he got down in earnest to composing the rest of the Quatuor, using manuscript paper provided by one of the guards: Hauptmann Karl-Erich Brüll.

The instruments available to Messiaen presented a challenge in terms of blend and balance, and his solution was to present them in different combinations: solo (clarinet), in duos (cello

and piano, violin and piano), and trios (clarinet and strings). The whole ensemble plays together in the sixth movement, but in unison, and it's only in the seventh movement that the full power of the ensemble is unleashed.

Messiaen recalled how he wrote the *Quatuor* in an interview with Antoine Goléa:

In the Stalag with me were a violinist, a clarinettist and the cellist Etienne Pasquier. I wrote an unpretentious little trio for them which they played to me in the washrooms, because the clarinettist had kept his instrument and someone had given the cellist a cello with three strings. Emboldened by this first experiment, called *Intermède*, I gradually added the seven movements which surround it, and it is thus that my *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* has a total of eight sections. ... An upright piano was brought into the camp, very out of tune, the keys of which seemed to stick at random. On this piano I played my *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*, in front of an audience of five thousand people – the most diverse mixture of all classes in society – farmworkers, labourers, intellectuals, career soldiers, doctors and priests. Never have I been listened to with such attention and such understanding.

This stirring account needs to be treated with a little caution. Two important details were corrected by the cellist Etienne Pasquier, (interviewed by Hannelore Lauerwald), about the size of the audience and the state of his cello:

[The first performance of the *Quatuor* took place] in the hut that we used as the theatre. ... All the seats were taken, about four hundred in all, and people listened raptly, their thoughts turning inward, even those who may have been listening to chamber music for the first time. The concert took place on Wednesday, 15 January 1941, at six in the evening. It was bitterly cold outside the hut, and there was snow on the ground and on the rooftops. ... Messiaen repeatedly claimed that there were only three strings on my cello, but in fact I played on four strings.

A review appeared in *Lumignon*, the French-language camp newspaper, on 1 April 1941. Under the headline 'Première at the Camp', this gives a fascinating description of the audience reaction, and recognises that something special had taken place:

It was our good fortune to have witnessed in this camp the first performance of a masterpiece. And what's strange is that in a prison barracks we felt just the same tumultuous and partisan atmosphere of some premières: latent as much with passionate acclaim as with angry denunciation. And while there was fervent enthusiasm on some rows, it was impossible not to sense the irritation on others. Reminiscences of the time speak of such a storm when one evening in 1913 at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, *The Rite of Spring* was first performed. It's often a mark of a work's greatness that it has provoked conflict on the occasion of its birth. ... The last note was followed by a moment of silence which established the sovereign mastery of the work.