

## CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE PROGRAM

Margaret Kampmeier, Artistic Director and Chair

# TACTUS

## *Part II*

### **PROGRAM**

OLIVIER MESSIAEN  
(1908–1992)

*Quartet for the End of Time* (1941)

- I. *Liturgie de cristal* (Crystal liturgy)
- II. *Vocalise, pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps* (Vocalise, for the Angel who announces the end of time)
- III. *Abîme des oiseaux* (Abyss of birds)
- IV. *Intermède* (Interlude)
- V. *Louange à l'Éternité de Jésus* (Praise to the eternity of Jesus)
- VI. *Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes* (Dance of fury, for the seven trumpets)
- VII. *Fouillis d'arcs-en-ciel, pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps* (Tangle of rainbows, for the Angel who announces the end of time)
- VIII. *Louange à l'Immortalité de Jésus* (Praise to the immortality of Jesus)

**Emmalie Tello**, clarinet

**Teagan Faran**, violin

**Jordan Bartow**, cello

**Han Geul Lee**, piano

# PROGRAM NOTE

## *Quatuor pour la fin du temps (Quartet for the End of Time)*

### Olivier Messiaen

The outbreak of the Second World War occurred one week after Messiaen had finished his organ work *Les corps glorieux* on August 25, 1939. Messiaen was called into service but was found unfit for active duty because of his poor eyesight. When the Germans invaded in May 1940 Messiaen was serving as a medical auxiliary at Verdun. He and three other musicians made it on foot to Nancy, but there they were captured. Messiaen was taken to a prison camp at Görlitz, Silesia (now Poland), where he remained until the spring of 1941, staunchly guarding “a haversack containing all my treasures, i.e., a little library of scores . . . going from the *Brandenburg* Concertos of Bach to the *Lyric Suite* of Berg [also including scores by Beethoven, Ravel, and Stravinsky].”

Messiaen composed in order to help himself survive “the cruelties and horrors of the camp”—first a short trio for a violinist, clarinetist, and cellist whom he met in the camp, which they performed in the washrooms. (The former two had their instruments with them; the Germans supplied the cellist with a cello with only three strings.) He then embarked on a full-scale chamber work for these musicians with himself as pianist, the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, which included the trio as the fourth movement. For the first performance of the Quartet on the savagely cold night of January 15, 1941, a rickety, out-of-tune old upright piano with many non-functional keys was brought into the Stalag, and the piece was played in the unheated Barrack 27 before an audience of 5,000 inmates. “Never,” said Messiaen later, “have I been heard with as much attention and understanding.”

The title *Quartet for the End of Time*, asserted Messiaen, was not to be interpreted as a response to his imprisonment; rather he wished to pay homage to “the Angel of the Apocalypse, who raises his hand heavenward saying: ‘There will be no more Time’” (*Revelation of St. John*). The composer also pointed out that the title has another meaning: his wish for an end of musical time based on the equal durational divisions of traditional music. The *Quartet for the End of Time* exhibits the polyrhythmic structures that he employed to achieve this aim, and which became very important in his later works. Messiaen also wanted the rhythmic structure to be independent of the harmony and melody, “in the manner of Guillaume de Machaut [c.1300–1377] whose work I did not know at the time.”

The first movement, Crystal liturgy, serves to illustrate Messiaen’s complex musical language. Two independent rhythmic ostinatos, one for the piano and a non-retrogradable (palindromic) one for the cello, are colored by the repeating patterns of twenty-nine different chords (showing Messiaen’s fondness of prime numbers). The melodic and harmonic patterns are not congruent with the rhythmic patterns, bringing to mind medieval isorhythmic motets, such as those by Machaut. Messiaen’s pitches are derived from his own system of modes. These combined structures are superimposed on two independent bird songs, played by the violin and clarinet. Here in a nutshell can be found some of the most important features in Messiaen’s development as a composer: complex polyrhythms, harmonic modes, his “banishment of temporalities,” and above all, the introduction of bird song. It is important to note, however, that Messiaen’s manufactured structures do not dictate the form of the movement or its duration—they are cut off abruptly; it is the bird song that shapes the movement. Otherwise Messiaen would have been exchanging one kind of tyranny for another.

Interesting relationships exist between the movements of the Quartet. The second shows thematic links with the seventh, both the third and sixth movements are monodies (clarinet alone, and all four instruments in octaves, respectively), and the fourth movement (the former trio) is related thematically to both the third and the sixth. The fifth and eighth movements are related in style, slow tempo, E major tonality, solo stringed instrument with piano, and theological basis. The *Quartet for the End of Time* remains one of the most important chamber music compositions of the twentieth century, in part because of Messiaen’s techniques, but also because it speaks to those who are totally unaware of them, as it did to the inmates that cold winter.

In the preface to the score, Messiaen provided the following description, which is worth quoting in full:

“I saw a mighty angel descending from heaven, clad in mist, having around his head a rainbow. His face was like the sun, his feet like pillars of fire. He placed his right foot on the sea, his left on the earth, and standing thus on the sea and the earth he lifted his hand toward the heaven and swore by Him who liveth for ever and ever, saying: “There shall be time no longer, but at the day of the trumpet of the seventh angel the mystery of God shall be consummated.”

—*Revelation X*

“Conceived and written in the course of my captivity, the *Quartet for the End of Time* was performed for the first time in Stalag 8-A on January 15, 1941, by Jean Le Boulaire, violinist; Henri Akoka, clarinetist; Etienne Pasquier, cellist; and myself at the piano. It is directly inspired by this excerpt from ‘The Revelation of St. John.’ Its musical language is essentially transcendental,

spiritual, catholic. Certain modes, realizing melodically and harmonically a kind of tonal ubiquity, draw the listener into a sense of the eternity of space or time. Particular rhythms existing outside the measure contribute importantly toward the banishment of temporalities. (All this is mere striving and childish stammering if one compares it to the overwhelming grandeur of the subject!)

“This Quartet contains eight movements. Why? Seven is the perfect number, the creation of six days made holy by the divine Sabbath; the seventh in its repose prolongs itself into eternity and becomes the eighth, of unfailing light, of immutable peace.

“**I. Crystal liturgy.** Between the morning hour of three and four, the awakening of the birds: a thrush or a nightingale soloist improvises, amid notes of shining sound and a halo of trills that lose themselves high in the trees. Transpose this to the religious plane: you will have the harmonious silence of heaven.

“**II. Vocalise, for the angel who announces the end of Time.** The first and third parts (very short) evoke the power of that mighty angel, his hair a rainbow and his clothing mist, who places one foot on the sea and one foot on the earth. Between these sections are the ineffable harmonies of Heaven. From the piano, soft cascades of blue-orange chords, encircling with their distant carillon the plainchant-like recitativo of the violin and cello.

“**III. Abyss of the birds.** Clarinet solo. The abyss is Time, with its sadness and tediums. The birds are the opposite of Time; they are our desire for light, for stars, for rainbows, and for jubilant outpourings of song!

“**IV. Interlude.** Scherzo. Of a more outgoing character than the other movements but related to them, nonetheless, by various melodic references.

“**V. Praise to the eternity of Jesus.** Jesus is here considered as one with the Word. A long phrase, infinitely slow, by the cello expatiates with love and reverence the everlastingness of the Word, mighty and dulcet, ‘which the years can in no way exhaust.’ Majestically the melody unfolds itself at a distance both intimate and awesome. ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’

“**VI. Dance of fury, for the seven trumpets.** Rhythmically the most idiosyncratic movement of the set. The four instruments in unison give the effect of gongs and trumpets (the first six trumpets of the Apocalypse attend various catastrophes, the trumpet of the seventh angel announces the consummation of the mystery of God). Use of extended note values, augmented or diminished rhythmic patterns, non-retrogradable rhythms—a systematic use of values which, read from left to right or from right to left, remain the same. Music of stone, formidable sonority; movement as irresistible as steel, as huge blocks of livid fury or ice-like frenzy. Listen particularly to the terrifying fortissimo of the theme in augmentation and with change of register of its different notes, toward the end of the piece.

“**VII. Cluster of rainbows, for the angel who announces the end of Time.** Here certain passages from the second movement return. The mighty angel appears, and in particular the rainbow that envelops him (the rainbow, symbol of peace, of wisdom, of every quiver of luminosity and sound). In my dreamings I hear and see ordered melodies and chords, familiar hues and forms; then, following this transitory stage I pass into the unreal and submit ecstatically to a vortex, a dizzying interpenetration of super-human sounds and colors. These fiery swords, these rivers of blue-orange lava, these sudden stars: Behold the cluster, behold the rainbows!

“**VIII. Praise to the immortality of Jesus.** Expansive violin solo balancing the cello solo of the fifth movement. Why this second glorification? It addresses itself more specifically to the second aspect of Jesus—to Jesus the man, to the Word made flesh, raised up immortal from the dead so as to communicate His life to us. It is total love. Its slow rising to a supreme point is the ascension of man toward his God, of the son of God toward his Father, of the mortal newly made divine toward paradise.

“And I repeat anew what I said above: All this is mere striving and childish stammering if one compares it to the overwhelming grandeur of the subject!”

—©Jane Vial Jaffe

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The Contemporary Performance Program at Manhattan School of Music is dedicated to giving advanced student performers the opportunity to study with expert faculty and to work directly with living composers. The CPP concert series presents knowledgeable performances of 20th- and 21st-century masterpieces by the student ensemble Tactus. Past concerts have featured both classic 20th-century repertoire and more recent works played with the composers in attendance. The group presents music by MSM faculty composers and works with the Composition department to read and perform student compositions.

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