



Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992)
Quatuor pour la fin du temps (Quartet for the End of Time) (1941)
Clarinet, Violin, Cello, & Piano

I. *Liturgie de cristal (Liturgy of the Crystal)* [All four instruments]

Bien modéré, en poudroiment harmonieux; (Very moderate, in harmonious “cloud”): 3/4

- Between 3 and 4 o’clock in the morning, the birds awaken: a solo blackbird or nightingale improvises, surrounded by a dustwhirls of sound, by a halo of harmonics lost high up in the trees. Transpose this onto a religious plane: you have the harmonious silence of heaven.

II. *Vocalise pour l’ange qui annonce la fin du temps (Vocalize for the Angel who Announces the End of Time)* [All four instruments]

Robuste, modéré (Robust, moderate) 3/4

- The first and third sections (both very brief) evoke the power of this mighty angel, crowned with a **rainbow** and clothed in a cloud, who places one foot on the sea and the other on the land. The “middle” [second section] evokes the impalpable harmonies of heaven. In the piano, gentle cascades of **blue-orange** chords, encircling with their distant carillon the plainchant-like song of the violin and cello.

III. *Abîme des oiseaux (Abyss of the Birds)* [Unaccompanied Clarinet]

Lent, expressif et triste (Slow, expressive and sad): ♩ = 44 approx; Unmetered

- The abyss is Time, with its weariness and gloom. The birds are the opposite of Time; they represent our longing for light, for stars, for **rainbows**, and for jubilant songs!

IV. *Intermède (Interlude)* [Violin, Cello, & Piano]

Décidé modéré, un peu vif; (Decidedly moderate, a little lively): ♩ = 96 approx. 2/4

- Scherzo, in a more outgoing character than the other movements, yet linked to them nevertheless by melodic “recalls.”

V. *Louange à l'éternité de Jésus* (Praise to the Eternity of Jesus) [Cello & Piano]

Infiniment lent, extatique) (Infinitely slow, ecstatic): E major: Unmetered

Other Terms: majestueux, recueilli, très expressif (majestic, collected, very expressive)

- Here, Jesus is considered the Word of God. A long phrase in the cello, inexorably slow, glorifies, with adoration and reverence, the eternity of this mighty yet gentle Word, “of which the ages never tire.” The melody unfolds majestically, as if from a regal yet soft—colored horizon. "In the beginning was the Word, and Word was with God, and the Word was God."

VI. *Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes* (Dance of the Fury, for the Seven Trumpets)

[All four instruments]

Décidé, igoureux, grantique, un peu vif (Decisive, vigorous, aggressive, a little lively): Unmetered

- Rhythmically, the most characteristic piece of this series. The four instruments in unison create the effects of gongs and trumpets (the first six trumpets of the Apocalypse followed by various calamities, the trumpet of the seventh angel announcing the fulfillment of the mystery of God). Use of added values, of augmentation or diminution, and non-retrogradable rhythms. Music of stone, tremendous ringing granite; perpetual motion of steel, of enormous blocks of **purple fury**, of frozen intoxication. Listen, above all, to the terrifying fortissimo of the theme in augmentation and register alteration towards the end of the movement.

VII. *Fouillis d'arcs-en-ciel, pour l'ange qui annonce la fin du temps* (Tangle of Rainbows, for the Angel who Announces the End of Time) [All four instruments]

Rêveur, presque lent (Dreamy, almost slow): 3/4

- Certain passages here recall the second movement. The Angel full of might appears, and in particular the **rainbow** that crowns him (the **rainbow**, symbol of peace, of wisdom, and every luminous sound and vibration! In my dreams, I hear and see classified chords and melodies, common colors and forms; then, after this transitory stage, I pass into unreality and lose myself in a rapture to a whirling, a gyrating fusion of superhuman sound and color. These swords of fire, these pools of **blue-orange** lava, these shooting stars: this is the tangled skein, there are the **rainbows**!

VIII. *Louange à l'immortalité de Jésus* (Praise to the Immortality of Jesus) [Violin & Piano]

Extrêmement lent et tendre, extatique (Extremely slow and tender, ecstatic): 4/4 E major

- Long solo for violin, the counterpart to the cello solo in the fifth movement. Why this second eulogy? It addresses more specifically the second aspect of Jesus: Jesus the Man, the Word made flesh, immortally resurrected to impart us his life. This movement is pure love. The progressive ascent toward the extremely high register represents the ascension of man toward his Lord, of the son of God toward his Father, of deified Man toward Paradise.

Text translations from Messiaen's Preface to the *Quartet for the End of Time* cited in Rebecca Rischin, *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 129-131.