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Books & Culture Nov. / Dec. 2008

A Messiaenic Vision

Celebrating the centenary of composer Olivier Messiaen.

David A. Hoekema

Every two years the Irving S. Gilmore International Keyboard Festival brings dozens of outstanding performers to West Michigan for solo and ensemble performances, at venues widely dispersed around the festival's Kalamazoo home. In 2008, nearly a hundred events were held in Kalamazoo, Grand Rapids, Zeeland, Battle Creek, St. Joseph, Benton Harbor, and Three Rivers during the festival's three weeks. The spotlight is always on classical music, but there is room for crossover artists such as jazz/pop/classical singer Audra McDonald, and on one evening bluegrass legend Ricky Skaggs and pop singer-songwriter Bruce Hornsby shared the stage. An extensive jazz program highlighted piano trios and jazz combos built around piano, keyboard, or organ.

The very last concert of this year's festival was held in Dalton Recital Hall at Western Michigan University on May 13. For this occasion Mitsuko Uchida, one of the giants of her generation, gathered together several younger players whose professional development she has assisted through the Borletti-Buitoni Trust to offer a wide-ranging program of chamber music from the 19th and 20th century. Welsh pianist Llyr Williams opened with a somber piece in two movements by Liszt, in which the one of the piano's leading pyrotechnicians imagined a Venice funeral procession for his dying friend Richard Wagner.

Then Williams was joined by violinist Soovin Kim and clarinetist Martin Fröst in Bela Bartok's "Contrasts," a virtuoso showpiece written as a commission for Benny Goodman. When the same program was repeated a week later in a recital space at Carnegie Hall, New York Times reviewer Bernard Holland called attention both to the "virtuoso turns" written especially for Goodman and to the "busy survey of Hungarian folk music" that enlivens the piece's three movements. Holland did not even attempt to describe the Messiaen quartet that followed, for, he said, "I have run out of adjectives and images to describe this great piece." [1]

The "Quartet for the End of Time" is one of the most remarkable compositions ever to emerge from the chaos of war. Written in a German prison camp, it received its premiere in January 1941 in an unheated barracks before 300 guards and fellow prisoners. For this portion of the program at Kalamazoo, Uchida replaced her younger colleague at the piano, and cellist Christian Poltéra joined the ensemble. [2]

The quartet is a bundle of contradictions and implausibilities, beginning with the odd addition of a clarinet to the violin, cello, and piano of a conventional string trio. One movement, the "Abyss of the Birds," is performed by unaccompanied clarinet, but the clarinet is silent for the last two movements. Indeed, only half of the eight movements in this "quartet" employ all four instruments, and even within those movements there are long soliloquies.

The second movement, "Vocalise: for the angel who announces the end of time," begins and ends in a furious driving rhythm, but between these bookends lies a meditative exploration of what the composer described as "sweet cascades of blue-orange chords." The lines traced out by the three instruments sometimes relate closely to each other or to the piano part, and there are intricate patterns of inversion and prolongation; but at other times they seem to fly past each other without even a nod of greeting.

The angel from whom Messiaen took his inspiration appears in Revelation 10, standing with one foot on the land and the other on the sea, shaking heaven and earth with a voice like a lion's roar. And the angel announces—in Messiaen's Bible—that "il n'y aurait plus de temps" ("there will be no more time"). This translation gives a mistaken impression, which is corrected in the 1999 Bible du Semour: "désormais, il n'y aurait plus de délai" ("henceforth there shall be no more delay"). But for Messiaen, clearly, it was time itself whose end is announced in this apocalyptic vision.

And here lies the central paradox of this remarkable example of musical theology: Messiaen seeks to depict a realm of timeless eternity, surpassing our experience and our knowledge, by means of the playing of four instruments. But these instruments could not make a sound if they, and we, were not inescapably imprisoned in the world of time.

In a timeless eternity, every hammer of every piano key is perpetually striking every string, and every key of every clarinet is depressed at once. There can be no music, and hence no musical meaning, outside the realm of time. All that distinguishes the sweetest and most lovingly caressed phrase played on the upper strings of the cello from the sound of a garbage disposal crunching chicken bones, after all, is the particular temporal sequence of vibrations in air that convey sound from source to hearer.

If there is no more time, therefore, there can be no more music. Messiaen surely knew this, but he ignored it. He wrote music all the same for the end of time. Casting aside all conventional structures of tonality, harmony, and rhythm, he set out to lead us through untraveled lands where nothing is as it appears, and yet everything is far more than it appears.

The elements out of which Messiaen creates music include birdsong, folk melody, and chordal clusters that defy analysis. Never wholly forsaking a certain gravitational pull toward the center, Messiaen carries us so far from this tonal home that we think there can be no way back; but then familiar intervals and melodies suddenly appear on the horizon. The movement from, say, the Romantic harmonic language of Brahms to the free association of Messiaen is like the movement from Renoir and Degas to Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning. Messiaen's major works have received a wider hearing in 2008, the centenary of his birth, than ever before, and yet they remain deeply perplexing to many listeners.

But in the hands of performers as skilled as the Gilmore artists, music that is initially incomprehensible becomes so utterly convincing that one cannot help being drawn into its world. Uchida, by far the most accomplished member of the ensemble, remained inconspicuous in her role throughout the performance, providing steady and precise support to her three companions without drawing attention to herself. Clarinetist Martin Fröst demonstrated absolute mastery of his instrument, able to draw a perfectly tuned note out of nothingness so gently that a listener was never aware of the moment when silence became sound. Violinist Soovin Kim and cellist Christian Poltéra drew every nuance of shading and emotion from their instruments. Each string player is given a

lyrical solo movement with a sort of piano ostinato painting a backdrop: the cello's song is of "Praise to the Eternity of Jesus" in the fifth movement, the violin's of "Praise to the Immortality of Jesus" in the closing movement. In the Gilmore performance these movements seemed to bring ordinary time to a point of absolute stillness and calm.

In shocking contrast to these still points came the "Dance of Fury, for the Seven Trumpets," in which all four instruments play a craggy and angular melody in unison throughout. The rhythm is fragmented and asymmetrical, but it pushes forward without rest, and players and audience alike are caught up in forces that cannot be conquered or even fully controlled. In any effective performance there is a remarkable excitement in this movement, which is unlike any other in Western chamber music. In this reading, as the musicians kept pushing each other nearer and nearer to the point of losing control, there was an element of sheer terror.

But after the dance of fury the angel with a lion's roar reappears—this time in the midst of "un fouillis d'arcs-en-ciel," a jumble of rainbows, a celestial tangle of color and light. Here the four instruments play together for the last time, and their conversation is wide-ranging. Messiaen tells us that we will find here "swords of fire" and "outpourings of blue-orange lava." The mood shifts abruptly from contemplative to furiously active and back again, while brief quotations from other movements serve to remind us of the nearness of eternity. What remains, a last movement in the form of a heartfelt prayer of adoration, is the violin's soaring song of divine immortality.

It is unlikely that the performers in Kalamazoo embrace Messiaen's distinctively Catholic mysticism. Yet the intensity of their performance revealed a deep understanding of what the composer was seeking to convey: that the realm in which God dwells is also our world, if we will let go of our ordinary selves and our musical expectations for an hour and set out on a journey of spiritual discovery.

For an hour in a Kalamazoo auditorium, the firmament seemed to open. A remarkable composition, played with extraordinary intensity, rolled back the fabric of the heavens to reveal what lies beyond. With exquisite timing, four master musicians ventured into a musical realm where there is no more time, or rather where time and eternity are joined as one.

Were it to fall to me to plan a funeral next week for a treasured friend, I do not think I could honor the memory of the departed more highly than by inviting a pianist and a cellist to play the fifth movement of Messiaen's quartet, "Praise to the Eternity of Jesus." In a musical idiom almost too intense to bear, it evokes the transience of earthly life and the resplendent beauty of divine grace that enfolds us. Words, I think, would not be necessary.

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1. Bernard Holland, "The Clarinet, Speaking in Many Voices and Accents," *New York Times*, May 20, 2008.
2. More than a dozen recordings of the Messiaen quartet are currently available on compact disc. A good starting point is the 1989 recording by Tashi, a group created by Peter Serkin and colleagues specifically to play this piece, available on a budget-priced reissue from RCA.