

Olivier Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*.

On a cold winter day in January 1941, four musicians, a clarinetist, a violinist, a cellist, and a pianist prepared themselves to perform. They were giving their first performance of an eight-movement piece that symbolized eternal life inspired by the Holy Bible's last book and the end of the regular rhythm of traditional Western music. Their stage was not a church or one of the chic concert auditoriums but was a German prison camp in World War II, and the prisoners were their audience.<sup>1</sup> The composer/pianist was the famous musician Olivier Messiaen. He and his fellow musicians were to perform his *Quatuor pour la Fin du Temps (Quartet for the End of Time)* that is known today as one of the most remarkable pieces of chamber music written in the early twentieth century.

In recent discussions of the *Quartet for the End of Time*, scholars seek to explain its technique and genesis. Musicologist Leslie A. Sprout describes how the work was misunderstood in earlier times and notes that "judging from the high level of interest by contemporary scholars and musicians in the circumstantial details surrounding the *Quartet*, it is a misunderstanding that persists today."<sup>2</sup> Sprout's point is that there is still a need to explain the piece today. It is difficult to understand because of its relation to war, its symbolic relationship with religion, and its modernistic language. Agreeing with Sprout, in this paper, I will explain why it isn't easy to understand the musical piece concerning its three concepts: the history of the work, its religious representations, and its technique. It is essential to understand the music in terms of these concepts to understand how this work was a turning point in developing Messiaen's musical language.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Griffiths, "Messiaen, Olivier," in *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, under "life," <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/18497> (accessed June 18, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Leslie A. Sprout, "Messiaen, Jolivet, and the Soldier-Composers of Wartime France," *Musical Quarterly* 87, no.2 (2004): 262, <http://mq.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/reprint/87/2/259> (accessed June 18, 2010).

Genesis Stories of the *Quartet*

The Quartet's origin stories prove how Messiaen created such a great piece under the terrible circumstances of the war, of course, with his fellow musicians' collaboration. However, someone who listens to it and does not know the piece's historical background cannot find any war elements or people's miserable situations inside it. Thus, one who does not know its history can quickly think that it was not written during the war times. Today, the composer's explanations and the genesis stories about the music are the only links combining the music with the war in short its history. Here is a question that comes then. Do we need these stories today to understand the artistic value of the *Quartet*? However, Sprout's article tells us that the wartime listeners needed. She explains in her article the reasons why they "ignored" and misunderstood the *Quartet*.<sup>3</sup> The *Quartet* did not meet with wartime listeners' expectations because they wanted "emotionally riveting" music in Sprout's words.<sup>4</sup> They granted other wartime music pieces for a protest action against the war because of that perceived deprivation.<sup>5</sup> Their preference for musical pieces had a direct connection with the war that they could not find in Messiaen's *Quartet*, but what they found was the only link that combines the music with the war, the genesis stories. □

What Sprout especially points out is that the genesis stories of the *Quartet* emerged and branched out through the years, mostly when the witnesses were still alive. Scholars interviewed these eyewitnesses of the events such as the composer, his wife, the prisoners, camp officers, and other musicians. They brought out more and more details as time passed.<sup>6</sup> As one could imagine what has happened during the years, those writers could have tried to meet up with the wartime

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<sup>3</sup> Sprout, 286.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 259-304.

listener's expectations, and from that purpose, they needed to dig up these stories or even exaggerate them. However, today is different from the wartime. We need these stories because it is impossible to disconnect these stories from its art when they are so attached sociologically, historically, theologically, philosophically, and anthropologically, which continues to interest musicologists. □

Sprout compares the *Quartet* with the other wartime French composers' musical pieces to reveal wartime listeners' expectations and show us what we need today. She gives some names Émile Goué, Émile Damais, Jean Martinon, and André Jolivet, whose music illustrate war scenes or cries, which was protesting the war as being testaments to it.<sup>7</sup> Finally, she says, "if what we really want [today] was *immediacy* [emphasis added], we too would embrace Jolivet's *Trois complaints* [Three complaints], but they are at once too literal and too dependent on topical references we no longer understand."<sup>8</sup> She points out that our desire is different from the wartime listeners and invites us to think about what we value and give credit in Messiaen's *Quartet*. Another musicologist Anthony Pople brings the same notion that Sprout brings. Pople gives some Czech composers names Pavel Haas, Hans Krása, and Victor Ullman, who were prisoners during the war and composed music. He indicates that Messiaen's *Quartet* was different from their music by not capturing war elements from the war, and referring to eternal life, not to a "borrowed time."<sup>9</sup> However, Messiaen was not the only wartime composer who inspired from the eternity, as we see when Sprout was comparing the *Quartet* with Emile Damas' symphonic poem *O Nuit*. Still, it was a "testimony to the somber night in which they wander and which hope

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<sup>7</sup> Sprout, 259-304.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 290.

<sup>9</sup> Anthony Pople, *Messiaen: Quatuor pour la Fin du Temps* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 14. □

visits so rarely” in the words of a wartime critic Guy Ferchault.<sup>10</sup> The way of Messiaen’s from Damas’ inspiration from eternity was different. We see that Messiaen conceives it as a prayer, not a rebellion against God.

In my opinion, when one analyzes the *Quartet*’s artistic value, one cannot separate the stories from art, regardless if they were mutated, changed, or created repeatedly. The stories are documents that help to make history. Besides, the music itself is already a story and a reminder of Holocaust victims' suffering, and Messiaen wrote it in the middle of the war. The Quartet's genesis story is essential to show how Messiaen created such a great piece under the terrible circumstances of the war and how the creation of the music was a collaboration of the composer and other musicians. Paul Griffiths, one of Messiaen’s biographers, says that Messiaen composed for the first time for a quartet, and most of his compositions were organ cycles except a few of his songs or small instrumental pieces.<sup>11</sup> Thus, this kind of unique instrumentation was a turning point in his composition live by the help of the other three fellow prisoner musicians whom he met coincidentally in the prison camp. Otherwise, it is a question whether if he would prefer that kind of instrumentation or not.<sup>12</sup>

#### Sacred Site of the *Quartet*

It was hard to relate the Quartet with religion because the components that make it religious were only the symbols that the composer used. Some of them that he used for the first time in the *Quartet* influenced his entire musical language. Messiaen explains in the introduction

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<sup>10</sup> Guy Ferchault, “Concert d’œuvres de prisonniers,” *L’Information musicale* 109 (March 26, 1943):243; and Émile Damas, *O Nuit*, mm. 85-103, Éditions Costallat, cited in Sprout, 272-273.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Griffiths, *Oliver Messiaen, and the Music of Time* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 91.

<sup>12</sup> These three musicians are: violinist; Étienne Pasquier, clarinetist; Henri Akoka, violinist; Jean le Boulaire, cited in Pople, 7.

notes of the *Quartet*'s score that he was inspired from the Book of Revelation and explains why he gave the title *Quartet for the End of Time* for his piece:

It was directly inspired by this quotation from the Book of Revelation. Its musical language is essentially immaterial, spiritual, and Catholic. Modes achieve a tonal ubiquity and draw the listener towards eternity in space or the infinite. Beyond meter, unique rhythms contribute powerfully in dismissing the temporal (all this remains no more than a tentative, stammered attempt when one thinks of the subject's overwhelming grandeur).<sup>13</sup>

Messiaen explains why the *Quartet* is in eight movements and says, "Seven is the perfect number, the six days of Creation, sanctified by the Divine Sabbath; the seven of this rest is prolonged into eternity and becomes the eight of everlasting light, of eternal peace."<sup>14</sup> Therefore, we see how Messiaen used symbolization of the numbers, which helped him relate the *Quartet* with the Holy Bible. He also explains the fifth movement of the *Quartet*; "Jesus is here considered as the Word. A long-phrase on the cello, infinitely slow, magnifies with love and reverence the eternity of this powerful and gentle Word, 'which the years can never efface,' 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was in God, and the Word was God.'<sup>15</sup> However, one who does not know about the composer's explanations and notes would not know that it is a piece of sacred contemporary music. Sprout points out that the symbolic relationship of the music with Revelation was another problem that wartime listeners did not understand the piece, and says that "critics spent most of their reviews debating the relationship between the religious

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<sup>13</sup> Olivier Messiaen, "Preface" to *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*, trans. Anthony Pople (Paris: Durand, 1942), cited in Liner Notes, Olivier Messiaen, *Quatuor pour la Fin du Temps*, performed by Tashi (Musical group), compact disc (New York: RCA Victor Gold Seal, 1988) 289 469 052-2 GH. See the quotation that he is inspired from the Book of Revelation with his preference of *omitted* sections cited in liner notes: "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. [ . . . ] And the angel which I saw stand upon the sea and upon the earth lifted his hand to heaven, and swore by him that liveth forever and ever [ . . . ] *that there should be time longer* [emphasis added]: but in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, the mystery of God should be finished," (*Revelation of St John the Divine* 10:1-7).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Messiaen, "Preface."

sentiments expressed in the texts and their musical 'illustrations' in the *Quartet*.”<sup>16</sup> Today, we are aware of Messiaen’s symbolic expressions of his Jesus belief in his music, when we also look at his other musical pieces. We put his *Quartet* to the contemporary sacred music category, which he was probably one of the first pioneers of that style. We see that his symbolic expressions of religion improved in his later works, and gained the concept that modern music can be sacred even it was not written primarily for a church. We see his ability to write religious music under difficult circumstances. There is no doubt that it was challenging to create a description of eternity in music, but the *Quartet* shows us how strong Messiaen’s faith was, reflecting his theme in a different way of expression. According to him, any art form created by humans, whether related directly or symbolically, is again God's creatures. In my opinion, this is perhaps the understanding of what Messiaen’s *Quartet* reminds us today.

#### *Quartet*’s Modernistic Techniques

The *Quartet*’s modernistic techniques were hard to understand because Messiaen experimented with some of them for the first time. It is impossible to think the music separately from its spiritual connection while describing Messiaen’s technical innovations and musical devices that he used to construct his music. One understands that he devoted himself and his entire music to God for the rest of his life. Sprout notes how Messiaen defined the meaning of the title of the *Quartet* during a radio interview with a reporter Antoine Goléa in 1958. She says that other than his primary inspiration of the eternity concept in Apocalypse, the title also refers to a “purely symbolic evocation of musical construction . . . an abolition of a regular pulse and experimentation with irregular rhythmic durations in the *Quartet*.”<sup>17</sup> Sprout explains how some

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<sup>16</sup> Sprout, 285.

<sup>17</sup> Sprout, 261. See her endnote six: Messiaen, in Antoine Goléa, *Rencontres avec Olivier Messiaen*, 64-67.

composers and critics misunderstood Messiaen's technical innovations in music during the wartime:

Their admiration for Messiaen was centered primarily on his revolutionary approach to rhythm. But [Pierre] Boulez and others harshly criticized as reactionary and in poor taste Messiaen's stylistic inconsistencies, lingering reliance on triads, and his tendency to write rhapsodic melodies. Despite its introduction of such vital concepts as additive rhythmic values and non-retrograde rhythms, the Quartet was deemed one of the worst offenders, primarily because of the two slow movements' emotive lyricism solo cello and violin.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, as a review, we understand that when one group of earlier wartime listeners ignored the *Quartet* because its music had no "emotional riveting," according to them,<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, some wartime critics and composers were against it because of its "emotive lyricism" in the fifth and eight movements.<sup>20</sup> What we learn from Pople is these two movements; the fifth and eight movements were:

transcribed presumably from memory, from two of Messiaen's earlier compositions. In the *Quatuor*, each is scored for a solo string instrument with piano accompaniment. The eighth movement is taken from the second part of the organ work *Diptyque* (1930); its melody is cast in fairly conventional 4/4 meter and could easily have been practiced by the violinist, le Boulaire accompaniment. The same may be said - although it is less regular in meter - of the fifth movement. This was rewritten for cello and piano from a section of *Fête des belles eaux*, which Messiaen had composed in 1937 for an ensemble of six *ondes Martenots*.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, we say that the transcriptions of these movements itself might be the reason to offend or confuse these critics since there was not so much difference between these transcriptions and its original versions, or maybe there was. Critics did not understand it in its time. Perhaps, they thought that the composer was repeating himself. It becomes more apparent when Musicologist Carla Huston Bell summarizes Messiaen's early Claude Debussy influences; she says that

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<sup>18</sup> Sprout, 288-289.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 288-289.

<sup>21</sup> Pople, 10.

"Debussy's added notes such as the added sixth and augmented fourth; and Debussy's coloristic concept" influenced him.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, we understand why Boulez and some composer's reactions were against Messiaen's fifth and eighth movements in the *Quartet*. It was probably because these two movements were showing his early influence of Debussy. Then, it also becomes more apparent what Sprout means by saying "Messiaen's stylistic inconsistencies" when also she uses "rhapsodic melodies" and "emotive lyricism" terms.<sup>23</sup> These controversial criticisms indicate how Messiaen had difficult times to establish his unique musical language. Pople points out that today these transcriptions are still discussion subjects that persist when he says that "a number of commentators have been expressed misgivings" about the transcriptions of these movements.<sup>24</sup> Then, Pople criticizes Griffiths when Griffiths compares the original version with the *Quartet's* fifth movement, "*Word* [emphasis added] can scarcely be dismissed as insignificant" in the introduction part of the fifth movement of the *Quartet*.<sup>25</sup> Pople disagrees with Griffiths and says, "Its association with Christ's words (as reported by St. John) immediately links it straightforwardly and unequivocally with the avowed subject matter" of the fifth movement in the *Quartet*.<sup>26</sup>

Pople points out that "it seems highly probable" that *Liturgie de cristal* (Liturgy of crystal), which is the first movement of the *Quartet* was "the last music to be composed specifically for the *Quatuor*," after explaining how he composed the other movements previously.<sup>27</sup> His assumption directs our attention on this movement when especially Bell indicates that Messiaen's first-time use of the *bird style* was in the *Quartet's* first movement.

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<sup>22</sup> Carla Huston Bell, *Olivier Messiaen* (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 15.

<sup>23</sup> Sprout, 288-289.

<sup>24</sup> Pople, 53.

<sup>25</sup> Griffiths, 101.

<sup>26</sup> Pople, 54.

<sup>27</sup> Pople, 11.

Then she says that it “became the exclusive basis of works written in the 1950s: *Reveil des oiseaux* (1953), *Oiseaux exotiques* (1956), and *Catalogue d’oiseaux* (1956-1958).”<sup>28</sup> Thus, we understand that Messiaen’s use of bird songs was one of the innovations that influenced his musical language development, which helped him create his future pieces that also include bird songs. In conversations with the journalist Claude Samuel, Messiaen defines himself as an ornithologist and a rhythmician.<sup>29</sup> It is obvious to see how the bird songs centered in his life that turned him into an ornithologist. □

However, Yale University professor Allen Forte points out an early misunderstanding about Messiaen's bird songs, when the critics identified them as not "accurate representations."<sup>30</sup> Messiaen’s explanation reminds us antique Greek philosopher Plato’s theory of forms, when Messiaen says, “Since they [birds] use untempered intervals smaller than the semitone, and as it is ridiculous servilely to copy nature, we are going to give some examples of melodies of ‘bird’ genre which will be transcription(s), transformation(s), and interpretation(s) of [their] volleys.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, we understand two things from his explanation; first, it has a theological aspect that refers to the *Quartet's* title's first meaning. It ables to use him to apply bird transcriptions into any form and to any instrument.

We see that his use of bird songs was one of the devices he used to achieve the second meaning of the *Quartet's* title.

Bell states that "as an innovator, Messiaen is perhaps best known for composing the first work of the so-called total organization, "Mode de valeurs et d'intensitiés [Mode of durations and

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<sup>28</sup> Bell, 20.

<sup>29</sup> Claude Samuel, *Conversations with Olivier Messiaen*, trans. E. Thomas Glasow (Portland, OR: Amedeus Press, 1994), 67.

<sup>30</sup> Allen Forte, “Messiaen’s mysterious birds,” in *Messiaen Studies*, ed. Robert Sholl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 101.

<sup>31</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *The Technique of My Musical Language (TMLM)*, trans. John Satterfield (Paris: Leduc, 1956), 34 cited in Forte, 101.

intensities],” from the *Quatre etudes de rythme* [Four studies in rhythm] (1949).”<sup>32</sup> We saw that earlier, Boulez and his friends' criticized harshly the *Quartet*.<sup>33</sup> However, we learn from Pople that Messiaen influences the same generation of composers by this later work, *Mode of durations and intensities*, and directs them to other innovations on composing contemporary music.<sup>34</sup> Bell comments on this composition of Messiaen:

In a piece that is 'totally organized,' the performer can take liberties with the speed or intensity (volume) of the music. The composer indicates the exact duration of each note and the exact intensity of each tone. This composition method is a form of serialism that goes beyond the earlier twelve-tone principle of Harold Schoenberg. Controlled the order of tones, Messiaen controlled the duration, timbre, and intensity as well. Thus, Messiaen found the ultimate implications of serial music, which was not accomplished by the twelve-tone system. His 'discovery' became the point of departure for all avant-garde composers during the 1950s and 1960s. He had provided a link in the evolution of music that opened up infinite new possibilities.<sup>35</sup>

Pople finds parallelisms between serial music and the *Quartet*, and says that implications of “conscious separation of pitch, rhythm, tempo and register . . . observed” in the movements of the *Quartet*.<sup>36</sup> From this approach, it is evident how the *Quartet* had an essential place in the composer's musical style development and his influence on other generations.□

When one thinks there is no doubt that it was challenging to create a description of eternity in music, it is the same to believe it for developing an understanding for the end of traditional Western music's regular rhythm. Griffiths says that Messiaen's use of symmetry is another device to symbolize the end of time, and points out to the similarity between the first and the last movement of the *Quartet*, which “denies the sort of progress by which most Western

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<sup>32</sup> Bell, 20.

<sup>33</sup> Sprout, 288-289.

<sup>34</sup> Pople, 91-92.

<sup>35</sup> Bell, 20.

<sup>36</sup> Pople, 92.

music proclaims itself at one with a notion of events changing through time.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, we see that Messiaen’s experimentation with rhythm was not the only device to achieve the second meaning of the piece; he used other devices such as using symmetry.

Music theory and composition professor Michael R. Linton indicates another innovation that he used for the first time in the Quartet, “Messiaen had rediscovered a medieval device called ‘isorhythm,’ in which unequal patterns of chords, pitches, and rhythms revolved around each other—except for medievalists, few musicians knew of the device until the 1950s.”<sup>38</sup> This innovation in his music is probably one reason why the *Quartet* was misunderstood since few people knew *isorhythm* during its time. Also, a music theorist Mirjana Šimundža names Messiaen as “the first Western composer to investigate Indian rhythmic patterns of talas.”<sup>39</sup> Then, he analyzes and shows these rhythms on the first movement of the *Quartet*.<sup>40</sup> Again, his use of Indian rhythms in the *Quartet* makes this piece important, when one considers it one of his style traits in his musical language.

Another musicologist Robert Sherlaw Johnson says, "More important than any of these [forms] is the form described as 'Variations of the First Theme separated by Developments of the Second.' It appears for the first time in the seventh movement of the Quatuor. It forms the basis of couplet-refrain and other strophic forms to be found in Messiaen's later music," when

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<sup>37</sup> Griffiths, *Oliver Messiaen*, 100.

<sup>38</sup> Michael R. Linton, “Music for the end of time.” *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* 87 (1998): 13, [http://find.galegroup.com/gtx/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC-Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T002&prodId=AONE&docId=A21238512&source=gale&srcprod=AONE&userGroupName=uni\\_rodit&version=1.0](http://find.galegroup.com/gtx/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC-Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T002&prodId=AONE&docId=A21238512&source=gale&srcprod=AONE&userGroupName=uni_rodit&version=1.0) (accessed June 23, 2010).

<sup>39</sup> Mirjana Šimundža, “Messiaen’s Rhythmical Organisation and Classical Indian Theory of Rhythm (I),” *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 18, no. 1 (1987): 117, JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/stable/836909> (accessed June 18, 2010).

<sup>40</sup> Šimundža, 129.

reviewing Messiaen's form concepts in his music.<sup>41</sup> Thus, we see another reason how the *Quartet* was a turning point in Messiaen's musical language development.

Conclusion:

When we analyze and try to understand the *Quartet*'s artistic value in respectful conjunction, it is impossible to think the music apart from its genesis stories, its sacred side inspired by the bible. It might have been challenging to understand the *Quartet* in earlier times, but today we see that it was a turning point in Messiaen's life and musical language development.

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<sup>41</sup> Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975), 23.

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