ABSTRACT

OLIVIER MESSIAEN'S *QUARTET FOR THE END OF TIME*: A LOOK AT THE ABYSS OF THE BIRDS AND SOCIO-POLITCAL ISSUES, RELIGION AND PERFORMANCE PRACTICE IN REFERENCE TO THE BIBLE AND THE HOLOCAUST

By

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Olivier Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time* stands as a commentary on the end of both literal time (the end of the world) and musical time (i.e., time signatures and meter). Written during World War II in a prisoner of war camp, the *Quartet* signifies a point in history steeped in turmoil and destruction. In a way, it reinforces the apocalyptic nature of World War II. Furthermore, *The Quartet for the End of Time* demonstrates Messiaen's dedication to God and the Catholic Church. His unwavering faith encouraged his strength throughout his imprisonment. As a devout Catholic, he incorporated his interpretation of God into many of his compositions. *The Quartet for the End of Time* presents one of his most religious works, outlining the end of time as described in the book of Revelation. Messiaen connected this end of time to an end of metric time in music. He used the Quartet as a medium to express the restrictions time and meter place on music and on one's spiritual life. Moreover, Messiaen, an amateur ornithologist, believed birds a reflection of God in nature. He saw them as representative of spiritual

freedom, or freedom from the bonds of physical time. In the *Quartet*, Messiaen utilizes the free-spirited nature of birdcalls to evoke a sense of timelessness.

Chapter 1 outlines Messiaen's life from early childhood, throughout his schooling, and into World War II. It describes Messiaen as a composer; delving into his religious beliefs and studies in ornithology to better explain the foundation of his works. The end of chapter 1 defines Messiaen's imprisonment and the beginnings of *The Quartet for the End of Time*. It introduces each member of the original quartet and focuses on the history of clarinet player Henri Akoka. Chapter 2 relates Messiaen's religiosity and his interest in ornithology to *The Quartet for the End of Time*. Furthermore, the second chapter describes *The Quartet for the End of Time* within the context of the Holocaust. Finally, chapter 2 describes the third movement of the *Quartet*, "Abyss of the Birds" in terms of performance practice. It outlines the difficulties involved in performance of the movement and describes the deeper meaning of "Abyss of the Birds."

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PREFACE

Olivier Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time* emerged in the midst of World War II as a meaningful tribute to the end of all time. Some scholars attribute Messiaen's imprisonment in a German prisoner of war camp as the basis for this composition, but Messiaen denied these claims. Rather, *The Quartet for the End of Time* resonates with the end of time described in the book of Revelation in the Bible. Messiaen spent much of his life studying time within the contexts of music, nature and religion. He attempted to break the barriers of time in his compositions and explore the concept of "timelessness." He accomplished this through obscuring meter and unusual rhythmic figures (such as Eastern rhythmic patterns). *The Quartet of the End of Time* explores the constraints of time in music, nature and religion and the search for a freedom from these constraints. Although Messiaen did not compose the Quartet as a commentary on his own imprisonment, *The Quartet for the End of Time* encapsulates the sentiments of the Holocaust and its similarities to the end of days. Each movement presents titles relating to the book of Revelation and the end of the physical world. Messiaen's Catholic faith, along with his interest in mysticism and the beyond, prompted his fascination with the end of days. Many of Messiaen's other works exemplify deeper religious meanings. No others, however, convey the tragedy and despair brought on by World War II and the Holocaust.

During the outbreak of World War II, Messiaen enlisted in the French military services. Due to his poor eyesight he could not perform well on the battlefield. The

army reassigned him to the citadel at Verdun, where, in May of 1940, German troops captured him along with fellow soldiers cellist Etienne Pasquier and clarinetist Henri Akoka. Their capture marked the beginning of the quartet. The Germans took Messiaen and the other prisoners to the notorious wartime prison camp Stalag VIII-A located in modern day Poland.[1] Previously a Nazi youth training camp, Stalag's facilities could hold only fifteen thousand people. After its conversion to a prisoner-of-war camp, Stalag VIII-A housed nearly thirty thousand prisoners, double the amount of people it could hold.[2] As aforementioned, Messiaen composed the *Quartet for the End of Time* during his stay in Stalag VIII-A. Assisted by a kind, music-loving guard named Karl-Albert Brüll, Messiaen acquired paper and a small pencil to write down his compositions.[3] As stated by Alex Ross "Excited by the presence of a significant composer, Brüll gave Messiaen pencils, erasers, and music paper, and had the composer stationed in an empty barrack so that he could work undisturbed."[4] In cramped and miserable conditions, Messiaen found the provisions, musicians and strength to compose and premiere the *Quartet for the End of Time* for an audience of three hundred prisoners and guards.[5] He

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[1] Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the 20th Century Music* (New York, NY: Picador, 2007), 390.

[2] Ibid., 391.

[3] Ibid., 390.

[4] Alex Ross, "Revelations: The Story Behind Messiaen's 'Quartet for the End of Time,'" *The New Yorker*, accessed October 23, 2014, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/03/22/revelations-2.

[5] Ross, *The Rest is Noise*, 391.

wrote the quartet for himself and the only other instrumentalists he could find in the war camp, a clarinetist, a cellist and a violinist.

Messiaen lived his life as a devout follower of the Catholic faith. He held his religious beliefs close to him, composing many works after the *Quartet for the End of Time* relating to Catholic liturgy and biblical stories. Messiaen exclusively composed religious works between 1945 and 1962, devoting his life and work to God. He focused his religious works on the divinity and glory of Christ. As stated in the Grove Music Online,

> He was attracted by those moments in the Gospel stories when Christ's divinity stood apparent: The Nativity, the Transfiguration, the Resurrection and the Ascension…But most of all he fixed his imagination on the life to come, as described in the last book of the New Testament: on the nature of resurrected existence, on the pronouncements of angels and on the heavenly city.[6]

Each movement in the *Quartet for the End of Time* represents some element of the end of time as described by Messiaen. Aided by the book of Revelation and the decaying situation of war-saturated Europe, Messiaen drew his own conclusions about the end of time and incorporated them into this quartet.

The title *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* comes from a passage in Revelation chapter 10 verses 5-6 stating,[7]

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[6] Paul Griffiths, "Messiaen, Olivier (Eugène Prosper Charles)," Grove Music Online, accessed October 23, 2014, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.mcc1.library.csulb.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/18497?q=Olivier+Messiaen&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit

[7] Aaron Grad, " French Masters," Seattle Symphony, accessed October 23, 2014, http://www.seattlesymphony.org/symphony/buy/single/programnotes.aspx?id=12465

> Then the angel I had seen standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven. And he swore by him who lives for ever and ever, who created the heavens and all that is in them, the earth and all that is in it, and the sea and all that is in it, and said, "There will be no more delay (time)."[8]

The titles of the movements of *The Quartet for the End of Time* reference other passages in the book of Revelation. These include references to the Abyss (Rev. 11: 7), and references to the return of Christ (Rev. 22: 12-21).[9]

Furthermore, Messiaen incorporates his love of birds into this quartet. He uses the clarinet to emulate birds, specifically in the movement "The Abyss of the Birds." In this movement, the clarinet both imitates bird song and describes the abyssal darkness surrounding all of Europe and the world. The melodic lines move slowly and freely, requiring the purest sound and an immense dynamic range. This melody, restated multiple times in the movement, represents the depth of the abyssal darkness covering the world at the time. It points to the desolate, mourning atmosphere in the prison and concentration camps created by the Nazis. Finally, it captures the plight of Henri Akoka. Akoka, an Algerian-born Jew, survived the war through his constant attempts to escape concentration and prison camps. Akoka made his escape in 1941. During a transfer from one prison camp to another by train, he "jumped from the fast-moving cattle car, with his clarinet under his arm."[10] In between these melodic passages, Messiaen inserts "bird

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[8]Rev. 10: 5-6 (NIV).

[9]Rev. 11:7, 22:12-21 (NIV).

elements." These include a quicker tempo, staccato, rather than legato notes, a higher register, louder dynamics, and grace notes tied to staccato sixteenth notes. Moreover, the flighty and nervous nature of these sections resonates with Akoka's "vibrant and unpredictable personality."[11]

In studying Messiaen's Catholic background, amateur career as an ornithologist, and experiences in a prisoner of war camp during World War II, one can better understand the incorporation of these elements into his *Quartet for the End of Time*, specifically *The Abyss*. Moreover, the history of Henri Akoka, the clarinet player in Messiaen's POW quartet, aids in the deeper meanings of the Abyss of the Birds and Messiaen's musical intentions. This study aims to demonstrate the connection between the movement the "Abyss of the Birds" and his religious beliefs, the tragedy of the Holocaust, his studies in ornithology and the personality of the clarinetist Henri Akoka.

This study utilizes the historical method in order to unearth details about Messiaen's religious beliefs, studies in ornithology, and the personality and career of clarinetist Henri Akoka. Moreover, the historical method provides deeper insight on the events of the holocaust and Messiaen's personal experiences in the POW camp. This work, written in a POW camp, encapsulates the sentiments felt by all concentration camp and prisoner of war victims. It implies a connection between the events of WWII and the end of days expressed in the book of Revelation. Socio-methodology determines the importance of music to society and in turn society and social phenomena to music. It

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[10] Ross, "Revelations: The Story." *The New Yorker*, accessed October 23, 2014, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/03/22/revelations-2

[11] Ibid.

proves useful in drawing connections between the tragedy of the holocaust, the end of days expressed in the book of Revelation, and Messiaen's quartet. Finally, the study of performance practice allows clarinet players to better understand the meaning and performance aspects of the "Abyss of the Birds." A study of past performances and recordings, as well as Akoka's own interpretation of the work, can provide future performers with the insight needed to approach this piece.

This paper aims to draw a connection between the holocaust, the book of Revelation and Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*. It will accomplish this through study of his religious upbringing, his studies in music, and his time spent in a prisoner of war camp. Furthermore, this paper means to explain his incorporation of birds into the *Quartet for the End of Time*, and its overall importance to the religious meaning of the work. Finally, this study plans to focus on the movement the "Abyss of the Birds." Messiaen incorporates his love of birds, religious devotion, and the abomination of the Holocaust into this movement. Moreover, this movement features the solo clarinet, calling for the clarinet player to accurately convey all of these points in performance.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE LIFE AND WORKS OF OLIVIER MESSIAEN

Early Life and Schooling

Birth and Family

Born on the 10 of December 1908, Messiaen entered the world into a family well versed in the arts. His mother, Cécil Sauvage forged a career as a well-known poet in France.[12] During each of her two pregnancies, she completed a collection of poems.[13] The first existed as a tribute to her unborn son Olivier. This collection of poems, entitled *L'ame en bourgeon* or "The Flowering Soul," expressed the elements of nature, music and the Far East.[14] Little did she know these poetic verses would shape Messiaen's entire career.[15] During the 1960s Messiaen returned to his mother's poems, setting the text to a cycle of improvisations for organ.[16] The second, *Le Vallon*, encapsulates the Auvergne landscape.[17] Sauvage's poems focused on music, nature, and the subject of maternity.[18]

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[12] Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Messiaen* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 11.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

Pierre Messiaen, Olivier's father, studied English literature and rose to fame as a celebrated scholar of Shakespeare. One of seven children, Pierre demonstrated an aptitude for poetry and English literature.[19] At the time of Messiaen's birth, Pierre held a professorship at Lycée Frédéric Mistral.[20] As a scholar and educator, Pierre Messiaen remains most famous for his celebrated translation of the works of Shakespeare.[21]

Early Signs of Faith

Messiaen's parents, though secular in their own beliefs, encouraged his enthusiasm for the Catholic faith. Pierre Messiaen, born into a devout Catholic family, attended Catholic school as a young boy and later entered the Catholic University of Lille.[22] Cécile, on the other hand, came from a secular background. Despite the lack of religion in her own life, she and Pierre facilitated Olivier's baptism into the Catholic Church. Messiaen, entranced by the colorful stories of the New Testament and the mysticism of the book of Revelation, pursued a deeper understanding of the Catholic faith on his own. His parents supported his faith and encouraged it.

Outbreak of War

At the start of the First World War, Pierre Messiaen joined the French Army. Leaving his wife and two sons behind, he entered into one of the most violent wars of all time. During the war, Cécile moved her two sons, Olivier and Alaine, to stay with her

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[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., 9.

[20] Ibid., 7.

[21] Carla Huston Bell, *Olivier Messiaen* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 2.

[22] Hill and Simeone, 7.

brother and parents in the town of Grenoble. Situated near the mountains of Dauphiny, Grenoble provided Messiaen with the backdrop for many of his later works.[23] The mountains of Dauphiny had a profound influence on Messiaen, inspiring works such as "Montages" from *Harawi*, "Les Mains de l'abime" from *Livre d'Orgue* and "Chocard des Aples" from *Catalogue d'Oiseaux*.[24] As World War I waged on, Messiaen and his family continued on with their lives in Grenoble. He passed the days immersed in the world of Shakespeare. He fell in love with the imaginative stories of Macbeth, intrigued by the stories of witches and the ghost of Banquo.[25] He gave readings of plays to his family, delved into stories on his own, and staged plays for his brother Alaine.[26] He built theatrical sets and starred in every role.

> For the back of the stage I used Cellophane wrappings that I found in sweet boxes or patisserie bags and then painted with Indian ink or quite simply with water-colours; then I put my sets in front of a window, and the sun coming through the coloured Cellophane projected coloured light on to the floor of my little theater as well as on to the characters.[27]

Although Messiaen had not yet discovered the world of music, his artistic talents flourished through his readings and portrayals of Shakespeare. Furthermore, Messiaen's obsession with color became apparent in his stained glass creation. He fawned over the magnificent colors created by the sunlight hitting his colored cellophane "stained glass."

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[23] Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen* (London: Omnibus Press, 2008), 9.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Bell, 2.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Messiaen, quoted in Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 21.

In later musical endeavors, Messiaen would discover an intricate connection between colors and harmony, something he would later call "sound-color."

Beginnings in Music

The Messiaens' move to Grenoble marked the beginning of a prolific career in music for Olivier. Although Messiaen's parents never directly exposed him to music (i.e., lessons, classes, etc.) he discovered his natural inclination toward sound. At the age of eight, he could sit down at the piano (without any formal training) and "work(ed) out by ear the music of Mozart's Don Giovanni and Berlioz's Damnation of Faust."[28] His extraordinary natural ear prompted him to seek out orchestral scores, teaching himself the melodies and harmonies by ear. For birthdays and Christmas, he asked for scores to study rather than toys.[29] In her book, *Olivier Messiaen*, Carla Huston Bell asserts that the scores Messiaen received as a child "helped shape his fundamental musical awareness and direct the course of his own compositions. His admiration of the composers he studied greatly influenced his own creative style, although not in an imitative sense."[30] These scores proved invaluable to the early development of Messiaen's musicianship. In his later years, Messiaen described his early experiences with score study in an interview with Claude Samuel, stating, "…I looked at the theme in F major from Orpheus's great aria in the first act, which is probably the most beautiful passage Gluck ever wrote, when

[28] Bell, 2.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

I noticed that I was 'hearing' it. So I could already hear a score, and I had only been learning music for a few months." [31] Thus, Messiaen discovered his talent in music.

In 1917, not long after his first encounters with classical music, Messiaen tried his own hand at composition. Lacking any formal training in harmony or piano, Messiaen composed a small work, *La Dame de Shallot*, inspired by a poem of Lord Alfred Tennyson's. This small work for solo piano remains unpublished, however, Messiaen remembered it with fondness for the rest of his life. Nearly fifty years after its composition, Messiaen described this work as "obviously a very childish piece, but not entirely silly, and not completely devoid of sense. I still think of it with a certain tenderness." [32]

End of World War I

After demobilization in 1918, Pierre Messiaen returned home to his family.[33] Upon his return he received an appointment to teach at the Lycée Clemenceau in Nantes. Pierre moved his family from the mountains of Grenoble to the town of Nantes.[34] While in Nantes, Olivier received piano and composition lessons. His predominant teacher, Jean Gibon, introduced Messiaen to Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*. This work, unbeknownst to Gibon, would shape Messiaen's entire career in music. A controversial piece for its time, *Pelléas et Mélisande* confirmed Messiaen's desire to pursue music as a career. As stated by Messiaen in an excerpt from an obituary for his late teacher,

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[31] Hill and Simeone, 13.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid., 14.

[34] Ibid.

> After six months, pupil (Messiaen) and teacher (Gibon) needed to separate because the little boy went to Paris with his family. What did the teacher give to the child as a souvenir of these beautiful lessons? A classic work, a harmony treatise? No: he gave him a score which at the time was the height of daring (rather like serial music, or *musique concrete*, or a sonata by Pierre Boulez nowadays). He gave him *Pelléas et Mélisande* by Debussy! This present served to confirm the young pupil's vocation, and point him in the direction he wanted. The pupil was me; the master was Jean de Gibon.[35]

Messiaen remembered his teacher as the man that encouraged and inspired his career in music.

Paris and the Paris Conservatory

Messiaen's family left Nantes in 1919 for Paris after the appointment of Pierre Messiaen to teach at Lycée Charlemagne. Upon their arrival in Paris, Olivier enrolled in the Paris Conservatory of Music. At eleven years old, only a few years into his music career, he began his studies at the Conservatory. During his time at the Conservatory, Messiaen won many prizes and awards for composition, piano and organ competitions. By the close of his time at the Conservatory, he was awarded the *Diplôme d'études musicales supérieures* an "award from the governing body of the Conservatorie in recognition of consistently high achievement by a student.[36] Messiaen studied with such teachers as Marcel Dupré, Paul Dukas, George Caussade, and Jean and Nöel Gallon at the Paris Conservatory.[37]

Jean and Nöel Gallon taught Messiaen harmony. They recognized his "natural sense of harmony and harmonic technique" and pushed him to study organ and

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[35] Ibid.,15.

[36] Ibid., 17.

[37] Bell, 3.

improvisation with Marcel Dupré.[38] Messiaen took private harmony lessons with Nöel Gallon for many years. He remembered Nöel as a kind, patient man that taught him everything about harmony and counterpoint.[39] Jean Gallon recognized Messiaen's talents for improvisation on the piano early on and sent him to Marcel Dupré for improvisation and organ lessons.[40] As a pupil of Dupré, Messiaen studied organ literature, the French organ style, and improvisation.[41] Messiaen immensely admired the talent and skill of Dupré, both as a composer and virtuoso organist.[42] Dupré fueled Messiaen's interest in unconventional modalities and rhythms. He encouraged him to study Eastern styles of music, including Greek and Indian rhythms and modalities.[43] Messiaen's experiments in modality led to him to create his own system of modes. Dupré encouraged this, prompting Messiaen to continue his studies in music of the East. Maurice Emmanuel, along side Dupré, further inspired Messiaen's interest in the Eastern rhythms and modalities. Emmanuel, an expert on the "metres of Greek verse and on the modes of ancient Greece" and "folk music and Christian liturgies" motivated Messiaen to explore deeper into non-Western modalities and rhythms.[44] Messiaen claimed that Emmanuel's *30 chansons bourguignonnes* "converted" him to a composer of modal music.[45]

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[38] Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen*, 26.

[39] Hill and Simeone, 18.

[40] Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen*, 19.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

Messiaen devised his own modal system during his schooling. Influenced by the octatonic scale frequently used by Stravinsky, Messiaen called this system the "modes of limited transposition."[46] These modes, including the whole tone scale, are "based on the equal-tempered chromatic scale and they divide the octave into two, three or four equal intervals, each interval being subdivided into the same relationship of tones and semitones."[47] The whole tone scale stands exempt from this, as it divides the octave into six equal divisions.[48] Along side his "modes of limited transposition," Messiaen wrote and published *Preludes pour piano* and *Le banquet celeste*.[49] During his summers spent in Fuligny with his aunts, he produced a plethora of compositions including, *Diptyque* for organ and *Troi Mélodies*. Messiaen completed *Troi Mélodies* after the passing of his mother. He wrote this work in honor of her, setting her poetic text to the second song "Le sourire."[50]

Messiaen graduated from the Conservatory in 1930 at the age of 21. The next year he won the job of church organist of La Sainte Trinité in Paris. In the halls of the church, Messiaen worked closely with Roman liturgical texts. He felt at home amongst

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[44] Griffiths, "Messiaen, Olivier." accessed October 23, 2014, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.mcc1.library.csulb.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/18497?q=Olivier+Messiaen&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit

[45] Ibid.

[46] Johnson, 16.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Bell, 3.

[50] Hill and Simeone, 21.

the vast organ, playing regularly on Sundays for thirty-one years.[51] During his tenure at La Sainte Trinité, Messiaen only left his post twice, once for maintenance on the organ, and again during his imprisonment at Stalag VIII A. His duties as church organist included playing at vespers, three masses on Sundays, accompanying plainchant at high mass, playing classical and romantic music at the 11:00 mass, and performances of his own works at midday office.[52] Messiaen remained at the church until his death in 1992.

Inspiration and Style

Messiaen, though influenced by many contemporaries of his time, found particular inspiration in the music of Claude Debussy. Debussy, like Messiaen, employed elements of color in his harmonic structures. Messiaen's own obsession with musical coloring stemmed from study of Debussy's music. Furthermore, both Debussy and Messiaen relied heavily on symbolism, or "literary and poetic ideas," in their music.[53] For this reason, Debussy rejected the title of "Impressionist" artist.[54] He claimed that, because he did not try to describe landscapes, he could not possibly be an impressionist.[55] Rather, Debussy, like Messiaen, considered himself a master of symbolism. Finally, Messiaen and Debussy both worked to make rhythm independent of melody and harmony. Both composers championed this idea, following in a tradition set

[51] Père Jean-Rodolphe Kars, "The Works of Olivier Messiaen and the Catholic Liturgy," in *Olivier Messiaen: Music, Art and Literature*, ed. Christopher Dingle and Nigel Simeone (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 325.

[52] Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen*, 52.

[53] Bell, 14.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Ibid.

forth by Beethoven and Brahms to "revolt against the barline" and blur the clarity of meter.[56] As stated by Bell in her book *Olivier Messiaen*,

> Debussy, by varying subdivisions of the beat between duple and triple, and by frequent ties over the barline, destroyed any regular metric grouping. Messiaen's slow rhythmic and harmonic movement in his early period may also reflect Debussy's influence, that is, the concentration on what is, or the total realty of the present moment, which Debussy achieved by an uncertainty of progression.[57]

Thus, both composers worked to obscure and ultimately abolish a sense of time and meter.[58]

Messiaen looked to Igor Stravinsky as an example in rhythmic writing. He particularly admired Stravinsky's *La Sacre du Printemps* and its groundbreaking use of rhythm and meter as both a motivic material and as a structural element of the piece. Messiaen extensively taught *La Sacre du Printemps* in his harmony classes at the Paris Conservatory, delving deep into an analysis of the work. His analysis of the piece stands as one of the most significant studies of Stravinsky's rhythmic practices.[59]

Marriage and Children: Life after the Conservatory

In June of 1932, Messiaen married violinist and composer Claire Delbos.[60] As a wedding gift to Claire, Messiaen presented her with one of his few "non-illustrative"

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[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Ibid.,16.

compositions for violin and piano.[61] To Messiaen, marriage constituted a sacred vow. The idea of the Christian marriage and family comprised a love Messiaen likened to divine love, something he explored in greater depth in his later years. In his work *Poèmes pour Mi* for soprano and orchestra, Messiaen outlined the purity and joy of marital love.[62] In 1937, Claire gave birth to their first and only child Pascal.[63] After the birth of Pascal, Messiaen composed another song cycle entitled *Chants de terre et de ciel* depicting his small, tight knit family.[64] In 1936, just before the birth of Pascal, Messiaen accepted two teaching posts, one at the Schola Contorum and the other at Ecole Normale de Musique.[65] Around the same time, Messiaen, with the help of Yves Baudrier, André Jolivet and Daniel Lesur, created La Jeune France. Inspired by humanistic values, the members of La Jeune opposed the emergence of neoclassicism.[66] Messiaen viewed the emergence of neoclassicism as backwards motion in the progression of music.[67] Considered an "avant guard" society, La Jeune France aimed to "re-emphasize passion

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[60] Griffiths, "Messiaen, Olivier." accessed October 23, 2014, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.mcc1.library.csulb.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/18497?q=Olivier+Messiaen&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit

[61] Ibid.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Bell, 18.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Ibid.

and sensuality in music."[68] Furthermore, they centered on the concept of musical humanism, or "the personal aspects of man."[69] La Jeune France aimed to reestablish the human, spiritual and intimate feeling into French music. They felt music fell into a mechanical, technical realm during the interwar years in France. Their solution to this problem included performances and premieres of works intended to rework human spirituality and passion into French music. The creed of the group, presented at their first concert at Salle Gaveau in Paris on June 4, 1936 states,

> As the conditions of life become more and more hard, mechanical and impersonal, music must bring ceaselessly to those who live it its spiritual violence and its courageous reactions. *La Jeune France*, reaffirming the title once created by Berlioz, pursues the road upon which the master once took his obdurate course. This is a friendly group of four young composers: Olivier Messiaen, Daniel Lesure, Yves Baudrier, and Andre Jovilet. *La Jeune France* proposes the dissemination of works youthful, free, as far removed from revolutionary formulas as from academic formulas….The tendencies of this group will be diverse: their only unqualified agreement is in the common desire to be satisfied with nothing less than sincerity, generosity, and artistic good faith. Their aim is to create and to promote a living music…[70](Manifesto of La Jeune France)

Although their efforts admirable, La Jeune France disassembled in 1939 at the start of France's involvement in World War II. As Messiaen went away to war, the group could no longer produce concerts and premieres of compositions.

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[68] Griffiths, "Messiaen, Olivier." accessed October 23, 2014, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.mcc1.library.csulb.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/18497?q=Olivier+Messiaen&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit

[69] Bell, 18.

[70] Ibid.

Messiaen and Catholicism

Introduction to his Faith

Olivier Messiaen devoted his life and works to God. As previously stated, Messiaen's parents did not practice Catholicism, but had him baptized him into the Catholic Church. Messiaen commented on his faith as a devout Catholic, claiming

> I was born a believer, and the Scriptures impressed me even as a child. The illumination of the theological truths of the Catholic faith is the first aspect of my work, the noblest, no doubt the most useful and most valuable…perhaps the only one I won't regret at the hour of my death.[71]

His childhood, steeped in stories of the ghosts and monsters of Shakespeare, fueled his imagination and curiosity for the afterlife.

Messiaen turned his attention to Biblical references of the apocalypse and the death and resurrection of Christ. Many of his compositions reflect these topics, with an alarming amount focusing on the epistle of St. John and his account of the end of time. Moreover, the book of Revelation and the concept of "timelessness" deepened his interest in obscuring meter and time. The concept of the end of time and of an afterlife represented a freedom from time. To Messiaen, the blurring of rhythm and meter described freedom from all constraints of physical and spiritual time.

Messiaen's faithfulness to God stemmed from his interest in mysticism, magic and the afterlife. Initially, he found intellectual nourishment in these fields within the characters of Shakespeare's plays. His vivid imagination drew him toward ghosts and witches and tales of the beyond. Thus, it seems logical that Messiaen grew entranced

[71] Messiaen, quoted in Rebecca Rischin, *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 49.

with the book of Revelation. The descriptions of monsters, brilliant colors and utter destruction of the world ultimately attracted him to look deeper into the Catholic faith. In an account by Yvonne Loriod, Messiaen's second wife, she recalls, "When Messiaen was little, he read Shakespeare. 'A super-fairy-tale,' he called it. But when he discovered the Apocalypse, he said it was the most enchanting, the most awesome, and the most wonderful of fairy tales."[72] Messiaen turned from the mild fairy tales in Shakespeare and into the dark and "cataclysmic" tales of Revelation.

Furthermore, Messiaen relished the descriptions of vivid and striking colors in Revelation, later incorporating these images into his "color chords." These images, drawn from different versus in Revelation, recount picturesque scenes of "monsters, and cataclysms and colorful visions of rainbows, emerald seas, and a celestial city built of blue sapphires and violet amethysts."[73] This book, terrifying to many Christians, fascinated Messiaen. Despite the tales of death and destruction, he felt connection with the concept of the end of all time and the intense and colorful scenes of the apocalypse. He fostered a life-long fascination with colors, envisioning specific colors for each chord structure and note he composed.

Messiaen suffered hallucinations onset by "physical deprivations" in Stalag VIII A.[74] These hallucinations consisted of scenes from Revelation, specifically scenes

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[72] Yvonne Loriod, quoted in Rebecca Rischin, *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 50.

[73] Rebecca Rischin, *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 49-50.

[74] Olivier Messian, quoted in Père Jean-Rodolphe Kars, "The Works of Olivier Messiaen and the Catholic Liturgy," in *Olivier Messiaen: Music, Art and Literature*, ed. Christopher Dingle and Nigel Simeone (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 323.

involving intense color. They ultimately inspired the composition of the *Quartet for the End of Time*, infusing the end of time and color with music.

Finally, Messiaen attempted to portray his faith and fealty to God through his compositions. He attributed his ability to compose to God, stating, "I was born a believer. I would perhaps never have composed anything had I not received this grace."[75] To Messiaen, music glorified God in the highest sense. He paid tribute to every aspect of Christ and God's glory in his works.

Postwar Music and Catholicism

Most of Messiaen's pre-war works featured religious topics. Although he played the Catholic liturgy every Sunday in church, he did not compose many liturgical pieces. *O Sacrum convivium*, performed after the Eucharist communion, and *Messe de la Pentecote*, written for the five stages of Mass, stand as two of his few functional liturgical works.[76] Messiaen wrote many non-functional liturgical works, or works based on the Catholic liturgy without religious purpose, for organ and piano.[77] According to Rebecca Rischin, more than half of Messiaen's published works center on biblical, liturgical and theoretical subjects.[78] For Messiaen, God appeared omnipresent in all of his works. Even his post-war works about nature honor God as the creator of nature.

Furthermore, Messiaen's opera *Saint Francois d'Assise* posed as a work steeped in both Catholic liturgy and divinity through nature. It incorporated the reflection of God

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[75] Rebecca Rischin, *For the End of Time*, 50.

[76] Kars, 324.

[77] Ibid., 324-25.

[78] Rischin, 49.

in nature, as the character of Saint Frances sings a song directed to the birds. After World War II, Messiaen continued to compose religious works. His focus shifted from overtly spiritual topics, to symbolically religious works. Messiaen sought God in nature, birds, and color. Thus, many of his post-war works reflected the presence of God in nature.

Of all forms of religious-based music, Messiaen thought plainchant the most pure.[79] He stated that, "Only plainchant possesses at once the purity, the joy, the lightness necessary for the soul to take off towards Truth."[80] In other words, plainchant represents the simplest, purest music: the music closest to God. Furthermore, plainchant inserted hidden messages "directly into the musical substance" to denote the deeper religious meaning embedded in the music.[81]

Aside from plainchant's "purity," Messiaen admired the rhythmic liberty of plainchant. He frequently used direct quotations of plainchant melodies in his compositions, along side birdsong, to evoke a sense of both purity and freedom from time.[82] Many of his works utilized elongated rhythms and harmonic movement to eliminate a sense of time and evoke a sense of the eternal. Plainchant helped alleviate any metronomic feeling of time or meter. Rather, its free flowing contours and lack of concrete rhythms created a sense of timelessness and the eternal. According to Père Jean-Rodolphe Kars in his essay, *The Works of Olivier Messiaen and the Catholic*

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[79] Kars, 327.

[80] Olivier Messiaen quoted in Père Jean-Rodolphe Kars, in *Olivier Messiaen: Music, Art and Literature*, 327.

[81] Griffiths, *Olivier* Messiaen, 51.

[82] Ibid.

Liturgy, "…the pure plain song melody seems to come from the end of time as if symbolizing the voice and the memory of the eternal Church."[83] Thus, plainchant served as a reminder of God the eternal and timelessness in Messiaen's music. It, like birdsong, represented the notion of freedom from the constraints of the temporal.[84]

Catholicism and Symbolism

As mentioned before, Messiaen utilized symbolism to convey religious meanings in his works. Messiaen's symbolism manifested itself in a number of different ways including numeric symbols, colors, and natural symbols (birds). Messiaen had a particular fascination with prime numbers, using them to "symbolize the presence of God in creation, or what Catholic theologians call the principle of sacramentality."[85] Messiaen asserted that prime numbers "represent the indivisibility of God."[86] Furthermore, the numbers 3, 5, and 7 held particular importance to Messiaen, as they represent divine meanings in the Christian and Hindu faiths.[87] The number three appears throughout history as a symbol of the Holy Trinity and devoutness to God. The Christian faith recognizes the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as one being. Three appears symbolic in many of Messiaen's works including *Le Mystere de la Sainte Trinite*, *Regard*

[83] Kars, 327.

[84] Ibid.

[85] Robert Fallon, "The Record of Realism in Messiaen's Bird Style," in *Olivier Messiaen: Music, Art and Literature*, ed. Christopher Dingle and Nigel Simeone (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 127.

[86] Samuel quoted in Robert Fallon, *Olivier Messiaen: Music, Art and Literature*, 127.

[87] Johnson, 41.

du Fils sure le Fil and in the three movements of *Trois petites Liturgies de la Presence divine* and *Messe de Pentecote*.[88]

The number five holds importance in the Hindu faith. Messiaen studied Indian rhythmic and modal techniques in his years at the conservatory, deepening his understanding of Indian culture and the Hindu faith. In the Hinduism, five represents the Shiva, god of death. To Messiaen, Shiva represented the death of Christ.[89] Even in expressing divine symbols of another religion, Messiaen communicated the doctrine of Christianity. Finally, the number seven holds perhaps the greatest importance to the Christian faith. Seven, often described as the number of Jesus, symbolizes the creation of the earth. The Christian faith asserts that God created the earth in six days, and on the seventh he rested. As stated in Genesis 1: 31- 2:1-2,

> God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning…the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work.[90]

The number seven proved influential in *Quatour por la fin du temps*, as the work progresses in eight movements. The first seven movements portray to the creation of the world and the eighth and final movement signifies eternity, or the end of time. Messiaen describes the meaning behind the number eight in conjunction with *Quatour por la fin du temps*, stating

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[88] Ibid.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Gen. 1:31, 2:1-2 (NIV).

> Seven is the perfect number, the Creation of six days sanctified by the divine Sabbath: the "seven" of this (day of) rest is prolonged through eternity and becomes the "eight" of inextinguishable light, of perfect peace.[91]

Messiaen used the number seven as the structure for the *Quartet for the End of Time*, giving the work great religious importance. As he stated, seven represents the perfect number and eight signals the ultimate freedom. It describes the entire Bible, beginning with creation and ending with the end of all time.

Yet another form of symbolism in Messiaen's music derives from nature. Untainted by the sins of man, nature reflects the most perfect and unspoiled version of God's love and divinity. Specifically, birds and their free flying, joyous dispositions exemplified a freedom from the temporal and "oneness" with eternity. Messiaen devoted many of his works after *Quatour por la fin du temps* entirely to bird song. These works, though not explicitly religious, deal with both the natural settings of birds and their virtuosic songs. For Messiaen, birdsong depicted the purest, most natural form of music in nature. Père Jean Rodolphe Kars argues that Messiaen's fascination with birds stemmed from his interest with eternity and life after death. He asserts that Messiaen saw birds as the future of the human soul, free beings released from the chains of time. He states in his essay *The Works of Olivier Messiaen and the Catholic Liturgy*, "The extraordinary rhythmic liberty of their songs predicts our future condition, as 'glorious bodies', when we will be released of all spiritual and temporal constraint."[92] Thus, birds

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[91] Olivier Messiaen quoted in Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen* (London: Omnibus Press, 2008), 41.

[92] Kars, 329.

represent the "release" of the spirit from the restrictions of this life and entrance into eternity or the afterlife.

Furthermore, Messiaen developed many of his theories on nature and God from St. Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas believed in the application of natural law, or the laws that exist in nature and govern the activity between all living creatures, to the actions of human beings. A political theorist and theologian, Aquinas viewed Christianity as a rational religion. He believed in a connection between human beings and the divine through nature. Messiaen drew much of his theory on God's presence in nature from Aquinas. He loved nature for the sake of nature, and saw a relationship between humans and birds through music. Both humans and birds derive their talents from God and stand as a reflection of his divinity. Nature depicts the purity of God and remains untainted by the sins of man. Man, created in the image of God, shows his divinity as the creator and represents his undying love for his creations. Messiaen, like Aquinas, viewed nature as the connecting force between God and man. On his nature walks and summers spent in the French countryside, Messiaen felt closest to God.

Messiaen believed God's love resonated in all of his natural creations, including man. He described the love man shares for one another as similar to God's love for man. Specifically, the concept of the Christian marriage stood as the ultimate manifestation of God's love for man. Thus, a Christian marriage (including his own) not only shared a deep love between man and wife, it also generated love between God and his children. Messiaen pointed to the story of Tristan and Isolde as exemplary of divine love epitomized by human love, stating, "A great love is a reflection, a pale reflection, but

nevertheless a reflection of the one true love, the divine love."[93] In other words, all love, including love of nature, love between people and all human love, reflects God's divine and overarching love of all things created.

Faith and the War

Finally, Messiaen's faith fueled his stoicism during World War II. During his imprisonment at the German prisoner of war camp Stalag VIII A, Messiaen relied on prayer and his scriptures to console him in the face of "hunger, cold, and demoralization in Stalag VIII A."[94] Messiaen frequented the barrack of Catholic priests to read his scriptures and study his scores.[95] He searched for peace amongst the scriptures, citing his faith as the source of his perseverance. He stated,

> It was an era of dreadful despair…I found myself in Silesia, a prisoner of war…I was persuaded that I had forgotten everything about music, that I would never again be capable of doing anything harmonic analysis, that never again in my life would I be able to compose. However, since my mobilization, I had had in my backpack a little book containing, in spite of its very small size, the Pslams, the Gospels, the Epistles, Revelation, and the Imitation. This little book never left me; it followed me everywhere. I read and reread it constantly, and I paused upon this vision of Saint John, the angel crowned with a rainbow. I found in it a glimmer of hope.[96]

His faith saved him, planting a seed of hope in a world of tragedy. Messiaen spent a great deal of time with the captured priests and men of God in Stalag VIII A. The Catholic priests invited Messiaen to lecture on the "importance of color" in Revelation.[97]

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[93] Olivier Messiaen quoted in Robert Sherlaw Johnson, *Messiaen*, 41.

[94] Rischin, 51.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Olivier Messiaen quoted in Rebecca Rischin, *For the End of Time*, 51.

This lecture, entitled "Colors and Numbers in the Apocalypse," piqued the interest of the priests. They listened to him intently, "approving of his commentaries."[98] This lecture reminded Messiaen of his love of music. He stated in an interview after the fact, " It was this conference, this angel (crowned with a rainbow) finally, that rekindled my desire to compose."[99] Thus, Messiaen's faith inspired him to remain strong in the face of war and to continue to compose music when he believed he no longer could.

Messiaen and Birdsong

Beginnings in Birdsong

Messiaen's fascination with birdsong began at the young age of 15. He often wandered the French countryside of Aube during his summer breaks from the conservatory. During these summers, he composed prolific amounts of music. Messiaen became entranced with the sounds of nature, particularly birdsong. He spent his time outside with a pen and paper, trying to transcribe the sounds he heard. Both his faith and love of nature fueled his interest in converting birdsong to into written music. Messiaen viewed birdsong to be the highest, most divine form of music. Messiaen's primary composition teacher at the Paris Conservatory, Paul Dukas, encouraged him to listen to birds and incorporate them into his compositions. He told Messiaen, "Listen to the Birds! They are great teachers!"[100] Messiaen, though entranced with nature, did not fully incorporate birdsong into his compositions until *Quatour por la fin du temps*.

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[97] Rischin, 35.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid., 35-36.
[100] Paul Dukas quoted in Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen*, 51.

Messiaen's knowledge of birds developed primarily from his travels around Europe, North America and Japan. He traversed the French countryside, armed with pen, paper and a guidebook, listening to birds and transcribing their songs. He consulted expert ornithologists such as Jaques Delamain, Jaques Penot, and Rober-Daniel Etchecopar where his guidebooks and ears failed him.[101] Messiaen professed the importance of birdsong and nature in his works, stating, "All the world knows that I'm an ornithologist and what an enormously important place the songs of birds occupy in my work…."[102] Birdsong became a signature of Messiaen's later works. After the war, many of his compositions focused solely on birdsong, portraying all manner of birds collected from his travels abroad, at home and from recordings.

Documenting Birdsong: Messiaen's Cahiers

In the 1950s, Messiaen began to catalogue the birdsong he transcribed. He wrote two hundred volumes of transcriptions of birdsong, descriptions of nature, and musical sketches. These notebooks or, Cahiers, documented his frequent ventures into nature and the many birds he encountered over the years. Furthermore, Messiaen's Cahiers served as documentation of the continuity and accuracy of his transcriptions. Before 1952, Messiaen had no systematic, organized way of retaining and documenting what he heard and saw on his nature trips. He began his Cahiers in May of 1952, during a long weekend spent in the forest.[103] On this trip he notated the birds he heard, trying to

[101] Johnson, 116.

[102] Olivier Messiaen quoted in Rebecca Rischin, *For the End of Time*, 57.

[103] Hill and Simeone, 204.

capture polyphonies within the birdsong.[104] Messiaen added in dynamic and tempo markings later, simply focusing on the contour of the line and notes in his preliminary transcriptions.[105] In reference to Messiaen's transcription of the wood thrush, Sander van Mass describes the processes Messiaen used to add dynamic, tempo and articulation markings. She states, "Messiaen found this song on the American Bird Songs recordings and started out transcribing what he heard. In subsequent revisions of his transcription he can be seen to vary his approach dramatically, singling out some melodic features and downplaying others, sharpening the register contrasts, adding dynamic markings, changing the phrasing and rhythmic flow."[106] Moreover, Messiaen's notes in his Cahiers included descriptions of his surroundings. In an excerpt taken from on of his Cahiers he states, "25 July: radiant weather. At 7 a.m. the sun arrives and rise from behind the Grand Serre. Towards 8 a.m. the sun picks out a great line in the water, and highlights the ripples. This gives a shimmering of light against the darker lake. At 9 a.m. the lake is pale blue, and the sun picks out the little droplets of water and the green reeds: the droplets sparkle, brilliant with light."[107] Messiaen documented more than birdsong. He described the vibrant colors and textures of his surroundings. He not only transcribed birdsong, he portrayed the natural habitats of individual birds. These colors and textures

[104] Ibid.

[105] Ibid.

[106]Sander van Maas, "Messiaen, Deleuze, and the Birds of Proclamation," in *Speaking of Music: Addressing the Sonorous*, ed. Keith Chapin and Andrew H. Clark (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2013), 178.

[107] Olivier Messiaen quoted in Hill and Simeone, 204.

he saw in the natural setting greatly influenced his introduction of "color chords" in his music

Works Incorporating Birdsong

Prior to World War II, Messiaen merely experimented with birdsong in his music. His compositions often dealt with topics of the divine, sometimes incorporating the sounds of birds alongside plainchant. In 1932, Messiaen, for the first time, attempted to incorporate birds into his work *L'Ascension*.[108] *Quatour por la fin du Temps* stands as Messiaen's first attempt at specific and systematic birdsong in music.[109] Not until after the war did Messiaen fully integrate birdsong into his works, beginning with *Le Merle noir* for flute and piano.[110] In the 1950s, Messiaen turned almost exclusively to birdsong as the primary topic of his compositions.[111]

Réveil des oiseaux and *Oiseaux exotiques* appear as two of Messiaen's most important birdsong works. He composed this pieces based on the information he gathered in his Cahiers. Unlike *The Quartet for the End of Time*, *Réveil des oiseaux* and *Oiseaux exotiques* utilize birdsong from multiple regions in the same work. *Réveil des oiseaux* focuses on European birds, while *Oixeaux exotiques* employs birdsong from around the world. In *Quatour por la fin du temps*, Messaien only used the songs of two birds, the nightingale and the blackbird. He did not specify the species of bird in the

[108] Van Maas, 171.

[109] Ibid., 169.

[110] Griffiths, "Messiaen, Olivier," accessed October 23, 2014, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.mcc1.library.csulb.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/18497?q=Olivier+Messiaen&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit

[111] Ibid.

score. Later speculation by musicologists and Messiaen's own sketches of blackbird and nightingale calls proved useful in identifying the birds in *Quatour*. In *Réveil des oiseaux*, Messiaen incorporated birds from all over Europe. Unlike *Quatour*, the score specifies each type of bird. He claimed the mountains near Grenoble inspired this work, recalling birdsongs he heard during his childhood in Grenoble. Messiaen frequented these mountains for the rest of his life. He found the setting a perfect, peaceful place to compose. Furthermore, *Réveil des oiseaux* followed birds singing in the forest from midnight until noon the next day. This work incorporated both Messiaen's love of birds and his fascination with time. It tracks the movements and songs of birds throughout the progression of time during a single day. *Réveil des oiseaux,* although revolutionary, only expressed birds from across Europe, specifically France. In *Oiseaux exotiques*, Messiaen incorporated birdsong from around the world. The birds he chose, ranging from tropical birds to birds of North America and Japan, produced a cacophony of sound. Messiaen's birds in previous works could be found in the same regions of the world. The birds in *Oiseaux exotiques* featured birds that would not normally sing together in nature.[112] Furthermore, this new work, featuring tropical birds, allowed Messiaen the opportunity to paint their vibrant plumage through music. He used his "color chord" techniques, assigning specific key areas, harmonic figures and melodic lines to the colorful plumage of a certain species of bird. *Oiseaux exotiques* portrays the dramatic, loud, agile personalities of high profile, tropical birds.[113]

[112] Ibid., 172.

[113] Ibid.

Accuracy and Transcription

Some scholars applaud Messiaen for the accuracy of his birdsong transcriptions, marveling at the continuity of specific bird species from work to work. In his essay *The Record of Realism in Messiaen's Bird Style*, Robert Fallon discusses the importance of accuracy in Messiaen's transcriptions. He states that, contrary to the opinions of many ornithologists, Messiaen's transcriptions achieved consistency and accuracy with actual bird calls two thirds of the time. Furthermore, he compares the pitches in Messiaen's transcriptions with the pitches of actual birdsong. His findings conclude that, generally, "Messiaen's birds match the pitches of recorded birdsong."[114] Moreover, he notes Messiaen's tendency to set bird pitches in "the upper voice of his harmonizations, building his chords below the natural cantus firmus."[115] In doing so, Messiaen managed to retain the integrity of pitch in his transcriptions. Fallon comments that only 23% of Messiaen's pitches match the exact octave equivalents of the actual bird. More than likely, instruments available to Messiaen could not reach the same octave as a bird. For this reason, Messiaen found himself severely limited by the range of human instruments and the human voice.

Messiaen himself made to no claim to perfection in his transcriptions. He simply wrote down what he heard, declaring, "I tried to copy exactly the song of the bird typical of a region, surrounded by the neighboring birds of its habitat…."[116] Nevertheless, composers prior to Messiaen could not rival his accuracy and scientific precision in

[114] Fallon, 119.

[115] Ibid., 119-120.

[116] Johnson, 117.

transcribing birdsong.[117] Many composers before Messiaen, including Beethoven, Jannequin, Couperin, and Stravinsky, used birdsong to better describe the program of their music. Beethoven used birdsong in the second movement of his *Symphony Pastorale*, in order to reinforce the image of a stream flowing through the Viennese countryside. The birdsong in Beethoven's symphony marks the coming of evening as the scene closes on the brook, utilizing the call of the nightingale, quail and cuckoo to establish the time of day and the natural setting. Thus, composers prior to Messiaen employed birdsong as a source of color in their works.[118] Rather than use birdsong as the basis for a piece, they employed it to enhance the overall program of a work. Unlike Messiaen, composers like Beethoven used birdsong based on a "stock repertoire of sounds consisting of staccato arpeggios, trills, and general ornamentation." As Messiaen stated:

> All of these bear very little resemblance to real-life bird songs, except for the cuckoo because it's so easy to imitate!" Messiaen was unique in that he attempted to transcribe the exact musical patterns of birds without resorting to formulaic onomatopoeia.[119]

Messiaen changed this norm, writing entire works featuring birdsong as the primary thematic material. One can see in the following musical examples, the intricate, rhythmic precision in Messiaen's nightingale song. His nightingale presents the repetitive nature of an actual bird. He did not compose melodic lines around the call of the nightingale; rather he simply transcribed its song as he heard it. Messiaen sacrificed tonal harmony

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[117] Griffiths, *Olivier* Messiaen, 169.

[118] Ibid.

[119] Rischin, 57-58.

and melody to preserve the integrity of his birdsongs. Beethoven, Couperin and Stravinsky strove for a melodic, pastoral element in their nightingale calls. They traded authenticity for color. See Appendix A for examples.

As Messiaen continued his ornithological studies, his transcriptions grew more accurate. Looking back on *Quatour*, his nightingale and blackbird calls pale in comparison to the intricacies of these same birdsongs in his later works. No doubt, the time he spent researching birds in the 1950s expanded his knowledge and understanding of individual birds and their songs.

Although Messiaen's birds present a high and intricate form of mimicry, Messiaen did not strive to imitate birds. Rather, he meant to convey symbolism and the realistic qualities of birds in his music. Scholars, such as Fallon, assert that Messiaen achieved more than imitation in his bird compositions. He attained a high level of mimicry, but did so through calculated, scientific transcriptions. Messiaen strove for his birdsong to be both imitative and representative of an actual birdsong.[120] His birds both imitated real birds and represented, in his eyes, all that birds stood for. For Messiaen, birds represented freedom and joy. They signified the freedom from the constraints of the temporal and the physical body. Thus, Messiaen's music imitates birds, but in a "higher, hidden reality."[121]

Messiaen could not achieve perfect accuracy in his transcriptions. Although he had an incredible ear, he could not account for the imperfections of musical instruments and the limited range of the human voice. Birds "have extraordinary virtuosity that no

[120] Fallon, 133.

[121] Ibid., 134.

tenor or coloratura soprano could ever equal…for they possess a peculiar vocal organ, a syrinx which allows them to execute rolls and very small intervals and to sing extremely fast."[122] Instruments and the human voice cannot match the virtuosity of the bird. They fail to reach the high registers birds can easily sing, and they cannot produce the same range amount of microtones and quartertones as birds. Thus, Messiaen was limited by these restrictions. He could only accurately transcribe the contour, rhythms and shape of bird song. In some cases, as Fallon argues, he could transcribe the exact octave, rhythms and note values for the voice and instruments, but in many he cases he had to alter the birdsong to accommodate man. He achieved this through transpositions to an easier key, changes in register, and altering the microtones to create playable intervals on standard, western instruments.

Making Birdsong Playable

In order to make birdsong playable, Messiaen had to alter and change his transcriptions. Birds can sing immeasurably fast and high, a task quite difficult for instrumentalists and vocalists. Messiaen lowered registers and slowed down the tempi of birdsong to accommodate the limits of musical instruments.[123] He altered other variations of bird song such as microtones, sliding tones, extreme register changes and patterns of variation.[124] Sander van Maas refers to this process of "altering" birdcalls to fit the parameters of musical instruments as "denaturing."[125] Denaturing, or

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[122] Olivier Messiaen quoted in Rischin, 58.

[123] Van Maas, 179.

[124] Ibid.

[125] Ibid.

"transposing" natural sounds to a scientific, technical setting, denaturalizes them. In a sense, it takes the natural out of nature. Messiaen "denatured" his own works to fit the parameters of man. Had Messiaen truly understood the implications of this, he may not have altered his birdsongs. His deep understanding of the connection between nature and the divine and his respect for nature as a direct reflection of God reinforced his need for accurate transcriptions. On the other hand, he wanted to portray the purity and freedom of nature in his works, and could only do so by altering birdsong for man. Messiaen desired to reflect God in his music, specifically through birdsong. In his work *Et exspecto ressurectionem mortuorum*, Messiaen chose birdsong to represent the mouthpiece of Christ.[126] Birdsong stood as a portrait of God in nature. Thus, Messiaen did not "denature" birds for the purpose of humanizing them. Rather, he "denatured" them to make them playable for man. Messiaen commented on the necessity of altering birdsong. He stated

> A bird, being much smaller than we are, with a heart that beats faster and nervous reactions that are much quicker, sings in extremely swift tempos, absolutely impossible for our instruments. I'm therefore obliged to transcribe the song into a slower tempo. Moreover, this rapidity is combined with an extreme shrillness, for birds are able to sing in extremely high registers that cannot be reproduced on our instruments; so I write one, two or three octaves lower. And that's not the only adjustment: for the same reasons I'm obliged to eliminate any tiny intervals that our instruments cannot execute. I replace those intervals, which are on the order of one or two commas, by semitones, but I respect the scale of values between the different intervals, which is to say that if a few commas correspond to a semitone, a whole tone or a third will correspond to the real semitone; all are enlarged, but the proportions remain identical, and as a result, what I restore is nevertheless exact. It's a transposition of what I heard, but on a more human scale.[127]

[126] Fallon, 133.

[127] Olivier Messiaen quoted in Rischin, 58.

In a sense, his changes do not "denature" birds; rather they humanize them. Birds, in Messiaen's eyes exist above men in the musical hierarchy. His techniques allow men to experience the beauty and splendor of glorifying God on an entirely different, more divine level.

Timbre

Messiaen did not concern himself with the integrity of timbre in his early birdsong works. *Quatour* utilized only the "contours and melodic figures" of the nightingale and blackbird.[128] Birdsong in the quartet lacked the actual timbre and color of real birdsong. Messiaen accurately transcribed the rhythms and notes, but could not capture the "essence" of these birds. After the *Quartet for the End of Time*, Messiaen addressed the issue of timbre in his birdsong compositions. He understood the melodic contours and rhythmic structures of birdsong, but wanted to convey color and individuality of the birds. Thus, he introduced the concept of "color chords" to deepen the texture and fill out the harmonic structures underlying birdsong melodies. As mentioned before, colors held a certain "dazzlement" for Messiaen. His Cahiers provide vivid descriptions of the colors of nature and birds. Birds, adorned with vibrant blues, reds and greens, fascinated Messiaen. His best way of describing the colors of birds in his music came from his color chords. He used color chords underneath the melodic lines of the birdcalls to "fill out" melody and capture the timbre of the bird.[129]

[128] Johnson, 119.

[129] Griffiths, 171.

Messiaen chose chords that corresponded to particular colors to describe the plumage of his tropical birds in *Oiseaux exotiques* and *Catalogue d'oiseaux*.[130] These works utilize color chords, associating harmonic colors with key areas.[131] Messiaen aligned his choice of chord with the type of bird and the color of its plumage.[132] In these works, many of the birds appear to have fixed harmonic coloring (color chords) and instrumentation.[133]

Birdsong and God

Birds, in Messiaen's eyes, existed above man in the hierarchy of music.[134] Messiaen believed in the "divine hierarchy", separating men from animals. In this "divine hierarchy", God created man in his image, seating man at the top of creation. Genesis 1: 27-28 solidifies this sentiment,

> So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground".[135]

Thus, God created man in his image, granting him control and rule over all other creatures. As a devout Catholic, Messiaen believed this doctrine. Just as God created the earth and all its inhabitants, so he give birds the ability to sing with such virtuosity.

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[130] Johnson, 119.

[131] Ibid.

[132] Ibid.

[133] Griffiths, 171.

[134] Van Maas, 180.

[135] Gen. 1:27-28 (NIV).

Messiaen saw God reflected in birdsong and in all of nature. He believed that "among the artistic hierarchy, the birds are probably the greatest musicians to inhabit our planet."[136] He attributed the virtuosity of birds to the presence of God in nature.

Messiaen believed nature enriched the spiritual life as well as the physical life.[137] Like Saint Thomas Aquinas, he found the connection between God and man at its strongest in nature. Nature, as a perfect reflection of God's divinity, provided a pure form of music for Messiaen. Birdsong presented a virtuosic musical talent that man could not attain. For this reason, Messiaen placed birds above man in the hierarchy of musical talents.

World War II and The Beginning of the End of Time

Introduction to Wartime Europe

In 1939, not long after the close of World War I, Germany began to mobilize against the rest of Europe. Adolph Hitler and his Nazi party claimed ultimate power in government, preaching plans for a racially pure Europe and the extinction of races he believed threatening to German survival. The country, still impoverished after World War I, followed Hitler blindly. He promised a solution to Germany's problems, blaming the Jewish community for the financial plights of the German government. Hitler's hatred for Jews stemmed from his own pathological problems.[138] They had no impact on Germany's problems with national poverty; rather Hitler needed a reason for war. Hitler's reasons for venturing into another world war stemmed from his attempts to repair

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[136] Olivier Messiaen quoted in Johnson, 116.

[137] Fallon, 131.

[138] Dale C. Copeland, The Origins of Major War (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 119.

social and economic discontent in Germany and to retaliate against the Russian Soviet Union.[139]

Regardless of Hitler's personal goals for war, World War II marks the bloodiest war in history to date. This war, guised as a national vendetta against the Jewish people, took the lives of many innocents. All of Europe, affected by this war, mobilized its troops to fight. In May of 1940 Germany successfully invaded France.[140] And on June 25, 1940 Germany and France signed an armistice allowing for German occupation of the northern two-thirds of France. Southern France remained a "Free Zone", under the supervision of the German government.[141] French leaders relocated their government offices to the city of Vichy.[142] This government, as stated in article three of the armistice with Germany, had to "aid the German authorities in exercising the "rights of an occupying power" in the Occupied Zone."[143] Furthermore, all French officials and public servants had to serve and collaborate with German officials.[144] Thus, the Vichy government in France served the higher power of Germany.

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[139] Ibid., 124.

[140] Rischin, 21.

[141] Ibid.

[142] Ibid.

[143] Ibid.

[144] Ibid.

Messiaen and the War

In 1939, Messiaen completed his work *Les corps glorieux*.[145] One week later, war broke out in Europe. Messiaen left his post at the Trinity Church in Paris for the front line. During his military assignment, the French army found Messiaen unfit for service. His poor eyesight limited his ability to fight on the front lines.[146] Instead, he went to Sarreguemines to move furniture and then to Verdun to work as an orderly in the medical corps.[147] In Verdun, Messiaen met the French corporal and professional cellist Etienne Pasquier and the Algerian born clarinetist Henri Akoka.[148] Pasquier, an army corporal of music, presided over Messiaen and three other soldiers. Pasquier remembered his first meeting with Messiaen, "I was a corporal, of music, that is. Four other Frenchmen were under my command, one of whom was Olivier Messiaen. And it was there, at the citadel of Vauban at Verdun, that our friendship began."[149] Messiaen and Pasquier spent their early morning watches at Verdun listening to the clamor of the birds.[150] These birds, along with the constant prodding of Henri Akoka, inspired Messiaen's initial sketches of "Abyss of the Birds."[151] By the time of Messiaen, Pasquier and Akoka's capture, he finished the "Abyss of the Birds."

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[145] Griffiths, 90.

[146] Rischin, 9.

[147] Ibid.

[148] Ibid.

[149] Etinne Pasquier quoted in Rischin, 10.

[150] Ibid., 12.

[151] Ibid.

In May of 1940, German troops invaded Verdun.[152] They captured the French soldiers, sending them to an open field near the town of Nancy.[153] In this open field, Henri Akoka read the "Abyss of the Birds" for the first time.[154] Akoka, an army musician, had his clarinet with him. He managed to keep it, even after his capture. For this reason, Messiaen could only complete the solo clarinet movement of the *Quartet for the End of Time*. Messiaen had not yet thought to write the *Quartet* at the time he completed the "Abyss of the Birds."

After three weeks in Nancy, the German troops transferred the prisoners from Verdun to Stalag VIII A in Görlitz-Moys in Silesia, Germany.[155] Upon their arrival at Stalag VIII A, the Germans stripped the prisoners of their clothes and personal belongings. Messiaen, carrying a small satchel filled with pocket scores and scriptures, resolved to keep his belongings. He commented on his arrival in Stalag VIII A, stating,

> Upon arriving in the camp of Görlitz, in Silesia, called in military jargon Stalag VIII A, like all the other prisoners, I was at once stripped of my clothing. Naked though I was, I continued to guard with a fearsome look a satchel containing all of my treasures, that is to say, a little library of pocket orchestral scores that would be my consolation, when, like the Germans themselves, I suffered from hunger and cold. This eclectic little library ranged from the *Brandenburg concerti* of Bach to the *Lyric Suite* of Berg.[156]

When the German guards tried to take his bag, he glared at them. The guard, afraid of the look on Messiaen's face, allowed him to keep his satchel. Messiaen recalled, "There

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[152] Griffiths, 90.

[153] Rischin, 21.

[154] Ibid.

[155] Ibid.

[156] Olivier Messiaen quoted in Rischin, 22.

was a soldier with a submachine gun who wanted to take away my satchel. I gave him such a terrible look that it was he who was afraid, and it was I, who, completely naked, got to keep my music."[157] The Germans soon realized Messiaen's relevance and importance as a composer. They respected music and musicians immensely, treating the musician prisoners with kindness.

> The German's had respect for music and musicians. This is the only favorable thing that I can say about them. They loved music very deeply, and so musicians were given a relatively free ride.[158]

Messiaen often exaggerated the details about the conditions and his treatment at Stalag VIII A.[159]

The Germans recognized Messiaen and Pasquier almost immediately in Stalag VIII A. Pasquier showed the guards newspaper clippings of his internationally famous Pasquier Trio. The Germans respected his talents and relieved him of any manual labor. Pasquier worked in the kitchen for his duration at Stalag VIII A, a task he enjoyed. To the Germans, Messiaen appeared a musical genius.

> Messiaen was recognized by the camp authorities. He had already had his music played before the war! All of the critics agreed that he was absolutely extraordinary. When the Germans learned of this, they put him in a barrack and told him: "Compose. You're the one who's a composer, so compose. We won't let anyone disturb you." So, we would bring him things to eat. It was out of the question for Messiaen to work. He was composing all the time.[160]

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[157] Ibid.

[158] Philippe Akoka quoted in Rischin, 25.

[159] Hill and Simeone, 101.

[160] Etienne Pasquier quoted in Rischin, 28.

The Germans encouraged Messiaen to compose, providing him with manuscript paper, pencils and a quiet space to work.[161]

Karl Brüll

The German guard Mr. Hauptmann Karl Brüll took a particular interest in furthering Messiaen's compositional career in the camp. Messiaen remembered Brüll for his kindness. He recalled that Brüll brought him extra bread, allowed him an entire space of his own to compose, and provided him with some manuscript paper and pencils.

> A German officer who was not part of Stalag but who was a lawyer in civilian life, I don't know anything else about him except that he was called Monsieur Brüll, secretly brought me a piece of bread two or three times, and, something marvelous, he knew that I was a composer, and he brought me manuscript paper, pencils, and erasers. And this enabled me to work.[162]

A German nationalist, Brüll took no interest in furthering the incentives of the Nazi-regime. In fact, Brüll helped many Jewish prisoners at Stalag VIII A, offering them comfort and advice. Brüll worked as a lawyer prior to the outbreak of war. He spoke both German and French fluently, acting as a translator for any French prisoners unable to speak or understand German. Furthermore, Brüll believed Germany would lose the war. He often made this opinion clear to Jewish prisoners, encouraging them to stay in the camp until their release. Brüll knew the fate of Jewish prisoners that tried to escape prisoner of war camps. Escapees were "deported" to death camps. Those that managed to escape still risked the chance of deportation. Germany occupied all of France in 1942, rounding up and deporting all French Jews to concentration camps like Auschwitz.

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[161] Rischin, 22.

[162] Olivier Messiaen quoted by Rischin, 29.

Prisoner of war camps provided Western European Jewish soldiers a safe haven from ghettos and death camps. Thus, Brüll encouraged Jews to stay in Stalag VIII A. They received fair treatment as Western Europeans and soldiers. David Gorouben, a Jewish prisoner at Stalag VIII A, interacted with Brüll on several occasions. They became good friends, as Brüll attempted to protect Gorouben along with the other Jewish prisoners. Gorouben spoke well of Brüll commenting,

> We became very good friends as he would seek out many of the Jewish prisoners to advise and help us as much as he could. He advised me not to escape and told me that as long as I had the uniform I was protected, whereas if I returned to France, I would risk being arrested and deported. I therefore stayed in Görlitz for five years.[163]

Aside from Brüll's kindness to the Jewish prisoners at Stalag VIII A, he respected the musicians in the camp. He appreciated their talents and wanted to help them continue to play and compose within the walls of the camp. He, along with other guards, helped obtain instruments for the imprisoned musicians.

Pasquier recalled the camp commandment acquiring instruments for the prisoners. He showed him a press release in a German newspaper about the Trio Pasquier.[164] "When the camp commandant realized that there were musicians (I had press releases), he arranged for Messiaen to have a piano, for Le Bouliare to have a violin, and for me to have a cello."[165] The German commandant allowed Pasquier to select his own instrument from a music shop in the town of Görlitz.[166] Pasquier, accompanied by two guards,

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[163] Gorouben quoted in Rischin, 30.

[164] Rischin, 34.

[165] Etienne Pasquier quoted in Rischin, 34.

purchased "a cello, bow, and rosin using the sixty-five marks that the prisoners had generously donated out of their earnings from chores."[167] The Red Cross provided some instruments to the prisoners of Stalag VIII A and some prisoners purchased instruments with the little money they made from chores.[168]

Composing in Captivity

Messiaen never completely lost hope during the war, but he often worried he would never compose again. Thus, it came as a great relief when the Germans encouraged Messiaen to compose. He drew inspiration from his faith and his fellow musicians to continue on with the *Quartet for the End of Time*. Many scholars believe Messiaen wrote the *Quartet* to describe his imprisonment in Stalag VIII A. Messiaen denied these allegations, claiming the work "emphasized rather its dependence on the imagery of the apocalypse contained in Revelation of St. John the Divine."[169] Although Messiaen openly denied any connection between the *Quartet* and his imprisonment, he later admitted that the hallucinations he suffered in the camp from lack of sleep and extreme hunger reminded him of the Revelation of St. John. Thus, in a way, his imprisonment inspired him to write.

Members of the Quartet

Messiaen wrote the quartet for the available musicians at the camp. Many of the prisoners played instruments and enjoyed classical music, but only a select few played

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[166] Rischin, 34.

[167] Ibid.

[168] Ibid., 33.

[169] Griffiths, 90.

professionally. As previously discussed, Messiaen met two of these musicians, Henri Akoka and Etienne Pasquier, at Verdun. Both Akoka and Pasquier attended the Paris Conservatory and held positions in professional orchestras in France. Messiaen met the fourth member of the quartet, Jean Le Boulaire, at Stalag VIII A. Jean Le Boulaire, the violinist of the group, arrived in Stalag VIII A after Messiaen, Akoka and Pasquier. He served in the French military from 1934 to 1936 and remobilized in 1938. The Germans found and captured his battalion in 1940, taking them to Stalag VIII A.[170] Le Boulaire, like the others, attended the Paris Conservatory.[171] He and Messiaen attended the Conservatory at the same time but never met.[172] Unlike the other three musicians, Le Boulaire did not receive the premiere prix in his field of study.[173]

Etienne Pasquier, unlike Akoka and Le Boulaire, achieved international fame prior to his capture. Etienne and his two brothers Jean and Pierre formed the Pasquier trio. They travelled throughout Europe playing concerts and rising to fame. Many composers commissioned works for the Pasquier Trio, including Jean Francaix, Bohuslav Martinu, André Jovilet and Darius Milhaud.[174] The Pasquier Trio enjoyed a forty-seven year career, only breaking during the war.[175]

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[170] Rischin, 32.

[171] Ibid.

[172] Ibid.

[173] Ibid.

[174] Ibid., 10.

[175] Ibid.

Pasquier began playing the cello at age five.[176] He learned quickly, emerging as a young prodigy. His talents earned him a spot in the Paris Conservatory.[177] In 1921, he received the premiere prix in cello at the Conservatory.[178] That same year he won a spot as the youngest player in the Concerts Colonne orchestra.[179] In 1929 he joined the Théâtre National de l'Opéra and only one year later he was appointed assistant principle.[180] Nine years into his tenure with the Théâtre National de l'Opéra, he was mobilized to fight.[181]

Henri Akoka, like Pasquier, began his musical career at a young age. Born on the 23 of June 1912 in Palikao, Algeria into a musical family, Akoka began playing the clarinet professionally at the age of 14.[182] Akoka's father Abraham, a self-taught trumpet player, moved his family to Ponthierry, France in order pursue a career in music.[183] Abraham and his sons Henri and Joseph worked at a wallpaper factory in Ponthierry. They joined a band associated with the factory, making extra money on the side through performances.[184] Henri worked as a silent film musician, earning some extra money for

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[176] Ibid., 9.

[177] Ibid.

[178] Ibid., 10.

[179] Ibid.

[180] Ibid.

[181] Ibid.

[182] Ibid., 11.

[183] Ibid.

[184] Ibid.

himself.[185] Akoka, like the other three musicians of the Quartet, attended the Paris Conservatory. In 1935 he earned the premiere prix in clarinet.[186] In 1936, Akoka joined the Orchestre Symphonique de la Radio diffusion de Strasbourg.[187] Not long after, he won a position in the "Paris based Orchestre National de la Radio."[188] At the start of World War II, Akoka received his draft orders to play in the army orchestra.[189] In 1939, with his instrument under his arm, Akoka left Paris to play at the theater aux armées at Verdun, where he met Olivier Messiaen and Etienne Pasquier.[190]

The Premiere of the Quartet

The Quartet premiered on January 15, 1941 in a barrack turned theater. Prisoners and guards packed into the crowded hall in freezing winter temperatures. Pasquier and Le Boulaire estimated an audience of about four hundred prisoners and guards.[191] Messiaen, on the other hand, claimed over 5000 people attended the premiere.[192] Although many people attended the premiere, the barrack theater could not hold more than 400 people.[193] Scholars speculate Messiaen may have exaggerated the number of

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[185] Ibid.

[186] Ibid.

[187] Ibid.

[188] Ibid.

[189] Ibid.

[190] Ibid.

[191] Ibid., 61.

[192] Bell, 70.

[193] Rischin, 62.

people in attendance to enhance the significance of the premiere. Regardless of the number of people in attendance, prisoners and guards alike clamored to hear the quartet play. Messiaen remembered a multitude of audience members from all walks of life. Some had never heard chamber music before and others took pleasure in listening to classical music on a daily basis. As stated by Rebecca Rischin in her book *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet*,

> Although Messiaen exaggerated the size of the audience, he accurately recalled the heterogeneity of that evening's crowd: "The most diverse classes of society were mingled: farmers, factory workers, intellectuals, professional servicemen, doctors, and priests." Many of them were hearing chamber music for the first time in their lives, and none had ever heard anything like the music performed that evening.[194]

The Quartet and the Holocaust: A Socio-Political Perspective

Messiaen wrote the *Quartet* during a time of great political and social unrest in Europe. He experienced, first hand, imprisonment and watched as fellow soldiers "disappeared" for their ethnic background and religious beliefs. Even in Stalag VIII A, Eastern European soldiers (specifically the Jewish soldiers) received comparatively poor treatment. Nevertheless, Stalag VIII A protected them from a worse fate. Despite Messiaen's denial of the Quartet's connection to his own imprisonment, he may have felt influenced by the social injustice around him. He knew the plight of the Jews and understood the dangers they faced.

The Quartet serves, in part, as a commentary on the persecution and destruction of European Jews during the war. Messiaen detached himself from the *Quartet*, but the rest of the world did not. Henri Akoka, as an Algerian born Jew, experienced persecution

[194] Ibid., 63.

first hand. As a Western European soldier and a musician, the Germans treated him with respect and even kindness in Stalag VIII A. Even as a Jew in Stalag VIII A he received fair treatment. After his escape, he no could no longer expect the respect and admiration he garnered from the German guards. He escaped into an apocalyptic world, fully experiencing the negative eternity expressed in "Abyss of the Birds."

The "Abyss of the Birds" provides, in some way, a commentary on the ethnic cleansing in Europe. The long stretches of the abyss describe an endless, dreary time. For victims of the Holocaust they spent what seemed endless time in hiding, in death camps, and in fear of capture. The desolate, mourning sound of the clarinet invokes sentiments of darkness and gloom. All of Europe sat beneath a dense cloud of darkness. The longing cries of the clarinet evoke a sense of hopelessness, a feeling well known to all those affected by the Holocaust. The bird section describes a different scene. It provides hope in a work of darkness. It represents the spiritual freedom Messiaen intended and can describe an actual freedom from persecution. Post-war, this movement describes the events of the Holocaust. It begins with desolation and sadness signifying the rounding up of Jews into ghettos and the institution of the "final solution." The B section reflects the end of the war and the physical freedom of Holocaust survivors, as well as freedom from persecution. Finally, the final A section stands reminiscent of the atrocities committed and the possibility of man to commit such heinous crimes again. It stands as a solemn reminder, paying homage to those that lost their lives, both to the Holocaust and defending Europe from a Nazi regime.

Because the "Abyss" was written for Henri Akoka, one cannot help but find connection between this movement and his religious and ethnic background. As the only

Jewish member of the Quartet, Akoka lived in constant danger of deportation to a concentration camp. Furthermore, Akoka could not live freely until the end of the war. His family lived in the shadow of German persecution. His father Abraham fell victim to this persecution. Captured by the Germans, he died in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

Henri Akoka: The Man Behind the Clarinet

Henri Akoka inspired Messiaen's concept of clarinet playing. He imagined Akoka's playing as the basis for the "Abyss of the Birds." Furthermore, the "Abyss of the Birds" reflects Akoka's eccentric personality and constant optimism. During their imprisonment, Akoka often encouraged Messiaen to remain hopeful and continue composing. His charming personality and warm sense of humor captivated and inspired Messiaen. Philippe Akoka, Henri's son described his father's relationship with Messiaen,

> This insistent side of Henri I remember well. He said that, in captivity, Messiaen had lost the will to compose. He told me many times: "I would push him. Write something for me. We have time on our hands. We're prisoners. Write some music." And it's in this way, according to my father, that the *Quartet* was born. Because the clarinet was the only instrument that they had on hand.[195]

Philippe believed his father played a great role in the conception of the *Quartet*. He not only pushed Messiaen to compose in Stalag VIII A, he also inspired the solo clarinet movement "Abyss of the Birds" prior to their imprisonment.

During his imprisonment, Henri Akoka attempted to escape on several occasions. The first time, Akoka and a few other inmates fled toward the Czechoslovakian border.[196] They hid during the days and travelled at night. In towns they split up, meeting again

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[195] Philippe Akoka quoted in Rischin, 15

[196] Rischin, 45.

away from civilization.[197] They travelled almost 350 miles to the Czechoslovakian border before the Germans caught them. As a Jew, Akoka risked "deportation" to a death camp. His charming wit and exemplary clarinet playing saved him. He impressed the German camp commandant with his playing and managed to stay in Stalag VIII A.[198] The commandant sent Akoka to two weeks of solitary confinement, but allowed him to keep his clarinet.[199] Le Boulaire commented on Akoka's escape, stating

> I don't know how he managed to do it, but Akoka found a way to escape with his clarinet. He had lost half his clothes but not his clarinet. And I think that, when he was caught, he was brought to the office of the camp commandant and managed to charm him with his clarinet, playing the solo from Pré aux Clercs. And not once did he lose his instrument.[200]

Akoka's final attempt at escape proved successful. A stipulation in the Geneva Convention required the removal of African born French soldiers from the freezing conditions in Silesia, Germany to a warmer climate.[201] Akoka's dark complexion and large nose allowed him to pass for someone of Arabic descent.[202] The Germans moved the African prisoners to Brittany in March of 1941.[203] Here, Akoka's sister Yvonne visited him. She brought with her some etude books he requested.[204] The next month,

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[197] Ibid.

[198] Ibid.

[199] Ibid.

[200] Pierre le Boulaire quoted in Rischin, 45.

[201] Ibid., 76.

[202] Ibid.

[203] Ibid., 77.

the Germans intended to return the prisoners to Stalag VIII A in Silesia.[205] Akoka planned his escape during the transport back to Stalag. The Germans led the prisoners into cattle cars, selecting a convoy chief to prevent any escape attempts.[206] If any prisoners attempted to escape, the Germans threatened to shoot and kill the convoy chief. Akoka volunteered himself as the convoy chief for his car in an attempt to prevent any other prisoners from dying on his behalf.[207] In the middle of the night, Akoka asked the other prisoners to help him out of the cattle car. He leapt from the top of the moving car and into a dry riverbed. Akoka survived the fall, passing out and injuring his hand upon landing.[208] Two railway workers found him and took him to a local doctor. They recognized him as an escaped prisoner and urged the doctor to return him to the Germans.[209] The doctor assured the railway workers he would. Instead, he hid Akoka away and nursed him back to health. Once he could travel, the doctor delivered him to the Free Zone.[210] Yvonne Dran, Akoka's sister recalled her brother's escape from the cattle car, noting his resolve to keep his clarinet with him.

> As the train passed through the French village of Saint-Julien-du-Sault, in the Yonne region (in the center of France), Henri asked his comrades to tie their belts together to form a rope. They opened a little overhead plank, hoisted him up on this make-shift rope, and slid him through the hole.

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[204] Ibid.

[205] Ibid.

[206] Ibid.

[207] Ibid.

[208] Ibid.

[209] Ibid.

[210] Ibid., 78.

> And there, in the middle of the night, while the train was still rolling, he jumped. And what is extraordinary is that he jumped with his clarinet under his arm! The clarinet never left him [she laughed].[211]

Akoka returned to the Free Zone with the help of a friend from the Conservatory. He delivered Akoka to a vicar who forged fake baptism papers for him. Akoka stopped in Paris to see his family before finally crossing over the line of demarcation and into the Free Zone. Once there, resumed his position in the Orchestre National de la Radio.[212] He stayed in the Free Zone until Jews could no longer live freely there.[213]

Akoka never lost his naturally happy disposition during the war. Even in the face of religious and ethnic persecution, he continued to share his infectious sense of humor and his wit.[214] He often spoke in code to his son Philippe later in life, stating, "Now I'm going to practice my clarinet" but meaning "Now I'm going to take a nap."[215] From the moment of his capture, Akoka resolved to escape. He never ceased plotting his escape, even after his capture and return to the camp. Despite his failures to escape, he never lost his optimism. He joked with other prisoners about his failed attempts. Philippe Akoka believed his father strong in his optimism during the war. He stated, "My father was never demoralized for a moment in his life."[216] Akoka pressed on in the face of imprisonment, never wavering from his optimistic demeanor.

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[211] Yvonne Dran quoted in Rischin, 77.

[212] Rischin, 78.

[213] Ibid.

[214] Ibid., 13.

[215] Ibid.

The other members of the quartet described Akoka as a chronic rule breaker. He had a rebellious streak, standing defiant in the face of authority.[217] His constant attempts to escape derived from his disregard for the authority of the guards. Finally, Akoka appeared to everyone around him as highly intelligent. Although he did not finish school, he was well read and self educated. He read Shakespeare with extreme intelligence and fervor, memorizing entire books and sonnets. Messiaen respected Akoka's intelligence. Lucien Akoka commented on his brother's intelligence and relationship with Messiaen. He noted the many differences between the two men, but claimed they shared a deep and heartfelt friendship. He stated,

> Henri was eminently intelligent. He had read tons of books. He had only a certificate d'études [a French diploma that one gets at age fourteen[but he new Montaigne, Rabelais, and all the classics! Henri was very erudite. He also had a great personality and was extremely cultivated. And Messiaen noticed this very quickly. Philosophically, he must have sometimes been in opposition to Messiaen. But Henri must have provided him with some very convincing arguments. Henri had something unique, given his political orientation. And Messiaen was captivated.[218]

Although they did not agree on religion, politics or philosophy, they loved each other immensely. For this, Messiaen remembered Akoka as a great friend and musician. They did not interact much after the war, but they remained friends nonetheless.

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[216] Philippe Akoka quoted in Rischin, 46.
[217] Rischin, 46.
[218] Lucien Akoka quoted in Rischin, 47.

CHAPTER 2

THE QUARTET FOR THE END OF TIME: A HISTORICAL AND PERFORMANCE PRACTICE ANALYSIS

Introduction

Many scholars have tried to describe the deeper meaning behind Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*. Most explain the *Quartet* in terms of Messiaen's own suffering, his devotion to God and his obsession with time and the eternal. All of these things, no doubt, had effect on Messiaen's writing. Messiaen claims no connection between the "end to time" references in the quartet and his own wartime experiences. Nevertheless, scholars, such as Rebecca Rischin and Trevor Holdon, speculate the *Quartet* must have drawn influence from his condition at Stalag VIII A. Furthermore, Messiaen himself admitted his physical deprivations caused him to hallucinate colorful images of the angel of death and the end of time. These hallucinations reminded Messiaen of the apocalypse, inspiring his work on the *Quartet for the End of Time*.

Few scholars have touched on the *Quartet* in reference to the Holocaust and wartime tragedies of Europe. Messiaen, as a prisoner of war, could not have known about the crimes of humanity committed by the Nazis during the war. He, like everyone, would have learned of the mass genocide committed by Hitler after the war. For the benefit of the Red Cross, the Nazis kept their death camps a secret, attempting to convince the world of their fair treatment of prisoners. German prison camps for western

Europeans, on the other hand, impressed the Red Cross. They allowed prisoners the freedom to enjoy entertainment and sports and, in the case of Messiaen, compose and play music. Although Messiaen did not have knowledge of these camps, the *Quartet for the End of Time* seems reminiscent of the conditions of Nazi concentration camps. Thus, in this chapter, I intend to draw a connection between the *Quartet for the End of Time* and the Holocaust. Messiaen may not have known about the death camps until after the war, but his work still provides a quasi-commentary of the apocalyptic terrors in the Nazi death camps. Furthermore, I attempt to forge a connection between the *Quartet for the End of Time* and Messiaen's compositional techniques of "color painting" and birdsong, as well as his exceptionally strong faith and obsession with time and eternity.

The Quartet and the Holocaust

Messiaen, during the war, did not fully understand atrocities committed by the Nazis against the Jews during World War II. The Nazis masked their death camps, using musicians as a front for fair treatment. They forced musicians to play in the death camps to persuade the Red Cross that the concentration camps were similar to prisoner of war camps. The Red Cross played an important role in providing aid to German prison camps during the war. They delivered mail to and from loved ones and kept watch over the treatment of prisoners. The German government, afraid of reckless treatment of German prisoners of war in America and Europe, treated their prisoners comparatively well. The death camps, kept secret by the SS guard and the Nazi party, treated their prisoners with cruelty and malice. In order to hide their crimes from the rest of the world and maintain peace in foreign internment camps, the Nazi party used captured Jewish musicians as pawns to show their "fair" treatment of Jewish prisoners. This occurred mostly in

Theresiendstadt, a "transit ghetto", for "Jews heading to death camps."[219] In the words of Rebecca Rischin, "Artists were gathered in this ghetto to convince Red Cross delegations that Jews were being well treated."[220] Thus, the world stood blind to the atrocities committed in the hands of the Nazis. It stands as true coincidence that Messiaen chose the topic of the Apocalypse and the end of the world for the *Quartet*. As he stated many times it did not reflect his own imprisonment during the war.

However, the *Quartet* still stands as a reflection of the Apocalypse, and in many ways the terrors of the Holocaust. For many, World War II seemed like the end. Thus, the *Quartet for the End of Time*, in a sense, reflects the apocalyptic proportions of the Holocaust. First, the work aligns with the Biblical prophecy of the end of the world. The Jewish people, persecuted throughout history, have experienced a fair amount of perceivably "apocalyptic" situations, but none as severe as the Holocaust. One cannot ignore the connection between the Apocalypse and the Holocaust. It stood as a mass genocide of the "chosen people" of God. For many, the horrors they experienced in the death camps seemed like the end of the world. The *Quartet* stands as a commentary of these events. It tells the tale of the Apocalypse, characterized by the death and destruction of the world. World War II fostered immeasurable amounts of death and destruction. Hitler's victims lost everything they held dear: their families, their earthly possessions, and their lives. Death came as a relief to many, while other suffered experiments of Nazi scientists and doctors. In the personal account of Holocaust and Auschwitz survivor Frank Rothman, he details his experiences in the death camp.

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[219] Rischin, 26.

[220] Ibid.

> Our life was indescribable, we were starving, lice were sucking our blood! I was mentally and physically abused. Once an epidemic of typhus broke out. I got it too! Typhus carries a high fever, it was at that time I was given 25 lashes. To this day, I don't know why, probably because I couldn't work hard anymore.[221]

Upon his arrival at Auschwitz, Rothman watched his friends and family march to their deaths. Because of his young age, the Nazi's spared Rothman from the gas chambers. Instead, they sentenced him to a lifetime of manual labor, beatings, and horrifying living conditions. They stripped him of his clothes, any personal affects, and his humanity. They took away his name and replaced it with a number. "After we were tattooed, my left arm showed A-7253. From this moment on, for the Germans I did not exist as a human being. From this moment on I, Feri Rothman was only a number. I was without any papers, any other identification. For the Nazis I was A-7253 a living object, to be used, taken to work, help them to maintain their war efforts."[222] For Mr. Rothman, the end of the world seemed imminent. He lost his friends and family in an instant and watched his life and the world around him crumble. He looked on as his family marched to the gas chamber, never saying goodbye. For Frank Rothman, and all Jewish people, World War II signified the beginning of the end. Although Rothman did not know Messiaen, and Messiaen did not write in honor of the Jewish genocide, the *Quartet for the End of Time* still denotes the destruction of everything. In a world plagued by war and death, the end seemed imminent.

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[221] Frank Rothman, *Living With Nightmares: A Holocaust Survivor's Painful Memories* (Roseville, CA: Roseville Historical Society), 11.

[222] Ibid., 71-72.

The Quartet and Catholicism

Upon Messiaen's capture, his desire to compose evaporated. Convinced he would never compose again, he turned to God in his time of need. Messiaen often spent time with the captured Catholic priests, discussing religion and music with them and giving lectures on the book of Revelation in relationship to art and color. Cellist Etinne Pasquier recalled Messiaen's intense devotion to God stating, "every Sunday Messiaen was invisible."[223] On Sundays, Messiaen went to the camp chapel and prayed. As he fell more and more into physical illness and malnourishment, he began to hallucinate. His hallucinations revealed colorful and bright scenes of the Apocalypse, reminding him of his great desire to paint colors through music.

> Curiously, as I had nothing to eat, I would have dreams with colored visions…and because I was having all these colored visions…I reread the Apocalypse, and I saw in the Apocalypse that there were a lot of colors, notably two complementary colors, green and red. There was an emerald sea before the celestial throng, this is the color green, and then there was red in several places…Finally, there was an extraordinary being…an angel crowned with a rainbow, the symbol of all colors, and this tremendous angel,…immense, greater than our planet…lifted his hand toward the heavens and said: "There will be no more time."[224]

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Messiaen possessed the unique talent of visualizing color within music. His fascination with "color painting" stemmed from his childhood experiences reveling at the stained glass windows of the Sainte Chapelle in Paris.[225] He remembered the vibrant colors of the stained glass with fondness, "For me, that was a shining revelation, which I've never forgotten, and this first impression as a

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[223] Etienne Pasquier quoted in Rischin, 43.

[224] Olivier Messiaen quoted in Rischin, 51.

[225] Rischin, 56.

child, I was ten years old at the time, became a key experience for my later musical thinking."[226] Indeed, he used color in his compositional techniques for the rest of his life. The colors and images described in Revelation enchanted Messiaen, he marveled at the "dazzling fairy-tale colors, which are so much a symbol of the Divine Light."[227] Inspired by these colors, he set out once more to compose.

Messiaen and Time: An Introduction

Messiaen took a particular interest in rhythm and time, specifically the restrictions imposed on music by common meters. Messiaen saw the *Quartet* as an opportunity to address these issues with time, writing without the restrictions of time signatures and meters in some of the movements. Although Messiaen felt trapped by rhythm and meter, his fellow musicians did not. They found Messiaen's music brilliant, yet difficult to play. They stumbled through the initial reading of the work, tripping over the foreign meters and rhythms. Violinist Jean Le Boulaire described his first read of the *Quartet* difficult at best, "Where Messiaen is right is where he says we're prisoners of rhythm. Aurally, it was very difficult for us to find a straight path in the midst of all these winding roads, in this tangled rhythm, at moments tangled with no point of reference, with no rhythm at all. No longer having our little measure in 4/4 or 3/4 time, we were a little lost."[228] For the reasons mentioned by Le Boulaire, Messiaen wished to "banish the temporal." He felt limited by rhythm and by time.

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[226] Olivier Messiaen quoted in Rischin, 56.

[227] Ibid.

[228] Pierre le Boulaire quoted in Rischin, 38.

Messiaen's fascination with time appears embedded into every fiber of the *Quartet*, beginning with the title of the work. The "End of Time" portion of the title denotes religious meanings of the Apocalypse and the literal end of time. Similarly, it expresses a second, more convoluted meaning. The second meaning refers to freedom from the boundaries of time. Messiaen wished to "eliminate conventional notions of musical time and of "past and future."[229] Thus, time in the *Quartet* represents restriction and the lack of rhythm and meter represents freedom. The slow movements of the *Quartet* aim to present timelessness and eternity. They represent the immortality of Christ in their slow harmonic progressions and "non-retrogradable rhythms." Messiaen referred to his non-retrogradable rhythms as " cessations of time," meaning pauses or interruptions of time. They stand as a metaphor for both the philosophical and religious idea of eternity.[230]

Religion and Time

As the title of the work indicates, time represents both a philosophical and religious meaning in the *Quartet*. Similarly, these two meanings intertwine with each other. The concept of timelessness in music references the eternity of heaven and the immortality of Christ. Time constitutes the beginning of eternity and the end of the world in the Bible. Thus, the elimination of conventional musical time instigates the beginning of eternity. Messiaen's concept of time and eternity rises far above that of the common man. These ideas, fostered centuries before his existence, intrigued political and religious theorists alike. Messiaen addressed the issue of time and eternity through

[229] Rischin, 52.

[230] Ibid., 54.

music. He believed music could explain the intricacies of time and its limiting nature. He did so by elongating and eliminating a sense of rhythm and meter in his works. Messiaen "rediscovered" this fascination with time and the eternal in Stalag VIII A. As aforementioned, he suffered from hallucinations due malnourishment and poor physical health. These hallucinations, based on the revelation of St. John, drove him to compose the *Quartet for the End of Time* and ultimately unearthed his interest in rhythm and time. He attributed his studies in time to the *Quartet*, stating,

> When I was a prisoner, the absence of nourishment led me to dream in color: I saw the rainbow of the Angel, and strange whirling colors. But the choice of "the Angel who announces the end of Time" is based on much more serious factors. As a musician, I studied rhythm. Rhythm is, in essence, alteration and division. To study alteration and division is to study Time. Time, measured, relative, physiological, psychological, is divided in a thousand ways, of which the most immediate for us is a perpetual conversion of the future into the past. In eternity, these things no longer exist. So many questions! I have posed these questions in my Quartet for the End of Time. But, in actual fact, they have guided all of my research in sound and rhythm for some forty years.[231]

Furthermore, Messiaen saw time as the "starting point of all eternity."[232] In Genesis the beginning of time began on the fourth day of creation with the installation of night and day.

> And God said, "Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years, and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth." And it was so. God made two great lights, the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. God set them in the vault of the sky to give light on earth, to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning, the fourth day.[233]

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[231] Olivier Messiaen quoted in Rischin, 59.

[232] Rischin, 54.

Messiaen's *Quartet* begins within the realm of metric time. The first movement, "Liturgy of Crystal," begins in a steady meter. As the work progresses, time and meter dissipate and blur. Although many of the movements have common time signatures, rhythm and meter appear obscured by a lack of downbeats and strong beats, slow moving harmonic progressions, and syncopated rhythmic figures. The slow progression of the final two movements, coupled with the ethereal quality of the solo violin in the final movement, marks the shedding of the shackles of time and the entrance into eternity. Not only does the Quartet chronicle the events of Revelation, it describes both the beginning and end of time on earth. The final movement, "Louange à l'Immortalité de Jésus" represents the eternity following the seven days of creation. The title references the immortality of Christ, the end of the world and the establishment of heaven on earth.

Finally, one must look at the *Quartet for the End of Time* as a tribute to God and both the creation and destruction of the earth. Messiaen often spoke of God's divinity reflected in nature, colors, and time. These three elements join with faith to complete the four pillars of the *Quartet*. They stand as the foundation of this work and all, either directly or indirectly, point to God and his divinity.

Birdsong and the Quartet

Birdsong proved especially important in the *Quartet for the End of Time*, demonstrating Messiaen's first attempt at systematic birdsong. Though Messiaen did not specify the species of birds in the score, specified birdsong from his later works define them as the blackbird and the nightingale.[234] Messiaen encountered both of these birds in

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[233] Gen. 1:14-16 (NIV).

[234] Ibid., 59.

his travels in the French countryside.[235] The *Quartet* represents an early form of Messiaen's birdsong in music. The songs of the blackbird and nightingale appear rudimentary in comparison to Messiaen's later, more developed transcriptions of their songs.

The birdsong first appears in the first movement of the work, "Liturgy of Crystal." Here, the blackbird and nightingale, represented by the clarinet and violin, sing in the early morning. The preface to "Liturgy of Crystal," written by Messiaen in the score, describes the birds as "celebrating the arrival of dawn."[236] The preface continues,

> Between 3 and 4 o'clock in the morning, the birds awaken: a solo blackbird or nightingale improvises, surrounded by dust whirls 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.[237]

Similarly, Messiaen's later bird works including *Catalogue d'Oiseaux*, *Réveil des oiseaux* and *Oiseaux exotiques* deal with birds and the time of day. This theme involving birds and time exists as the premise for many of Messiaen's later works.

The second movement shows continuity of the blackbird theme in the clarinet.[238] The clarinet part derives its material from the opening motive in "Liturgy of Crystal."[239] It involves the same trills and sixteenth note triplets found in the "second and seventh measures of B, are clearly derived from the clarinet's opening motive in the first

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[235] Ibid.

[236] Ibid.

[237] Olivier Messiaen quoted in Rischin, 59.

[238] Rischin, 59.

[239] Ibid.

movement."[240] Furthermore, this material carries over into the B section of the third movement. The sixteenth note triplets change rhythmic form, turning into sixteenth note grace note triplets.[241] In a later commentary, Messiaen admitted the birdsong emphasized in the *Quartet*, particularly in the third movement, is "written in the whimsical and cheerful style of the blackbird."[242] Thus, Messiaen eventually confirmed the presence of the blackbird as the songbird in the third movement "Abyss of the Birds." Appendix B

Birdsong weaves its way throughout the entire *Quartet*, but it appears most prominent in the "Abyss of the Birds." As the title implies, birdsong garners particular importance in this movement, representing freedom and joyfulness outside of the abyss. "Abyss of the Birds" juxtaposes Messiaen's concept of time with the freedom of birds. He describes the slow, drawn out sections as the abyss. To Messiaen, the abyss represented time and all of its constraints. He stated in the preface to the "Abyss of the Birds," "The Abyss is time, with its dreariness and gloom…."[243] The abyss, opposite the birds, reinforced Messiaen's negative outlook on time. It describes an endless, suffocating version of time, one that prevents the forward motion to eternity. Moreover, the abyss in the Messiaen's "Abyss of the Birds" derives from St. John's prophecy in Revelation 11:7. In this verse, the abyss unleashes a beast from the depths of the earth to kill the two witnesses of the apocalypse.[244]

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[240] Ibid.

[241] Ibid.

[242] Olivier Messiaen quoted in Rischin, 59.

[243] Ibid.

[244] Rischin, 59.

> Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them.[245]

The abyss exists as a great chasm in the earth, filled with monsters. For Messiaen, the abyss stood as more than a religious metaphor. It represented a chasm of eternal time; a dreary, gloomy space of endless and stifling time.

The B section of the movement represents the blackbird. It incorporates the blackbird motive from the first two movements of the *Quartet*.

> The birds are the opposite of Time: they represent our longing for light, for stars, for rainbows, and for jubilant song.[246]

The blackbird represents freedom from time and from the physical body. Scholars like Rebecca Rischin believe Messiaen's blackbird represented his own desire for freedom from imprisonment. Messiaen repeatedly denied this claim, stating the freedom represented by birds meant freedom from time and oneness with eternity. In any case, these birds rise from the abyss, joyous and light, fleeing from the dark depths of time. The motive of the blackbird, compared to the slow, legato lines of the abyss appears lighthearted and unrestricted.

Robert Sherlaw Johnson explains the freedom from the temporal in birdsong using nature. He claims that the rhythmic patterns of birdsong derive from nature, and thus from God.[247] The duration of phrases and pauses in birdsong depend on the "natural

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[245] Rev. 11:7 (NIV).

[246] Olivier Messiaen quoted in Rischin, 59.

[247] Johnson, 120.

rhythm in birdsong."[248] Messiaen compressed the silences from the original blackbird song in order to keep maintain forward motion and direction in the B section of the "Abyss of the Birds."[249] Moreover, birdsong lacks temporal direction.[250] It moves opposite the natural flow of time, moving freely and without constraint.[251] The only restriction on birdsong comes from the "natural rhythm of birdsong" derived from God. For Messiaen, birdsong in the *Quartet* represented the "promise of ultimate freedom."[252]

Messiaen's Freedom

According to Messiaen, the Quartet for the End of Time did not reflect his imprisonment. Though Messiaen suffered sever hunger, physical ailment and chilblains in captivity, he had access to his scores and scriptures.[253] Unlike prisoners of concentration camps, he could watch shows, rehearse with his quartet, and compose in peace. For a wartime camp, he had access to some comforts. Furthermore, as a musician, the German guards treated him with respect. They relieved him of any manual labor, allowing him time to compose in silence during the day and time to practice and rehearse in the evenings. In many instances, he received preferential treatment from the Germans. Even Henri Akoka, a Jew, received respect and admiration from the guards because of his musical talents. Still, Messiaen lived day to day as a bird in a cage. He

[248] Ibid.

[249] Ibid.

[250] van Maas, 181.

[251] Ibid.

[252] Ibid., 173.

[253] Rischin, 26.

could not return home to his wife and son. He ate little food and suffered greatly from the cold. He had rags for clothes and lacked all comforts from home. Despite his fair treatment as a prisoner, he still suffered from his imprisonment.

One can argue, then, that Messiaen obsessed about freedom and time in the *Quartet* because of his desire for freedom from imprisonment. Upon his capture, he lost all hope. He thought he would never compose again, claiming that he would forget everything about music. The birdsong, specifically linked with freedom, weaves its way throughout the *Quartet*. In some sense, Messiaen had freedom on his mind. His imprisonment cannot be ignored as a contributing factor to the *Quartet*. As Rischin argues, Messiaen's severe physical depravities caused him to hallucinate fanciful scenes that "reminded him of the colorful images present in Revelation. These images drove him, in turn, to reread certain passages."[254] Thus, his dreams onset by starvation and ailment reminded him of his faith and fueled his desire to compose. Moreover, Messiaen's status as a musician and composer gained him favor in the eyes of the German guards. They allowed him to take the morning watch, recognizing his need for peace and time alone.[255] During these early watches, Messiaen saw the aurora borealis for the first time. Its awe-inspiring colors "intensified his fascination with color" and prompted him to continue his exploits in color painting in music.[256]

[254] Ibid., 50.

[255] Ibid., 27.

[256] Ibid.

"Abyss of the Birds"

Prior to his arrival at Stalag VIII A, Messiaen began work on the movement "Abyss of the Birds." Henri Akoka, a fellow soldier and an accomplished clarinet player, insisted Messiaen write something for him. Messiaen, despite his melancholy, agreed. He began work on "Abyss of the Birds," perhaps one of the most time conscious movements of the *Quartet*. Akoka read it for the first time in an open field near Nancy.[257] Messiaen did not have access to any other instruments at the time he composed the Abyss. Had the German guards refused to provide instruments to the other musicians, the rest of the *Quartet* may not have existed. Furthermore, the "Abyss" would exist today as a standalone solo clarinet work. Moreover, players may perform it outside of the context of the rest of the *Quartet* as a solo piece.

Messiaen, according to Jean Le Boulaire, adored the clarinet. He loved its sweet, rich sound, selecting it as a representation of the "whimsical" blackbird.[258] He wrote the "Abyss of the Birds" based on Henri Akoka's sound. He appreciated Akoka's playing, writing the extreme pianissimos and fortissimos with both Akoka's playing and personality in mind. Akoka's set up and personal style created this sound. These factors produced a "brighter, thinner, more "metallic" sound than that of modern-day clarinetist" and appeared "typical of the French school of the time."[259] Messiaen's concept of clarinet sound emanated from this school of playing. Modern day clarinetists strive for a darker, warmer sound. When Guy Deplus, a former professor of clarinet at the Paris

[257] Ibid., 12.

[258] Ibid., 41.

[259] Ibid., 13.

Conservatory, played the *Quartet* in the 1960s, Messiaen asked him to change the dynamics in "Abyss of the Birds." He noted that a warmer, darker sound could not project as well as Akoka's bright sound. He asked Deplus to begin the movement at a stronger dynamic marking. Deplus recalled his experience with Messiaen stating,

> Messiaen retained Akoka's particular sound in his mind. And when he worked with our quartet, he was taken aback, because my sound was different. For example, in "Abyss of the Birds," when the theme from the beginning returns in the low register of the clarinet [see where the theme returns on a low F#, marked, as in the beginning, "Lent, expressif et triste" "Slow, expressive, and sad"], it's marked *piano*, but Messiaen said to me: "No. With you, it needs to be louder." Because sounds are darker now, so they project less. Even when Akoka played piano, he projected more. With me it was different. And so Messiaen asked me to play *mezzo-forte* here rather than *piano*.[260]

Deplus, along with other modern clarinetists, had to alter Messiaen's original dynamic markings to achieve the sound Messiaen originally imagined, the sound of Henri Akoka.

Akoka often complained about performance difficulties in "Abyss of the Birds." The extreme pianissimos in the altissimo register, the magnificent amount of focus and control for the sustained notes, and the swift dynamic changes perturbed him. He protested to Messaien, exclaiming, "It can't be done!...Its impossible!"[261] Messiaen insisted Akoka could play the piece. He constantly encouraged Akoka, urging him to continue to learn it. Pasquier recalled Akoka's first read of the piece in the field near Nancy,

> In the movement for solo clarinet, "Abyss of the Birds," Messiaen asked for unbelievably high notes! And Akoka would protest: "It can't be done." And Messiaen would watch and listen and say: "But yes! You're getting there."…Messiaen also wanted Akoka to expand the sound… "It's

[260] Guy Deplus quoted in Rischin, 14.

[261] Etienne Pasquier quoted in Rischin, 40.

> impossible!" the clarinetist would protest. "But you're doing it! You're getting there!" Messiaen would reassure him.[262]

Even by today's performance standards, "Abyss of the Birds" poses difficulties. Although the range of the work does not pose as much of an issue for performers today, the dynamic contrasts and the amount of control and focus required continue to challenge performers.

First, the Abyss of the Birds requires extreme focus and control in air support and embouchure support. The piece begins on a throat F# marked piano. As Messiaen instructed performers after the premiere, the first note should not be piano. Due to the modern concept of a darker, warmer sound, performers could not project at the piano dynamic as well as Akoka. Either way, the F# should begin without any production noise and at a quiet dynamic. This requires extremely focused, controlled air. Furthermore, the entire first phrase must proceed with the same sound quality as the first note at an extremely slow tempo (eighth note= 44). The entire "A" section of the piece requires superb stamina for the clarinet player. The performer must produce a clear, focused sound throughout the entirety of the section. It moves along extremely slow, requiring even more air support. See Appendix B.

Next, Messiaen wrote extreme dynamics throughout the entirety of the movement. It ranges from pianissimo notes beginning from nothing, to loud, deafening fortissimos. The dynamic changes pose an even greater issue of control. In order for the performer to start at pianissimo and crescendo to fortissimo in four beats, the performer must gauge their air perfectly. They cannot take a breath in the middle of the note, and Messiaen

[262] Ibid.

wanted these phrases held as long as possible. Thus, performers must use vast amounts air and control to achieve this. Furthermore, performers must crescendo at the right pace in these phrases. A rapid crescendo causes the performer to run out of air quickly, moving the phrase along too fast and detracting from the "endlessness" of the phrase. The dynamic range required in some of the altissimo passages tests the performers ability to produce a clear sound at a pianissimo dynamic in the highest register of the instrument.

Finally, the performer must juxtapose the feeling of abyssal, endless time and the timeless, freedom of the birds. The B section, representative of the blackbird, appears at a much quicker, lighter tempo than the abyss in the A sections. Performers must imitate the call of the blackbird, playing light staccatos and fast grace note triplets. The staccato notes provide a "bird timbre." Although Messiaen did not focus on timbre, the staccato notes appear reminiscent of a bird chirping. Furthermore, the sixteenth note grace note triplets imitate the speed of a birdsong. As Messiaen noted, a bird's syrinx allows it to sing quickly, rolling through "notey" passages. This section must be joyous and light. It represents the concept of freedom and the eternal. The player must convey this sentiment in the midst of the Abyss. As Messiaen stated, "The middle of "Abyss of the Birds," in particular, should be full of imagination."[263] This section cultivates Messiaen's birds and the symbol of freedom.

> It is in a spirit of no confidence in myself, or I mean in the human race, that I have taken birdsongs as model. If you want symbols, let us go on to say that the bird is the symbol of freedom. We walk, he flies. We make war, he sings…I doubt that one can find in any human music, however inspired, melodies and rhythms that have the sovereign freedom of birdsong.[264]

[263] Olivier Messiaen quoted in Rischin, 39.

[264] Ibid., 60.

The freedom of the birds contrasts the endless time of the abyss section. It references the freedom of eternity amongst the abyss of time and the dreariness of the world. The birds present the spiritual freedom Messiaen believed derived from Christ. In terms of Revelation, these sections represent the cataclysmic Abyss, dreary and filled with beasts and the spiritual freedom attained with Christ's immortality and the freedom of the afterlife.

Finally, in between the lively, vibrant birdsong, Messiaen included intense sustained notes. According to Michael Arrignon, a previous professor of clarinet at the Paris Conservatory, these sustained notes represent eternity in the negative sense.[265] They interject in both the A and B sections, representing an abyssal eternity, a dangerous eternity. On his performance of the movement for Messiaen, Arrignon states,

> I never spoke to him about these passages…but the longer they lasted, the more satisfied he was. I always held them for as long as I possibly could. In my opinion, these notes are symbolic of eternity, but eternity in all of its horrors, in the abyss.[266]

In other words, these sustained notes act as interjections of the abyss into eternity. It reminds the listener of the abyssal qualities of the A section amidst the freedom of the birds. They remind the listener of a negative form of eternity, an eternity inside the Abyss. Perhaps Messiaen meant to warn his listeners of the negative eternity of hell. See Appendix B.

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[265] Rischin, 60.

[266] Michael Arrignon quoted in Rischin, 60.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSIONS

Although Messiaen did not fully understand the repercussions of World War II at the time of his imprisonment, the *Quartet for the End of Time* describes an apocalyptic scene much like the state of wartime Europe. It recalls the events of the apocalypse and the end of the world. On a more obvious level, the *Quartet* explains the physical end of time and the end of everything. For the entire world, World War II seemed like the end. Such a large-scale war, along with the introduction of the atomic bomb and the possibility of nuclear warfare, produced a worldwide fear of an apocalypse. Many feared the world's greatest powers would destroy each other, in turn triggering complete destruction. The world truly stood on the brink of destruction of apocalyptic proportions.

Moreover, European Jews felt the true fire of the apocalypse. In the heart of occupied Europe, they fell victim to Hitler's "Final Solution". They lived in fear of an extermination of their entire race. As Hitler commanded, the Vichy government in France began rounding up French Jews in 1942. They sent them to ghettos and eventually to death camps. Among these Jews, Henri Akoka's father Abraham fell victim to the Holocaust. Akoka, along with two of his brothers and his sister, hid under false names in German occupied France in 1943. Messiaen understood Akoka's situation. He, like everyone else, did not know where the Germans took Jewish prisoners. They understood that Jewish prisoners did not return once deported. The

Quartet may not stand as a commentary of Messiaen's imprisonment, but it epitomizes a desire for freedom, something the Jews longed for. Akoka reached for freedom throughout the entirety of the war. He tried to escape several times from Stalag VIII A. His final escape attempt proved successful, however he escaped into a German occupied France. He, like many others, could not live freely in his own home. He fled to the Free Zone, but could only safely stay there until 1943, when Germany occupied the whole of France. Akoka and his family remained in France under German rule until the end of the war. His siblings changed their names and attained false papers. Henri, on the other hand, never hid his ethnicity. While Jewish citizens lost their jobs and homes, Akoka continued at his post in the French Radio Orchestra and remained openly Jewish. The Akoka's never truly experienced freedom until the end of the war. Even still, the loss of their parents poisoned the end of their persecution.

Furthermore, the *Quartet* represents the endlessness of time and the depths of the abyss described in the book of Revelation. Concentration camps resonate with this sentiment, embodying the endless, timeless darkness of the abyss. The dark spurts of eternity personified by the A and A' sections of "Abyss of the Birds" and the sustained notes in the B section relate to the negative eternity fostered by the death camps. For many, their sentence felt like eternity. They lived in a constant state of hopelessness, in an abyss of total darkness and despair. It appeared to most that the concentration camps marked the end of their lives.

Although Messiaen did not write the *Quartet* with the plight of the Jews in mind, one can understand connections made between the deeper meaning of the "Abyss of the Birds" and the Holocaust. The *Quartet for the End of Time,* in a sense, now represents a

period in history on the brink of destruction. It paints the picture of death and destruction and describes the hopelessness and endlessness of time. Moreover, it describes the end of time and the release into the eternal. As Messiaen completed the *Quartet* during the war, one can imagine the deeper meaning behind the ascent into eternity. For the many victims of the Holocaust that lost their lives, this meant a literal release from life. For those others, the *Quartet* embodied a hope for peace and justice for the war crimes committed.

Messiaen's devout faith greatly affected his compositions. Most of his works pay homage to God and the Catholic faith. Messiaen lived a life devoted to his faith, attributing all of his talents to God. Moreover, he felt connected to the book of Revelation. The colorful images and the descriptions of eternity and the end of all time entranced him. It inspired both his attempt to "banish the temporal" and his use of color chords and "color painting." The accounts of St. John encouraged the composition of many of Messiaen's works. The *Quartet*, along with several other works, glorifies the concept of spiritual freedom and the immortality of spiritual life. Furthermore, Messiaen saw music as the ultimate expression of his faith. He portrayed the divinity of God through birdsong, wrote entire works for the glory of God, and strayed from conventional meter and time to express his longing for the eternal and spiritual freedom.

In the *Quartet for the End of Time*, Messiaen utilized birdsong and unconventional meter to express the spiritual freedoms earned in eternity and the afterlife. The work, comprised of eight movements, represents the creation of the world and its ascension into eternity at the end of time. The final movement expresses the beyond through its ethereal and reverent solo violin melody. It truly transcends the

restraints of time. The "Abyss of the Birds" juxtaposes the dreary, gloomy restraints of time and the freedom and joyousness of birds. The abyss represents time. It refers to the abyss described in the book of Revelation, a great chasm in the earth filled with monsters and demons. Messiaen equates this abyss with the "dreary gloom" of time. The birdsong, signified as the blackbird, represents spiritual freedom and joy. It transcends the confines of the temporal and moves freely without any distinguished meter. Though Messiaen meant to "banish the temporal" this movement requires rhythmic precision. The lack of a clear meter and the solo, unaccompanied clarinet release the listener from any real concept of time. Finally, the sustained notes within the birdsong appear reminiscent of the abyss. They represent the timeless abyss, or the negative eternal. Perhaps Messiaen meant to depict the endless eternity of hell. These notes begin at the softest dynamic and end in a piercing fortissimo.

Finally, Messiaen dedicated the *Quartet* to the angel of death in the book of Revelation. The angel declares the end of time. Messiaen believed this statement to have a dual meaning, one the literal end of days, and the other the end of rhythmic time. Above all else, Messiaen saw divinity as the inspiration for this work. In his hunger-induced hallucinations, he saw images of the angel of death and the apocalypse. These images, along with theological talks he gave at Stalag VIII A, inspired the composition and meaning of the Quartet. Messiaen's faith inspired his strength through a difficult time, thus it inspired him to continue composing, even in the face of sorrow and despair.

As stated before, birdsong held a large importance in Messiaen's spiritual life. He viewed birdsong as the most divine form of music. He saw God reflected in all things, especially nature. Birdsong represented many spiritual meanings for Messiaen. He used

the song of the wren to represent the voice of Christ in his work, *Et exspecto ressurectionem mortuorum*.[267] Aside from the spiritual role of the bird in Messiaen's work, birdsong represented freedom from the temporal. Messiaen, fascinated with unconventional and non-western rhythms and modes, looked for ways to express freedom from time in his music. Birds seemed the perfect way to accomplish this. The rhythm and meter of birdsong derive from nature, and thus from God. They sing freely, unrestricted by time signature and meter. They possess rhythmic pattern, but can sing in unimaginably high registers and with intense speed. They possess all the musical freedoms of a true virtuoso. Still, Messiaen achieved some amount of accuracy in his transcriptions of birdsong. Thus, even birds appear restricted by the song of their species.

Messiaen studied birdsong, not only for religious reasons, but also for his love of nature. He spent his summers away from the Conservatory in the forests and countryside of Aube. Here, Messiaen studied the birds and transcribed their songs. His teachers at the conservatory encouraged him to continue composing with birdsong. Messiaen heard virtuosity in birdsong that the human voice and man-made instruments could not duplicate.

The "Abyss of the Birds" combined all three of Messiaen's compositional pillars: birdsong, time, and religion. Presented in ternary of "ABA" form, the A section represents the temporality of the abyss, and the B section signifies birds and their freedom from the restrictions of time. Furthermore, the abyss represents the abyss detailed in the Revelation of St. John. The book of Revelation describes the abyss as a chasm in the earth full of monsters and demons. Messiaen saw the abyss as an extension

[267] Fallon, 133.

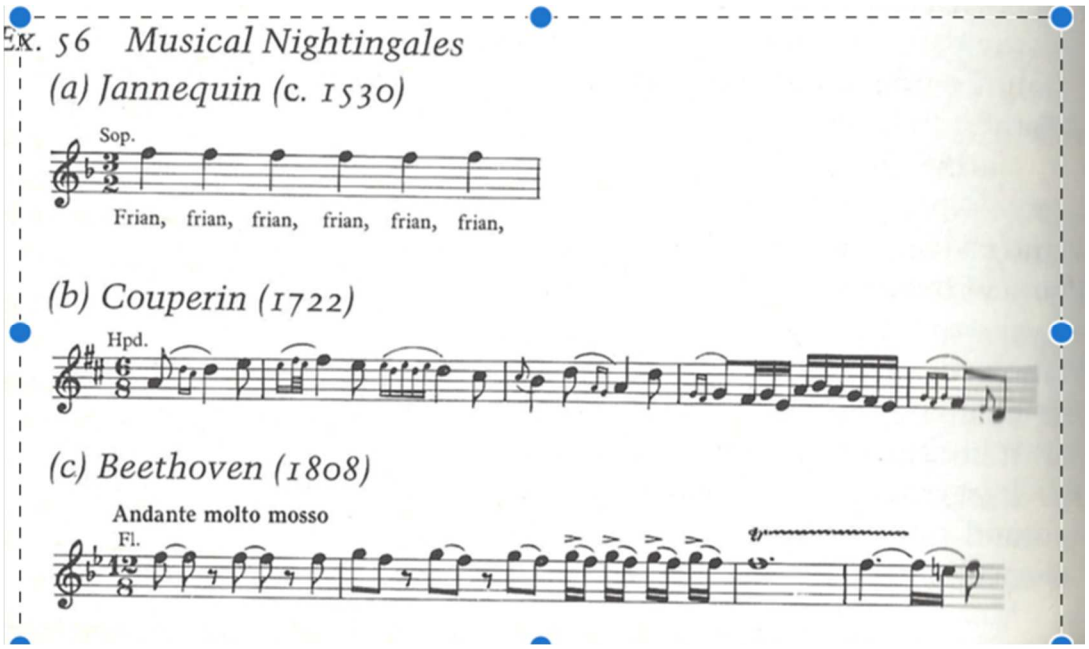
of the temporal. On the one hand, the slow moving melodic lines obscure time. On the other hand, they invoke a sense of unending time. Thus, the abyss creates an eternity of time. It combines Messiaen's concept of eternity and sets it in a rhythmic structure. Time and eternity combine in the abyss and create a negative eternity.

The birds, opposite time, evoke spiritual freedom. They fly above time, free from metric restrictions. This section requires the performer to convey rhythmic freedom while following the written rhythms perfectly. Like the abyss, the birds combine a "banishing" of the temporal while staying within the temporal. Meaning, a performer must convey the sense of eternity and timelessness, while staying within the written rhythmic figures. Furthermore, the B section boasts sustained notes that reinstate the sense of eternal time among the birds. These notes require complete focus and control from the performer, starting from nothing and ending in a piercing fortissimo.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

NIGHTENGALE TABLES



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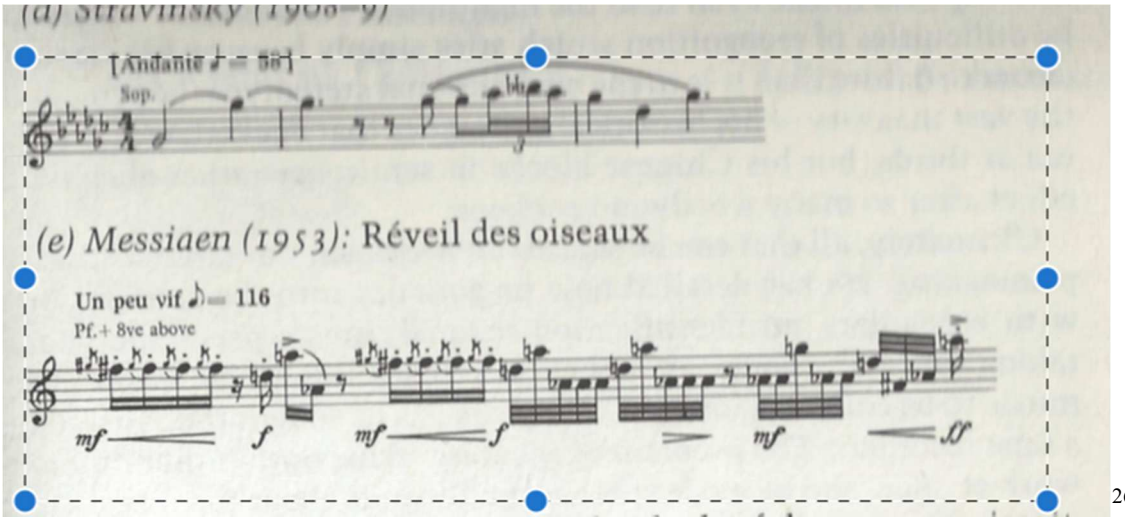
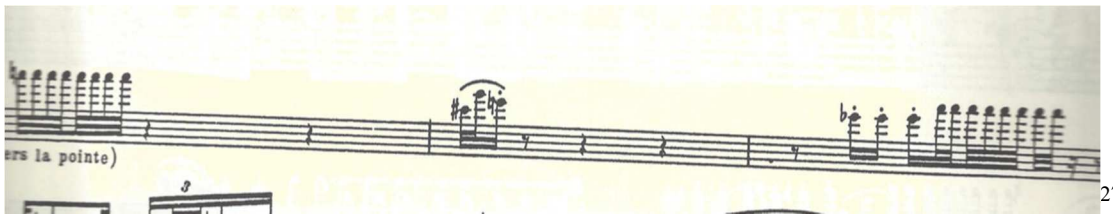


269

[268] Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 168-169.

[269] Ibid.

Nightingale: “Liturgy of Crystal” from *Quartet for the End of Time*



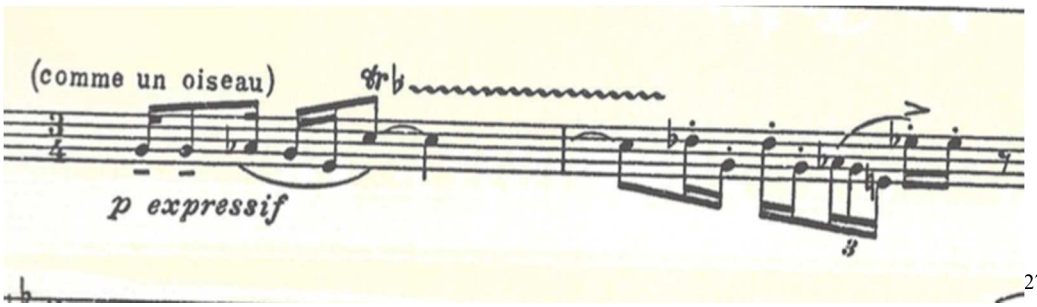
[270]

[270] Olivier Messiaen, *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps pour violon, clarinette en si bémol, violoncelle and piano* (Paris, France: Durand, 1942).

APPENDIX B

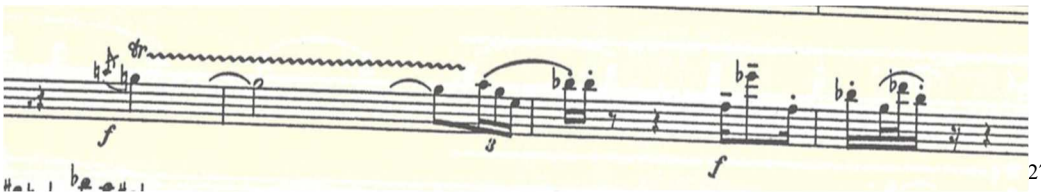
BLACKBIRD TABLES

Blackbird in Clarinet part, “Liturgy of Crystal”



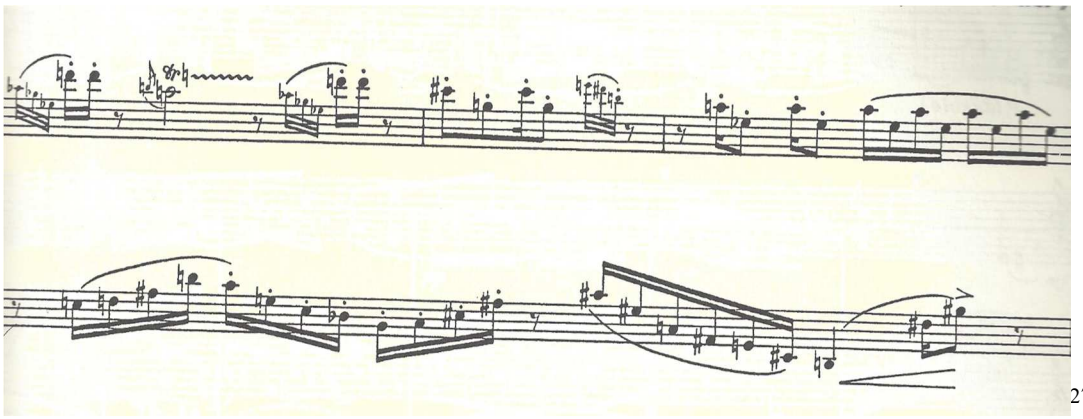
[271]

Blackbird in Clarinet part, “Vocalise”



[272]

Blackbird in Clarinet, “Abyss of the Birds”



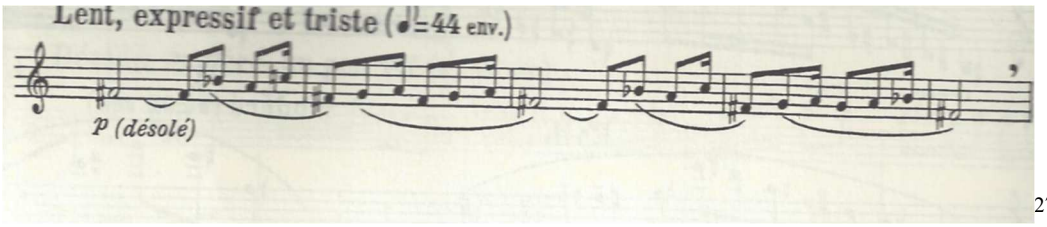
[273]

[271] Ibid.

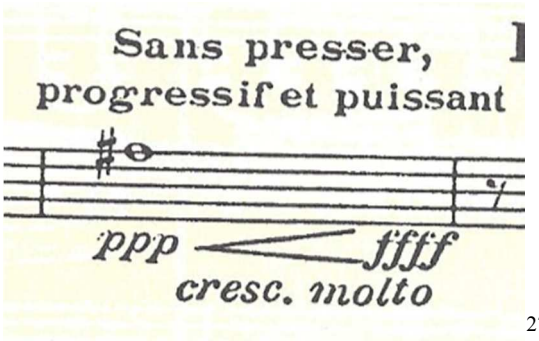
[272] Ibid.

[273] Ibid.

Beginning of “Abyss of the Birds”



[274]



[275]

[274] Ibid.
[275] Ibid.

APPENDIX C

RECITAL PROGRAM

Program

Hommage à M. de Falla……..Bèla Kovács (1937-)

Fantasia on the Opera *Un Ballo in Maschera*……..D. Lovreglio (1841-1907)

Quatuor pour la fin du temps……Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992)

3. Abîme des oiseaux

INTERMISSION

Gran Duetto Concertato sopra motivi dell'opera *La Sonnambula*…..Luigi Bassi (1833-1871)

Sextet for Wind Quintet and Piano in C, FP100.....Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)

1. Allegro vivace
2. Divertissement
3. Finale

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