

Édités par Christine Ballman et Valérie Dufour

# « La la la... Maistre Henri »

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BREPOLS



# Experiencing Time in the *Quartet for the End of Time*

Jann PASLER (University of California, San Diego)

“And I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow on his head.... Setting his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land... he raised his right hand toward Heaven and swore by He who lives forever and ever... saying: THERE WILL BE NO MORE TIME. In the days when the seventh angel is to blow his trumpet, the mystery of God will be fulfilled.”

Thus reads chapter 10 of the Revelation of St. John, cited on the title page and in the preface of Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time* (1940-1941). During World War II, a prisoner in Stalag VIII A, Messiaen looked to his ascetic Catholicism for solace and detachment. Responding to a priest's invitation to discuss the Book of Revelation rekindled his “desire to compose.”<sup>1</sup> The *Quartet*, “conceived and composed” during his captivity, as he tells it, takes time as its subject, especially the time of eternity and “eternal peace.”<sup>2</sup> In this article, I examine notions of time developed by Pierre Souvchinsky and other contemporaries of Messiaen, as well as musical predecessors of the *Quartet*, including two compositions from the 1930s that Messiaen transcribed and reused as its fifth and eighth movements. In such works, it is not only philosophical and religious concepts that shape the musical experience and instill a sense of the sublime, but also the choice of instrument and the medium of performance.

## Ontological and Psychological Time

Time is fundamental in music. Messiaen called it “the starting point of all creation.”<sup>3</sup> But what does time mean? And what might it mean to write music that banishes time, that escapes it, as Messiaen sought? Time is becoming, succession from past to future. One might say that the temporal is a context for expectation and therefore meaning. Henri Bergson proposed a close relationship between musical time and what he called “duration.” He used this concept to distinguish the time of the unconscious and dreams, characterized by the interpenetration of heterogeneous elements, from time as space, like the minutes of the ticking clock whose measurement divides time into homogeneous parts. Duration is “the development of a thought that gradually changes as it takes shape.”<sup>4</sup> In the idea of a melody, Bergson saw an example of the way the

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1. Messiaen's lecture was entitled “Colors and Numbers in the Apocalypse”. See Brigitte MASSIN, *Olivier Messiaen: Une Poétique du merveilleux*, Aix-en-Provence, Éditions Alinéa, 1989, p. 154, and Rebecca RISCHIN, *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2003, p. 35-36.

2. MESSIAEN, “Preface”, *Quatuor pour la Fin du Temps*, p. i.

3. Id., “Address delivered at the Conferring of the Praemium Erasmianum”, cited in RISCHIN, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

4. Henri BERGSON, *Œuvres complètes*, Paris, PUF, 1970, p. 783.

unconscious perceives this kind of time – “a succession of qualitative changes which melt into and permeate one another... like the notes of a tune.”<sup>5</sup> In music, duration concerns the dynamic aspects that unfold in time, not the stabilizing ones often associated with traditional form.<sup>6</sup>

In the *Revue musicale* (1926), the composer Charles Koechlin and the philosopher-musician Gabriel Marcel, while sympathetic to Bergson’s ideas, took a broader approach to the subject of musical time, acknowledging that time in music is not “pure succession, but has more than one dimension... form and organization.” Marcel pointed out that, in moving from tone to tone, a melody cannot be reduced to “an organized succession of states”, but rather becomes a form, and yet a form that is dynamic. Koechlin proposed a different definition of “pure duration” as “an attribute of our deepest consciousness and seemingly independent of the external world: life unfolding.” To this he contrasted “psychological time... the impression of time that we receive according to the events of life: minutes that seem like centuries, hours that pass too fast” and “time as measured by mathematics”, that is, clock time. The musical time that interested him was closer to the first one, which he associated with “the sensation of continuity”, except that, as for Marcel, he also understood musical time as a function of temporal divisions that contribute to a kind of “spatialization of time.”<sup>7</sup> Influenced by these ideas, Susanne Langer proposed the notion of music as virtual time, that is, the imagination of time as distinct from real time, whereas Gisèle Brelet thought of it as “speculation in time inseparable from the experience of time as lived.”<sup>8</sup>

In a special issue of *Revue musicale* (1939), Messiaen’s essay, “Le Rythme chez Igor Stravinsky”, appeared only pages after an important article on time and music by Souvtchinsky, Stravinsky’s Russian friend. In it, Souvtchinsky, building on these ideas, proposed two categories of time: psychological and ontological.<sup>9</sup> Stravinsky borrowed from Souvtchinsky’s ideas in his *Poétique musicale* (1940-1941) and Brelet, in her book *Le Temps musical* (1949), developed them further.<sup>10</sup>

Psychological time is the time of humans, the time of becoming, or desire, and its realization, the time of the will. It is that in which we live our lives – in “waiting, anguish, suffering, as well as sensuality.”<sup>11</sup> Psychological time involves an abandon of the present for the irreality of the future. It gives the sense of being in advance or behind. Psychological time proceeds by change and difference, enlarging and transforming experience. As such, it is characteristically unstable, often ametrical. Its pulse can change, speed up, slow down, hold back, rush ahead. In experiencing this kind of time in music, Brelet sees the listener as tending to give into their own duration, their own psychological processes.<sup>12</sup> Music expressing, embodying, or stimulating this kind of time is capable of both notating emotions and stimulating them. Souvtchinsky cites Wagner as the purest example because, in his music, “the essence of psychological time determines not just

5. *Id.*, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, Paris, 1889, trans. by F.L. Pogson as *Time and Free Will*, New York, Allen, 1910, p. 104.
6. For an analysis of Bergsonian ideas in music from Debussy and Fauré to the French spectralists, see Jann PASLER, “Resituating the Spectral Revolution: French Antecedents and the Dialectic of Discontinuity and Continuity in Debussy’s *Jeux*”, in Irene DELIÈGE and Max PADDISON (eds), *Aspects of Time in the Creation of Music*, a special issue of *Musicae Scientiae*, 3, Liège, Belgium, 2004, p. 125-140; also in *id.*, *Writing through Music: Essays on Music, Culture, and Politics*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2008.
7. Charles KOECHLIN, “Le Temps et la musique”, p. 46-49, 51, and Gabriel MARCEL, “Bergsonisme et musique”, in *La Revue musicale*, VII/3 (1926). Susanne LANGER discusses these in her *Feeling and Form*, New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953, p. 113-17.
8. LANGER, in *Feeling and Form*, writes, “What, then is the essence of all music? The creation of virtual time, and its complete determination by the movement of audible forms” (p. 125) and “All music creates an order of virtual time in which its sonorous forms move in relation to each other.... Music makes time audible and its form and continuity sensible” (p. 109-110); Gisèle BRELET, *Le Temps musical*, Paris, PUF, 1949, p. 35, 54, 305.
9. Pierre SOUVTCHINSKY, “La Notion du temps et la musique (Réflexions sur la typologie de la création musicale)”, *La Revue musicale*, n° spécial Igor Stravinsky, Mai-June 1939, p. 310-320, and Olivier MESSIAEN, “Le Rythme chez Igor Stravinsky”, p. 331-332.
10. Igor STRAVINSKY, *Poetics of Music*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1942 and BRELET, *op. cit.* For what Stravinsky borrowed from Souvtchinsky, see Valerie DUFOUR, “La Poétique musicale de Stravinsky: un manuscrit inédit de Souvtchinsky”, *Revue de musicologie*, 89/2 (2003), p. 373-392 and “Stravinsky vers Souvtchinsky : Thèmes et variations sur la Poétique musicale”, *Mitteilungen des Paul Sacher-Stiftung* 17 (March 2004), p. 17-23.
11. SOUVTCHINSKY, *art. cit.*, p. 312.
12. See BRELET, *op. cit.*, especially vol. 2, chapt. 2.

the form of developments and interminable chromaticism, but also the nature and intonations of the themes, always laden with psychological meaning.”<sup>13</sup>

Ontological time is the time of the universe, that which underlies and makes possible the experience of all other kinds of time. Brelet called it the essence of time itself, “pure time.”<sup>14</sup> This is not the time of becoming, but the time of being; not focused on the past or the future, but the present; not the reflection of emotion or psychological states, but stability and balance. Ontological time proceeds by similarity, like that of regular meter and, as such, is susceptible to regular divisions, like Koechlin’s “pure duration.”<sup>15</sup> It permits the composer to grasp the process of ontological time and penetrate it. Such time regulates the listener’s breathing, producing a sense of “dynamic calm and satisfaction.”<sup>16</sup>

Musical experience, for Souvtchinsky and Brelet, is “one of the purest forms of the ontological sensation of time.”<sup>17</sup> Music of ontological time draws the listener in and absorbs human subjectivity, encouraging one to forget the inevitable *devenir*, or becoming, of existence, because it requires submission to the music, a present that totally absorbing. As at the end of Act I of *Parsifal*, “Here time becomes space.” Brelet sees social implications in this kind of music, an expression of the living reality of social experience as opposed to individual duration. Measure is a mediator in the perception of time, mediation between that experienced by the individual and that of the universe. Brelet sees music in which there is conflict between meter and rhythm as translating conflict between the ontological and the psychological.<sup>18</sup> Very little music reflects ontological time alone, Souvtchinsky notes, since it is very rare that a composer can successfully dominate his or her own psychological reflexes. Consequently, he considers the psychological and ontological as categories rather than descriptions of music *per se*.<sup>19</sup>

Souvtchinsky and Brelet use the notions of psychological and ontological time to explain varieties of “musical creation” and “musical experience.” In music by Mozart and static sections of Debussy and Stravinsky’s music, they suggest, the aim is to seek and discover the “laws and conditions of being” and perhaps, most importantly, to give an experience of the “eternal present.”<sup>20</sup> This is encouraged by a focus on sonority for its own sake, in some ways “essentially identical with music.” “Sonority is born, grows, and dies like a living being: its duration is not abstract, but concrete and qualitative.” “The musical time of sonority ... inhibits the expressivity associated with psychological duration” and thus helps the listener focus on the primacy of the present.<sup>21</sup> A musical experience that elevates sonority over functional tonality thus can affect the experience of time in it.

Souvtchinsky also refers to the “immanent musicality” of Debussy’s music, “its musical states constituting a kind of transformation of musical instants into duration.”<sup>22</sup> But the underlying purpose of his essay is to elevate Stravinsky and argue how his music, especially in its approach to time, differs from that of Wagner. When it comes to Stravinsky’s spirituality (enlivened after he rejoined the Russian orthodox church in 1926), however, Souvtchinsky takes a hard line. Pointing to the example of Scriabin whose musical “submission” to mystical ideas led to a “deformation of his musical conscience”, Souvtchinsky notes that when it comes to the experience of spiritual life, there are things that “cannot be and should not be translated or expressed by music.”<sup>23</sup> In a footnote, implicitly taking on an idea in St. John’s Revelation, he argues that in the lives of humans there can exist no experience that abolishes time: “il n’existe pas ‘d’expérience du non-temps’ dans la vie immanente de l’homme.” Such an idea, he claims,

13. SOUVTCHINSKY, art. cit., p. 315.

14. BRELET, *op. cit.*, p. 451.

15. KOECHLIN, “Le Temps et la musique”, p. 49.

16. SOUVTCHINSKY, art. cit., p. 313.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 312.

18. BRELET, *op. cit.*, p. 305-07.

19. SOUVTCHINSKY, art. cit., p. 312-313.

20. BRELET, *op. cit.*, p. 540, 684-687, 701. Souvtchinsky refers specifically to “the law of the necessity of time” (*Ibid.*, p. 319).

21. BRELET, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

22. SOUVTCHINSKY, art. cit., p. 317. See an extended analysis of this idea in Jann PASLER, *Debussy, Stravinsky, and the Ballets Russes: The Emergence of a New Musical Logic*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1981.

23. SOUVTCHINSKY, art. cit., p. 320.



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belongs to those symbolic notions that “define nothing at all.”<sup>24</sup> Perhaps this was a reaction to increased interest in religious experience among his contemporaries in the 1930s, such as Stravinsky, Arthur Lourié, and Jacques Maritain. But it also begs a question: did Messiaen then, only a year later, take this as a challenge, that is, to write music that is, explicitly, about the “end of time”?

**Time, Sonority, and Predecessors**

In his 1939 article, Messiaen discusses superimposed meters in Debussy’s *Nuages*, rhythmic augmentations in Stravinsky’s *Petrushka*, and rhythmic cells using augmentation and diminution in *The Rite of Spring*. Debussy’s music had long been a “childhood love” and he acknowledged the preeminence of rhythm in Stravinsky’s music. But other works perhaps better suggest the influence of these composers’ music on how Messiaen construed musical time. Consider, for example, the way Debussy superimposes two kinds of time in his piano prelude, *Des pas sur la neige*. The left hand pattern is absolutely regular, a very slow and deliberate walking rhythm in 4/4, ornamented by a triplet sixteenth-note. The right hand plays against this with melodic gestures that enter and proceed unpredictably, often interrupted by rests. This suggests a form of interaction between the stable, predictable meter of ontological time – the time of the universe--and the unstable, ever-changing rhythms of psychological time – the time of mankind. Here these musical “categories” serve as background for each other, their differences underlined through the contrasts. As Stravinsky pointed out, “variations in psychological time are perceptible only as they are related to the primary sensation – whether conscious or unconscious--of real time, ontological time.”<sup>25</sup> Listening to the simultaneity of these two kinds of time in the Debussy prelude in a way mirrors the “counterpoint” of one’s own sense of time coming into relationship with that of the music. Sonority and tempo also contribute in significant ways to the experience of time. The repetition of not only the same rhythms but also the recurring dissonance of the major second, D to E, sustained for two beats and resolved for two beats in almost every measure, gives a sense of turning in place, even as the registral shifts of this pattern from the middle of the piano to its outer limits, give the work dynamic momentum. The very slow tempo, “triste et lent (quarter note = 44)”, facilitates dwelling in both kinds of time, almost equally, especially as the melodic entrances tend to come on different beats than those of the pulsing ostinato.

Stravinsky’s *Symphony of Psalms* (1930) likewise plays with the juxtaposition of time which proceeds “by contrast” and “variety” (psychological time) and that which “is generally dominated by the principle of similarity” and “unity” (ontological time).<sup>26</sup> In the first movement, these appear in structural and as well as quick succession. The opening section alternates between tutti E-minor chords, surrounded by rests, and strings of a repeating motivic cell in sixteenth notes with two parts, one rising (A) and one falling (B), played in unison by the oboes and bassoons. Repeated in various combinations (AB; AA AB BB; then BBBB), supported by changing duple and triple meter, and interrupted twice on the second beat by a rest, and twice on the first beat in a one-beat measure, these patterns create instability and unpredictability, despite the recurring motivic material. Music of utter regularity in 4/4 follows, an instrumental introduction and then a chorus resembling Gregorian chant, singing in Latin, “Hear my prayer, Oh Lord.” The rising and falling of their minor second recalls the oscillating movement of the opening woodwinds and reiterates a binary conception of form. Here, however, the notes are of longer value and the metric context one of unrelenting invariability. This is music of discipline and order, appropriate for singing a psalm. The 4/4 meter, moreover, is reinforced by short repeating ostinati in the instrumental accompaniment. Improvisatory-like melismas in the woodwinds and E minor chords, tutti, from the prelude interrupt the flow a few times to articulate structural sections, offer momentary contrast, and allow singers to take a breath. Psychological time here interacts with, but ultimately gives way to, ontological time. In its final moment the chorus, with increasing power, modulates unexpectedly to G major, a kind of musical transcendence.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 312.

25. STRAVINSKY, *Poetics of Music*, p. 30.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

Messiaen may have taken inspiration from such ideas. He shared Koechlin's focus on rhythmic divisions, providing a "little treatise" on them in the preface to his Quartet, and, although he never mentioned ontological and psychological time in his published work, he did later refer to similar notions of "durée vécue" and "temps structuré" in his *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d'ornithologie* (1949-1992).<sup>27</sup> At the same time, he sought to establish his own musical distinction through using them to pursue a very different aim: music that goes beyond time as we know it, that suggests the realm of the divine. Two works draw on and expand these ideas, preparing in important ways the Quartet for the End of Time.

In his first printed score, written in 1930 at age 21 as he was finishing his Conservatoire studies but had failed to win the Prix de Rome, Messiaen set to music what he called an "essay on earthly life and blessed eternity", concerned with transformation from mortality to immortality.<sup>28</sup> In *Dyptique*, the eighth movement of his *Livre du Saint Sacrement*, for organ, the opening section in C minor expresses anguish, a response to the "useless torment of life."<sup>29</sup> Its melodic gestures, some turning back on themselves, are well-balanced arabesques, but its rhythms are plodding and its tone serious, almost ponderous. The music is emotionally constricted even as it is harmonically adventurous sometimes to the point of losing its foundation, as in organ improvisations after the Mass in French churches. Then, without cadence or transition, comes the adagio in C major. This is as different from what comes before as the sublime second (and final) movement of Beethoven's last sonata, opus 111, is to the "ravaged and tempestuous" first movement, characterized by diminished sevenths. Likewise, the experience of Messiaen's adagio is dependent on the turmoil of the preceding music for its meaning.<sup>30</sup> At the end of the work, like the trills in Beethoven's Adagio when all sense of rhythm and meter stop and melody disintegrates into pure sonority, moving chromatically, on offbeats up to a high D and "the poor little motif seems to hover alone and forsaken above a giddy yawning abyss – a procedure of awe-inspiring unearthliness",<sup>31</sup> Messiaen's serene ascending phrase in the treble, accompanied by lushly rich sonorities, moves ever higher, past any expectation, to a kind of musical no man's land. Here the composer purifies any impulse for change in the music or his listeners. He seeks victory over the ephemeral, deliverance from psychological time. To listen to such music is to cling to its sonorities and to submit to its movement without anticipation or consequence. This is the time of eternity when "there is neither the need nor the desire to hold onto what was."<sup>32</sup> As in Beethoven's Adagio where, as Leverkün put it, "repose and ecstasy are one and the same", this music makes manifest the "peace and the clarity of Christian paradise."<sup>33</sup>

The sustained notes of the organ produced by pulsing air in pipes--sounds held far longer than possible for the human breath--play an important role in this experience. As in Debussy's music and Beethoven's trills, the emphasis on sonority, in this case, sonority produced by a machine, inhibits psychological time to the extent that it focuses attention on timbre separate from its function in tonality or as a means of expression. Sonority, which takes attention away from the dialectic of consequence, does not push forward to something else. It invites effortless immersion. Also significant is the extremely slow tempo, which had already been used in another organ piece, *Le Banquet céleste* (1928) and the first section of his early orchestral work, *Les Offrandes oubliées* (1930). Whereas Brelet sees slow tempos as usually activating the listener's internal subjectivity, and thus offering an experience of psychological time, this is not the case in *Dyptique*. Rapidity may be able to follow the élan of becoming, to underline the capacity of the present to contract and expand, but a slow tempo can induce the calm of contemplation and, as

27. Roger NICHOLS too, in his review of this treatise in *Musical Times*, 137, no. 1841 (July 1996), p. 17, muses about why Messiaen never mentioned this connection, though Nichols assumes it was Stravinsky's *Poetics* that Messiaen was ignoring, instead of Souvtchinsky's 1939 article.

28. Anthony POPE, *Messiaen: Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 81.

29. Peter HILL and Nigel SIMEONE, *Messiaen*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2005, p. 38.

30. The musicologist Adrian Leverkün (alias Adorno) in Thoman Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, chapter 8, describes the two movements as such.

31. *Ibid.*

32. After publishing *La Présence totale* (1934), in his *Du Temps et de l'Éternité* (1945), volume three of his *La Dialectique de l'éternel présent* (1928-1951), Louis LAVELLE writes, "Il n'y a en elle ni le besoin ni le désir de garder ce qui a été. Elle ignore toute richesse qui est un effet de l'accumulation. Elle ne cherche à rien posséder". Cited in BRELET, *op. cit.*, p. 687.

33. HILL and SIMEONE, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

such, a more rich experience of the music. Slow tempo is the “symbol of meditation, contemplation and spiritual possession”, the slowness of ontological time a negation and forgetting of becoming. Slow tempo immobilizes time; it engenders a joyful equilibrium. In very slow music, musical time is consubstantial with itself, the time of reflection, the essence of time made incarnate.<sup>34</sup> *Dyptique* was premiered at La Trinité church in February 1930. Messiaen got the organ job there the next fall, a position he held until his death.

Messiaen’s second pre-existing work in the Quartet, the *Fête des belles eaux* (1937), is for six ondes Martenot, an early electronic instrument invented in 1928. In this work, written for the aquatic sound and light shows of the Paris 1937 International World’s Fair, the composer explores similar approaches to sonority, tempo, and time. Two “water” movements alternate with “fireworks” movements. Echoing his perception that “the watersprouts” could be either “furious and awesome, or dreamy and contemplative”,<sup>35</sup> the first *L’Eau* starts with an extremely long whole note, pppp, followed by a rapid arabesque in thirty-second notes down two octaves and back up. Then the tempo shifts to “extrêmement lent, extatique (at the sixteenth note = 46).” Like the organ, the ondes, which use thermionic valves to produce oscillating frequencies, allowed Messiaen to write music beyond the human breath. What follows then, the slow deliberate pulsing of an ecstatic melody for one soloist accompanied by three ondes playing homophonic chords, transcends the human. Messiaen explains: “When the water attains a great height, one hears a long, slow phrase – almost a prayer – which turns the water into a symbol of grace and eternity, according to the book of John: ‘the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.’”<sup>36</sup> Instead of stimulating the oscillating arabesques that mark time in Ravel’s *Jeux d’eau* and other impressionist music, water symbolized for him an escape from time, a conduit to reflection beyond time.

And, yet, this music does not embody ontological time. There is no regular meter. Throughout, the composer incorporates what he later called “value-added” rhythms, often one sixteenth note added to a string of eighth notes, or a dot added to a note to extend its value by one-half. Measure bars reflect musical phrases of unequal length. In part 1, consisting of two four-measure phrases, measures in 3/4 alternate with 3/4 measures expanded by value-added notes: 3/4, 3/4 + 1 sixteenth; 3/4 + 1 sixteenth; 3/4; 3/4; 3/4 + 1 sixteenth; 3/4 + 1 sixteenth; 3/4. In part 2, the melodic phrases contract to one measure and half measure lengths at time same time as the measure lengths themselves gradually expand from less than four quarter notes to two measures of 6/4 and finally a measure longer than 7/4: 4/4 – 1 sixteenth; 4/4 – 1 sixteenth; 4/4 + 1 eighth; 5/4 + 1 eighth; 3/4 + 1 eighth; 6/4; 6/4; 6/4; 2/4 + 1 eighth; 7/4 + 1 eighth. At the end of part 2, the rhythmic expansion accompanies the work’s climax with the melodic ascension up an eleventh and a huge crescendo from pp to molto ff. Dynamics underline the A B A’ shape, with a return to pp and two-measure phrases in part 3 as in part 1.

The second *L’Eau*, although it borrows the melody from the first *L’Eau*, transposed up a fifth and played mezzoforte, and the chordal accompaniment played by three ondes, takes the music in another direction. Here Messiaen adds two more ondes playing exuberant, repeating bird songs, ornamenting and enriching the sonority of the main melody as they punctuate the downbeats or offer a counterpoint on offbeats. The effect is to place the “prayer” of the water in the context of nature, or to suggest that birdsongs are part of paradise.

### The Quartet and Performance

Messiaen’s *Quartet for the End of Time*, eight movements for piano, clarinet, violin, and cello, was conceived for himself and three other prisoners of war (Henri Akoka, Jean Le Boulaire, and Etienne Pasquier). They premiered it in their camp on 15 January 1941. The work similarly plays with sonority, slow tempo, rhythmic cells, and the juxtaposition of different kinds of time. Rhythmically the “most characteristic”, as Messiaen notes in the preface, is the sixth movement, the *Dance of Fury, for the Seven Trumpets*. Here, recalling the unison playing in the opening

34. BRELET, *op. cit.*, p. 391-394.

35. MESSIAEN, essay accompanying the recording STU 70102. Cited in POPLE, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

of Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* but far more difficult, four instruments create "the effect of gongs and trumpets ... music of stone, formidable sonorous granite, the irresistible movement of steel, of enormous blocks of purple fury, of frozen intoxication." Value-added rhythms "independent of meter", such as the composer used in the *Fête des belles eaux*, augmented and diminished rhythms, rhythmic pedals, and what he calls "non-retrogradable" rhythms permeate this work, often treated as rhythmic cells, perhaps inspired by those in *The Rite of Spring*. They expand, contract, sometimes by only a partial beat, and "powerfully contribute to the effect of banishing the temporal."<sup>37</sup>

The *Dance of Fury* is a kind of variations on a theme, with the measures of unequal length, recalling this treatment in the *Fête des belles eaux*: 4/4 + 1 sixteenth; 4/4 + 1 sixteenth; 4/4 plus 2 sixteenths; 4/4 plus 3 sixteenths; 5/4 plus 1 sixteenth, 8/4 plus 1 half note, etc. The value-added sixteenth notes here also function not only as rhythmic ornaments, but also as melodic ones, often a minor or major second away from the preceding or following note. Tempo varies frequently, indicated by "pressez," "pressez insensiblement," and "pressez beaucoup," or "un peu plus vif" and "un peu moins vif" in the score as well as explicit changes from eighth note = 126, 160, 176 and 200 and later to eighth note = 76, "almost slow, terrible, and powerful." Most of the piece is to be played *ff*, "decided, vigorous, granite-like," with some dynamic changes to *pp* and to *ffff* giving timbral reinforcement to the tempo changes. To enhance this effect, Messiaen advises the performers in the preface, "Do not be afraid to exaggerate the dynamics, the accelerandos, the ritardandos, everything that renders an interpretation lively and sensitive." Inspired by the trumpets of the Apocalypse, this music embodies the flux of psychological time. At the same time, suggesting contradictions in this idea, the constant stretching and contracting of the opening theme and the non-retrogradable rhythms, those the same backward and forward that change the past into the future, confuse the sense of time as moving forward, time as becoming.

The third movement, the *Abyss of the birds*, is for solo clarinet. The piece began, not at Stalag VIII A, but in Verdun before the war started. Messiaen conceived it for Akoka, mobilized to play in a local military orchestra, with whom he shared a "daily ritual" of listening together to the birds at dawn. Akoka's playing style and his "bright" sound purportedly had an enormous influence on the composer's musical preferences and quite possibly some of the gestures used in this piece.<sup>38</sup> The "abyss", Messiaen tells us in his preface, "is Time, with its sorrows and its weariness." The piece opens "lent, expressif et triste (at the eighth note = 44)", its notes wandering between F sharp and B flat. Then enter the birds, who "are the opposite of Time; they are our desire for light, for stars, for rainbows and joyful songs." Lively bird songs, "presque vif, gai, capricieux (at quarter note = 126)" and "très libre de mouvement", express the time of nature, a time characterized by constant change and fluidity, but not expressive of human feelings. Tempo and sonority thus differentiate two worlds, although they are not entirely unrelated because, as Anthony Pople has pointed out, "the slower music, too, frees itself from the rigours of traditional musical time."<sup>39</sup> Some have interpreted the bird as a kind of "Christ-figure, granting the hope of salvation." But, in the context of Revelation 9:1-6,<sup>40</sup> this could be heard as hope for deliverance from human time, the time that torments.

Although performed by the human breath, this music tests its boundaries. The *Abyss of the birds* calls for three passages in which the performer starts as quietly and imperceptibly as possible, *ppp*, and progressively grows louder until reaching the maximum sound possible, *ffff*, all this over the span of a whole note (with the quarter note = 44). Added to this challenge is the need to shift gears immediately thereafter, performing lively sixteenth note arpeggios (at quarter note = 126). Such music, requiring extraordinary breath control, dazzling virtuosity, and great imagination, puts the performer in the position of only being able to approximate the demands

37. Messiaen, "Preface", *op. cit.*, p. i.

38. RISCHIN, *op. cit.*, p. 11-14.

39. POPLÉ, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

40. "And the fifth angel sounded, and I saw a star fall from heaven unto the earth; and to him was given the key of the bottomless pit. And he opened the bottomless pit... and there came out of the smoke locusts upon the earth: and unto them was given power... And it was commanded that they should hurt... only those men which have not the seal of God on their forehead... they should not kill them, but they should be tormented five months... And in those days shall men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee them." Pople suggests that this section contains perhaps "the most explicit link between [the prisoners'] incarceration and 'the end of time'" (*Ibid.*, p. 40-41).



of the score. As such, the listener is drawn into the performer's struggle and inevitable frustration with the limitations of being human, as well as celebration for what is achieved in the moment.

The first, fifth, and eighth movements concern the contemplation of eternity. As Messiaen once explained, "This quartet was written for the end of time, not as a play on words about the time of captivity, but for the ending of concepts of past and future; that is, for the beginning of eternity."<sup>41</sup> Forty years later, he added: "Time – measured, relative, physiological, psychological – is divided in a 100 ways, of which the most immediate is a perpetual conversion of the future into the past. In eternity, these things no longer exist."<sup>42</sup> The first movement begins in what Messiaen called "the harmonious silence of Heaven", inspired by the early morning when birds are awakening. As in the opening of *Des pas sur la neige*, Messiaen juxtaposes fragmentary material, imitations of bird songs played by the clarinet and violin, free and unpredictable, over a fifteen-note melody with non-retrogradable rhythms, unchanging and repeated in the cello, and a repeating pitch sequence in the piano, music which thus has no beginning or end. The time of bird songs thus proceeds over a kind of time of the universe, the  $\frac{3}{4}$  meter throughout, although little in the music draws attention to this metric regularity.

In the fifth movement, *Praise to the Eternity of Jesus*, Messiaen reflects on Jesus as the Word of God. In a tempo notated as "infiniment lent, extatique", a long phrase in the cello, as he puts it, "glorifies, in adoration and reverence, the eternity of this mighty yet gentle word of which the ages never tire." Recalling the notion of water as "a symbol of grace and eternity", this movement is a transcription of the first water movement from his *Fête des belles eaux*. The only differences are that the composer barred the work differently, dividing the second and third measures into two, that while the ondes Martenot in the accompaniment of part two remain soft the piano accompaniment follows the shift to forte in the melody, and that one measure is omitted near the end. As transcribed in the Quartet, the sustained chords of the ondes Martenot, an effortless legato with no real tension, are transformed into pulsing repeated chords in the piano, the first of each harmonic change accented, as if to assure that the sound is heard and does not die out. The slow tempo (sixteenth note = 46), the slowest in the Quartet, is crucial to its effect. The slower the performance, the more difficult it is for the cellist to maintain the long notes of its upper register and the phrase markings without a break and the more challenging it is for the pianist to perform the repeated chords at absolutely the same dynamic level. The "infinitely slow" tempo, in conjunction with the need to be "very expressive", draws attention to sonority at the risk of distracting concentration on rhythmic exactitude. It thus renders problematic perfect coordination between the performers. And, yet, it is crucial that accents on the first iteration of every chord change in the piano come exactly with the cello's notes. If this is an expression of psychological time as expressive, holding the listener's attention through its constant becoming, it is also because performers are called to enact challenges of fierce and unrelenting intensity that test their limitations as well as those of their listeners. That performers often rush this music suggests how daunting these challenges can be.

The eighth movement, *Praise to the Immortality of Jesus*, is like a structural value added, after seven days of creation, a day of rest. In it, Messiaen addresses "the second aspect of Jesus: the Man, the word made flesh." Messiaen thought of this movement as pure love. The "progressive ascent toward the extremely high register", he tells us, represents "the ascent of man toward his God, of the son of God toward his Father, of deified Man toward Paradise." The tempo, as in the fifth movement, is marked "extrêmement lent et tendre, extatique", to be played "expressif, paradisiaque." Again, the composer drew on a previous work, transcribing the adagio of *Dyptique* here for violin and piano, but slowing it down from eighth note = 58 to eighth note = 36.<sup>43</sup> Again, the sustained chords of the organ accompanying the melody are transformed into repeated chords, here double dotted. But this movement, unlike the fifth one, proceeds in a  $\frac{4}{4}$  meter throughout, disciplining the expressivity of the performers with an absolutely regular,

41. MESSIAEN, cited in *ibid.*, p. 13.

42. MESSIAEN, cited in RISCHIN, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

43. POPE, in Messiaen, points out that, while *Dyptique* should normally last about 4 minutes, 17 seconds, this movement should last around 7 minutes. In recorded performances, however, Messiaen took 9 minutes to perform it, and his wife Yvonne Loriod, eight and a half minutes (82). This suggests that performers should take seriously Messiaen's invitation to exaggerate indicated tempos, especially when it comes to slowness.

almost hypnotic pulse. Moreover, unlike elsewhere in the quartet, there are no tempo changes, except one at the end, and no value-added notes or other rhythmic innovations. The movement does not induce desire or yearning or other sentiments associated with psychological time. Furthermore, the accompaniment begins with triads and returns to them often; dissonance functions here more for color, especially the tritone, E - B flat, to be performed “with love.” The composer explores the whole sound palette, from the low gong-like bass to the upper reaches of the piano and violin. Only in the final push upward to the work’s climax does the music deviate, “un peu ralenti.” Here, both violin and piano crescendo and then retreat back to *ppp*, as the violin reaches to the highest note of the piece, the high E, and holds it until the sound dies off completely, *perdendosi*, for six full quarter note beats, as at the end of Debussy’s *Des Pas sur la neige*.

Certainly, the piano in this movement pulses with the purest form of ontological time and produces a “dynamic calm” in the listener. But, more in sympathy with Gabriel Marcel (a convert to Catholicism in 1929, who defined man by an ontological exigency, the need for transcendence) than with Souvtchinsky, Messiaen sought a spiritual goal with this music. He uses the musical tactics of metric invariability that produce an experience of ontological time to give listeners a sense of something beyond time, “eternal peace.”<sup>44</sup> Moreover, in contrast with Souvtchinsky’s concept of ontological time, he does so by embracing human suffering. That is, he wants the sound produced by humans instead of by mechanical instruments such as the organ or Ondes Martenot. As the violinist struggles to achieve pitch accuracy on notes in the highest register of the instrument (three octaves above middle C), notes beyond the range of the human voice, and endeavors to hold these for very long durations, and as the pianist strives to maintain an absolutely regular pulse, despite the extremely slow tempo, the music suggests the human side of Jesus. That is, just as the suffering and tenderness of Jesus’s life as a human being was necessary for his people’s salvation, the performers’ struggles are necessary for listeners to achieve transcendence. If the musical embodiment of ontological time can produce an experience of the “eternal present”, as Souvtchinsky and Brelet have suggested, and if it can end the concept of past and future, as Messiaen hoped, then it is because performers, willing to scale the walls of human possibility, risk failure to shepherd listeners toward ecstasy, the blessed realm beyond time.

Messiaen’s *Quartet for the End of Time* is not just a synthesis of various kinds of time, but also a teleology, a movement from one state into another, from an experience of the human to an experience of the divine in the human, a becoming one with the divine. The extreme concentration required by such music--the essence of its difficulty--suggests that perhaps the deepest meaning of the work comes in performance, in the enactment of this challenge. Because Messiaen tells performers to take great care with “the exact notes and their rhythmic values” and, especially to “sustain implacably the two extremely slow movement” of the fifth and eighth movements,<sup>45</sup> the work demands enormous effort, discipline, and concentration. In sum, although as its goal the *Quartet* posits the end of time, as its medium it calls on the struggles of human life, which is substantial with time.

44. As St. Thomas Aquinas put it in the *Summa Theologiae*, which Messiaen often quoted, “Awareness of invariability in something altogether free from change produces the notion of eternity”. See Ian DARBYSHIRE, “Messiaen and the Representation of the Theology of Illusion”, in Siglind BRUHN (ed.), *Messiaen's Language of Mystical Love*, New York and London, Garland, 1998, p. 41-42.

45. MESSIAEN, “Preface”, p. iv.

