

Messiaen the Theologian

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Chapter 8

Five Quartets: The Search for the Still Point of the Turning World in the War Quartets of T. S. Eliot and Olivier Messiaen

Andrew Shenton

After the kingfisher's wing
Has answered light to light, and is silent, the light is still
At the still point of the turning world.

– T. S. Eliot¹

The *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* [Quartet for the end of Time] by Olivier Messiaen and *Four Quartets* by T. S. Eliot are two significant works of art that were both published in their final form during the Second World War. The authors worked without any identifiable personal knowledge of the other although it is likely that later in their lives they were familiar with each other's work. It is all the more extraordinary then that a French Catholic musician and an Anglican American/English poet would deal with some strikingly similar subject matter, especially since neither were writing typical war works.²

This essay sketches the composition and publication of both works and analyses certain primary themes that concern the nature of the human experience of music as a means of expression and as a means of negotiating time. After a brief introduction, I will comment on three common themes: time and technique, the 'unattended moment' and the 'still point of the turning world'.

Messiaen scholarship is, in many ways, still in its infancy, so there are still only a few books and articles about Messiaen's *Quatuor*. Anthony Pople wrote

¹ T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1944). 'Burnt Norton', IV, line 134. Quotations from *Four Quartets* are reproduced by kind permission of Faber and Faber Ltd (UK). Excerpts from 'Burnt Norton' in *Four Quartets* by T.S. Eliot, © 1936 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, renewed 1964 by T.S. Eliot; from 'East Coker' in *Four Quartets*, © 1940 by T.S. Eliot, renewed 1968 by Valerie Eliot; from 'The Dry Salvages' in *Four Quartets*, © 1941 by T.S. Eliot, renewed 1969 by Valerie Eliot; from 'Little Gidding' in *Four Quartets*, © 1942 by T.S. Eliot, renewed 1970 by Valerie Eliot; all reprinted by kind permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company (USA).

² This term, most often applied to poetry, describes those works written in direct response to war. It came into effect largely after the First World War, which was catalogued to great effect by writers such as Rupert Brooke and Siegfried Sassoon.

an insightful handbook that covers technical and analytical aspects of the music and delves into the theology through a reading of Messiaen's own prefatory commentaries.³ Rebecca Rischin has put the *Quatuor* in historical context and there are essays by, among others, Iain Matheson and Robert Sherlaw Johnson, that take up some of the extra-musical themes in the work.⁴ Biographical information on Messiaen was scarce until the excellent work done by Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone. In their biography of Messiaen they situate the *Quatuor* in his chronology and provide archival information that elucidates the composition and reception history of the piece.⁵

For Eliot on the other hand, the literature is vast. Several major biographies detail aspects of his life. The two most authoritative of these, by Peter Ackroyd and Lyndall Gordon, are sympathetic to the problems of relating a poet's life to his work.⁶ There are several collections of essays or monographs devoted exclusively to *Four Quartets* that document the compositional process and examine the poems' themes.⁷ Inevitably this means pursuing the musical correspondences set up by Eliot's title. David Moody is sensitive to the problems of pressing the analogy of the quartet too far, but he does try to ascertain what exactly the four instruments (voices) are in the *Quartets*.⁸ For Keith Alldritt, the *Quartets* comprise 'four dramatic monologues which interweave and combine but which always remain recognisable'.⁹ Alldritt labels these voices the lecturer, the prophet, the conversationalist and the conjuror and offers an illuminating reading of the four poems from this perspective.

Many writers have connected Eliot and his work to specific composers, including Beethoven (notably the late quartets), Bartok (quartets 2–6), Tippett, Ives, Britten

³ Anthony Pople, *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁴ Rebecca Rischin, *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); Iain Matheson, 'The End of Time: A Biblical Theme in Messiaen's *Quatuor*', in *The Messiaen Companion*, ed. Peter Hill (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), pp. 234–248; Robert Sherlaw Johnson, 'Rhythmic Technique and Symbolism in the Music of Olivier Messiaen', in *Messiaen's Language of Mystical Love*, ed. Siglind Bruhn (New York: Garland, 1998), pp. 121–139.

⁵ Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Messiaen* (New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press, 2005). See especially pp. 94–104.

⁶ Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984); Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (London: Vintage, 1998).

⁷ See especially Helen Gardiner, *The Composition of 'Four Quartets'* (London: Faber & Faber, 1978); and Bernard Bergonzi, ed., *T. S. Eliot Four Quartets: A Selection of Critical Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1969).

⁸ A. David Moody, 'Four Quartets: Music, word, meaning and value', in *The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot*, ed. A. David Moody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 142–157.

⁹ Keith Alldritt, *Eliot's Four Quartets: Poetry as Chamber Music* (London: The Woburn Press, 1978), p. 39.

and Stravinsky.¹⁰ To my knowledge nobody has yet made a connection between Messiaen and Eliot partly because there is no documentary evidence of personal connection. So, like the connection of *Four Quartets* to Bartok and his quartets, this essay is speculative, but it provides another way of thinking about each work and it puts music to Eliot's words and vice-versa. Eliot has an epigraph to his *Quartets* by the late sixth century BCE Greek philosopher Heraclitus that reads: 'Although the word is common to most, men live as if each had a private wisdom of his own'. What he means by this is that although all (English) speakers share the same language, our interpretation of that language, of each of those words, is to a large degree private and personal. What this means for a comparative study of Messiaen and Eliot is that I have personally found connections between these works beyond any superficial theological or even biographical information about each man. I offer these up as a new way of approaching both works, acknowledging that I have my private wisdom about them as you do yours.

When listening to Messiaen I am increasingly convinced that at some point we have to put away the musicology and face the music. When we do, we have to listen carefully to what the music says to us on a deep and personal level, freed from Messiaen's verbal accoutrements and from conscious analysis. But, we also often have to try and express to others what the music means to us. Since we have no way to talk about music except in words, Eliot gives us a poetic way to engage with some philosophical and theological concepts in Messiaen's music. It is difficult trying to explain the meaning of a word in one language with that of another because subtlety and nuance are lost in translation. This is actually one of the themes of *Four Quartets*: the struggle of the poet trying to use words that:

[...] strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still. (BN, V, 149)¹¹

But, I am getting ahead of myself. Let me briefly contextualize the quartets for you.

¹⁰ For reference to the Beethoven quartets see for example, Grover Smith, *T. S. Eliot's Poetry and Plays* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1956), p. 253 and David Barndollar 'Movements in Time: *Four Quartets* and the Late String Quartets of Beethoven', in *T. S. Eliot's Orchestra: Critical Essays on Poetry and Music*, ed. John Xiros Cooper (New York: Garland, 2000), pp. 179–194. For Bartok, see Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet* (London: W. H. Allen, 1974), p. 261; and for Tippett, Ives, Britten and Stravinsky see the essays by Suzanne Robinson, J. Robert Browning, C. F. Pond, and Jayme Stayer respectively in *T. S. Eliot's Orchestra*.

¹¹ Quotations from *Four Quartets* are identified thus: (Quartet (by initials), movement, line).

Four Quartets

Although T. S. Eliot was born in the United States and studied at Harvard, he immigrated to England in 1914, became a citizen in 1927 (the year he converted to Anglicanism) and remained there for the rest of his life. Eliot was a renowned poet, dramatist and literary critic. He received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948 and is the author of such notable works as *The Waste Land*, *Murder in the Cathedral* and *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*.

Four Quartets consists of four separate but connected poems published between 1935 and 1942. They were released under the collective title *Four Quartets* in 1943 in the United States and in 1944 in the UK. The four poems are:

Burnt Norton (1935) (BN)
 East Coker (1940) (EC)
 The Dry Salvages (1941) (DS)
 Little Gidding (1942) (LG)

For Messiaen, calling his piece a quartet is one of simplicity and convention – any piece for four instruments can be called a quartet and, by the start of the twentieth century, the form of the piece can be anything from one to many movements. With regards to Eliot the answer is not so clear, though many have put forward valuable suggestions. Eliot told his friend John Hayward that he thought the title ‘quartet’ sets people on the ‘right track’, and explained that the title suggested to him ‘the notion of making a poem by weaving together three or four superficially unrelated themes: the ‘poem’ being the degree of success in making a new whole out of them’.¹² Each poem is related to a season and an element: ‘Burnt Norton’ (air/spring); ‘East Coker’ (earth/summer); ‘Dry Salvages’ (water/autumn); ‘Little Gidding’ (fire/winter). Each consists of five sections or ‘movements’. British poet Stephen Spender described the content of each movement thus: ‘the first consisting of introduction and statement; the second, the transcendence of the theme of the first, in a lyric-like minuet, followed by a sustained meditative passage further developing the thought; the third, illustrative, through the metaphor of journey or pilgrimage of the theme of exploration; the fourth, a lyric; the fifth, a summary of the whole, and a return to the theme of the opening movement’.¹³ The pattern for Messiaen’s *Quatuor* can be described in similar terms: the first movement is his introduction; the second, his programmatic statement; the third, an illustration of an aspect of the theme; the fourth, an interlude; the fifth and eighth, are lyrics; and the sixth and seventh are a further development of the theme. What both works demonstrate is an organic and holistic conception of form that demonstrates

¹² Letter dated 3 September 1942, quoted in Helen Gardiner, *The Composition of ‘Four Quartets’*, p. 26.

¹³ Stephen Spender, *Eliot* (Glasgow: Collins, 1975), p. 155.

sustained development of themes from one part to another while at the same time introducing new ideas throughout.

In an unpublished essay dating from 1933, Eliot declared that the aim for his writing was to achieve '[...] poetry so transparent that in reading it we are intent on what the poetry *points at*, and not the poetry, this seems to me the thing to try for. To get *beyond poetry*, as Beethoven, in his last works, strove to get *beyond music*.'¹⁴ Messiaen's aim for his music is similar: a struggle to get at what the music (and his own commentaries) *point at* and not the music itself. In fact, this desire to get 'beyond poetry' is a development from the Symboliste desire expressed by writer Paul Valéry as 'the common intention of several groups of poets to reclaim their own from music'.¹⁵ Indeed Valéry himself writes about the musical effect of poetry and notes that:

the meaning produced within you, far from destroying the musical form communicated to you, recalls it. The living pendulum that has swung from sound to sense swings back to its felt point of departure, as though the very sense which is present to your mind can find no other outlet or expression, no other answer, than the very music which gave it birth.¹⁶

Valéry was also aware, like Eliot, of the limitations of poetry, noting that the true communication between the poet and reader allows a freedom 'analogous to that which music allows to the hearer, although less extensive'.¹⁷

Music was important to Eliot. Scholar John Cooper describes it as Eliot's 'central symbol of the aesthetic state', and notes that it is, 'as such, the closest an earthbound intelligence, bent on practicing gestures of renunciation, can get to the divine'.¹⁸ Eliot himself noted that poetry was an effective means of communication, but not at the same level as music. In his essay *Poetry and Drama*, written in 1957, Eliot declared: 'This peculiar range of sensibility can be expressed by dramatic poetry, at its moments of greatest dramatic intensity. At such moments, we touch the border of those feelings which only music can express. We can never emulate

¹⁴ In an unpublished essay 'English poets as Letter Writers', in the Hayward Collection, King's College, Cambridge. Quoted in Paul Murray, *T. S. Eliot and Mysticism: The Secret History of 'Four Quartets'* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 17.

¹⁵ Paul Valéry, *The Art of Poetry*, trans. Denise Folliot, with an Introduction by T. S. Eliot (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958), p. 42.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 157. In his essay 'Pure Poetry', Valéry goes even further, and compares the resources of the musician with that of the poet concluding that the musician 'only has to assemble well-defined and well-prepared elements', whereas the poet's language constitutes 'an effort by one man to create an artificial order by means of a material of vulgar origin' (*Ibid.*, p. 190).

¹⁸ Cooper, John Xiros, *T. S. Eliot and the Ideology of 'Four Quartets'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 162.

music, because to arrive at the condition of music would be the annihilation of poetry, and especially of dramatic poetry.¹⁹

It is interesting to note that Messiaen was an avid commentator on his own music in a way that continues to paralyse other writers, who simply repeat what he said, respecting or perhaps guaranteeing the composer's invincible imprimatur; or, they echo his comments in a manner that more or less imitates his own style. Eliot on the other hand did not attempt to provide analysis or interpretation of his writing. There is a famous account of Eliot's refusal to elucidate his work: when a student asked Eliot what he meant by the line from *Ash Wednesday* (1930) 'Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper tree' (II, 43), Eliot replied that he meant: 'Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper tree'.²⁰

Quatuor pour la fin du Temps

The circumstances surrounding the composition of the *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* are unusual. Messiaen was just 32 years old when he was captured and taken to Stalag VIIIA, a prison camp about 70 miles east of Dresden. Three of his fellow prisoners were also musicians: the cellist, Étienne Pasquier; the clarinetist, Henri Akoka; and the violinist, Jean le Boulaire. Fortunately the violinist and clarinetist had managed to keep their instruments in captivity and a cello was found for Pasquier. In the camp Messiaen wrote what he described as 'an unpretentious little trio', for the three men, which they played in the camp washrooms.²¹ This piece became the 'Interlude', the fourth movement of the eight in the *Quatuor*, and a germinal one for musical and rhythmic material. For some of the other movements Messiaen reused material from earlier works, probably due to lack of time for wholly new composition and perhaps partly to bring attention to his own work as he was at that time relatively unknown as a composer.²²

The *Quatuor* was premiered in Stalag VIIIA on 15 January 1941, with Messiaen himself playing the piano (see Plate 8.1). The size of the audience varies

¹⁹ T. S. Eliot, 'Poetry and Drama', in *T. S. Eliot On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), p. 87.

²⁰ Spender, *Eliot*, p. 129.

²¹ Antoine Goléa, *Rencontres avec Olivier Messiaen* (Paris: Juilliard, 1961), p. 62.

²² The fifth movement, 'Praise to the eternity of Jesus', for cello and piano, first appeared as part of the 'Festivals of Beautiful Water' for a sextet of ondes Martenot, written for the Paris Exposition of 1937; and the eighth, 'Praise to the immortality of Jesus', for violin and piano, is his arrangement of the second part of his *Diptyque* for organ, composed in 1930. According to Hill and Simeone, a note in Messiaen's archives shows that two of the movements originally had different titles: 'the sixth movement is given as "Fanfare" (changed to "Dance of fury, for the seven trumpets")', while the eighth movement appears as "Second praise ('louange') to the eternity of Jesus" (changed to "Praise to the immortality of Jesus")'. See Hill and Simeone, *Messiaen*, p. 101.

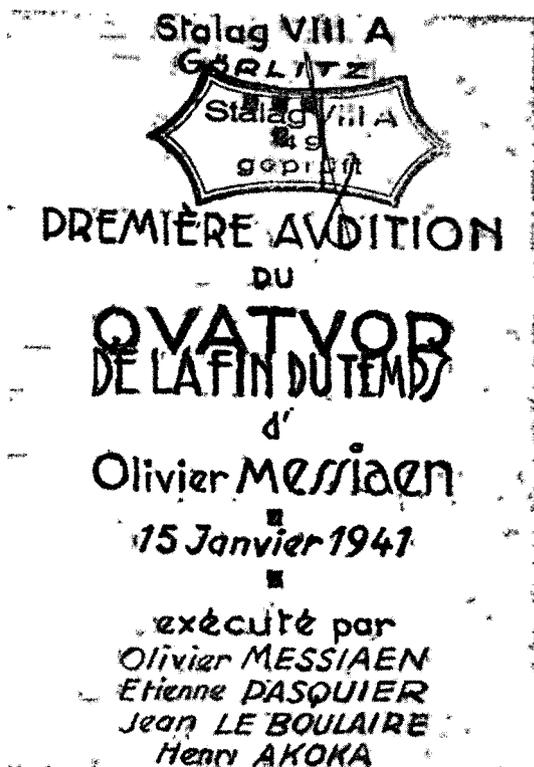


Plate 8.1 Poster for the premiere of the *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*

in different accounts, but the effect of the music was universally felt.²³ At the time of the premiere a French language newspaper called *Lumignon* was produced in the camp. In the first issue, dated 1 April 1941, there was a review of the *Quatuor* which noted that: 'this music honours everyone. This is its true grandeur, which draws us to it.'²⁴

The theme for the *Quatuor* is taken from the *Book of Revelation*, the last canonical book in the Bible. In *Revelation*, St John recounts that an angel visited him and called him to be a witness to what he sees in a series of visions. He then writes seven letters to the seven major churches in Asia warning them that Christ will be returning to earth. These letters describe the final judgment of God on the

²³ Messiaen claimed there were 5000 at the premiere, Pasquier said around 400 and Charles Jourdanet (an audience member on the occasion) recalls '150 or so'. See *ibid.*, pp. 100–102.

²⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 101. The review is signed with the initials V. M.

world using symbols and metaphors that require exegesis and are therefore open to a number of interpretations.

The *Book of Revelation* is powerfully evocative, but Messiaen warned against a superficial reading of it. He said: 'To regard the *Revelation* merely as an accumulation of cataclysms and catastrophes is to understand it poorly; the *Revelation* also contains great and marvellous periods of illumination, followed by solemn silences'.²⁵ Clearly, his music aims to express some of the less violent aspects of the story and, as the *Quatuor* lasts less than an hour, Messiaen obviously had to restrict the programmatic content to certain elements.

Messiaen wrote substantial notes in the preface to the score that tell us the general programme of the *Quatuor*, and of the form and content of individual movements. He also wrote in the score itself, annotating features such as birdsong and identifying important musical elements such as the rhythmic patterns in the cello and piano in the first movement, 'Crystal Liturgy'. The epigraph in the score declares that the work is 'in homage to the Angel of the Apocalypse, who raised a hand towards heaven saying "there shall be no more Time"'. In the first section of the preface, dedicated to a discussion of the subject of the *Quatuor* and to a commentary on each movement, he added the following passage:

I saw a mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in cloud, with a rainbow round his head. His face was like the sun, his feet like pillars of fire. He planted his right foot on the sea, his left foot on the land and, standing by the sea and the earth, he raised his hand to heaven and swore by him who lives for ever and ever, saying: There shall be no more time; but on the day the seventh angel sounds the trumpet, the hidden purpose of God will have been fulfilled. (*Revelation*, 10:1–7)

Since Messiaen himself stated 'I did not want in any way to make a commentary on the *Book of Revelation*, but only to justify my desire for the cessation of time', and because, in truth, the majority of the movements have only tangential connection to the apocalyptic theme, this essay does not discuss those sections or movements of the *Quatuor* explicitly related to the *Book of Revelation*, nor does it pursue any connections between notions of the end of time and the circumstances under which the piece was written and premiered.²⁶ Instead it delves deeper into some of the theological and philosophical issues regarding the end of time, and in particular how the cessation of time might be conceived in human terms and described as the still point of the turning world.

The titles of the eight movements of the *Quatuor* are as follows:

1. Crystal liturgy ['Liturgie de cristal']
2. Vocalise for the angel who announces the end of Time ['Vocalise pour l'ange qui annonce la fin du Temps']

²⁵ Goléa, *Rencontres*, p. 70.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

3. The abyss of the birds ['Abîme des oiseaux']
4. Interlude ['Intermède']
5. Praise to the eternity of Jesus ['Louange à l'éternité de Jésus']
6. Dance of fury, for the seven trumpets ['Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes']
7. Cluster of rainbows, for the angel who announces the end of Time ['Fouillis d'arcs-en-ciel, pour l'ange qui annonce la fin du Temps']
8. Praise to the immortality of Jesus ['Louange à l'immortalité de Jésus']

Thanks to these titles and his commentaries in the preface to the score, we know that Messiaen is specifically portraying the Angel of the Apocalypse in the first and third parts of the second movement, in the sixth movement, and also in part of the seventh movement. The fourth movement, the 'Interlude', has no thematic programme and is also not discussed in this essay, although Messiaen does note that it is related to the other movements 'by various melodic references'.²⁷ Movements 1, 3, 5 and 8 bear no direct relationship to events described in the *Book of Revelation* (although it is possible that the third movement, 'Abyss of the birds' refers to the bottomless pit described earlier in *Revelation* by the fifth angel).²⁸ These four movements, along with sections from the second and seventh movements, may, however, be related to the part of the epigraph ('there shall be no more Time') inscribed in the score, and I shall suggest some ways we might engage musically and theologically with them.

The end of Time

Immediately prior to the first performance of the *Quatuor* Messiaen gave a lecture in which he later recalled, 'I told them first of all that 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, and in this I relied on the magnificent text of the *Revelation*'.²⁹ Nearly two decades later he said, 'my initial thought was of the abolition of time itself, something infinitely mysterious and incomprehensible to most of the philosophers of time, from Plato to Bergson'.³⁰

Messiaen and Eliot are both concerned with physical, philosophical and theological aspects of time. Both have a sense that the cessation of time may be a type of heaven or a unity with a god who is without beginning or end. Eliot writes of the passage of human time as 'a time for living and for generation' (EC, I, 10),

²⁷ Messiaen, *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* (Paris: Durand, 1942), Préface, p. ii.

²⁸ For references to the abyss (or bottomless pit) see *Revelation*, 9:1–5, 11:7 and 20:1–3.

²⁹ Goléa, *Rencontres*, p. 67.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

echoing the famous passage in *Ecclesiastes*, and also of 'The time of the seasons and the constellations' (EC, I, 42), but he is more interested in philosophical aspects of time and these are best summarized by the opening passage of the first *Quartet*, 'Burnt Norton'. Eliot notes that:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past. (BN, I, 1)

He ascertains the primacy of the present noting that:

Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present. (BN, I, 44)

Time as part of the human condition is not always pleasant or easy according to Eliot, who believes that 'Time past and time future / Allow but a little consciousness' (BN, II, 83), and suggests that 'Only through time time is conquered' (BN, III, 90).

In addition to the commentaries he wrote about his own music, Messiaen discussed in some detail different aspects of time in the first movement of his *Traité de rythme, de couleur et d'ornithologie*, written between 1949 and 1992 and compiled posthumously by his wife, Yvonne Loriod, according to a plan put forward by Messiaen himself.³¹ According to Messiaen, 'The perception of time is the source of all music and all rhythm', which is why the first chapter of his treatise starts with a theological and philosophical discussion of time that is broad-ranging in its scope but often quite specific about how time relates to perception of music.

In the opening section of the first chapter, entitled 'Time and eternity', Messiaen defines both time and eternity by quoting St Thomas Aquinas, whose discussion in the *Summa Theologiae* makes the distinction that 'Eternity is an all-encompassing simultaneity, and in time there is a before and an after'.³² Messiaen also describes angelic time in the *aevum*, that is 'the intermediary between time and eternity', and human time, which he explains as being characterized by 'periodic changes, through the alternation of two events, the first never being identical but similar'.³³ Like Eliot, Messiaen uses the familiar passage from *Ecclesiastes* (3:1 ff) to illustrate human time: 'For everything there is a season, and a time for everything under

³¹ Olivier Messiaen, *Traité*. For a detailed analytical summary of the first chapter of the *Traité* see: Andrew Shenton, 'Observations on Time in Olivier Messiaen's *Traité*', in *Olivier Messiaen: Music, Art, Literature*, eds Christopher Dingle and Nigel Simeone (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 173–189.

³² Messiaen, *Traité I*, p. 7.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 7 and 8.

heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die.³⁴ He then moves his discussion to the end of human time and quotes again in his *Traité* the passage from *Revelation* that is the key quote for his *Quatuor*: 'I saw a mighty angel coming down from heaven ...'.³⁵ Although Messiaen's chapter in the *Traité* includes reference to more than 30 writers (including Einstein, Euclid and Newton) and includes discussion of such diverse topics as stellar time and geological time, he is clearly most interested in eternity and the notion that the Christian God is eternal.

Although the *Quatuor* is a comparatively early work, Messiaen is already deeply concerned with manipulating time, especially through rhythmic innovations. In the preface to the *Quatuor*, in addition to an explanation of the subject of the piece and a commentary on each movement, Messiaen included some performance practice advice, and a short summary of his novel and inventive rhythmic language. This explanation deals specifically with four techniques: first, added values (the addition of a note, rest or dot to a rhythm); second, augmentation and diminution of rhythms; third, non-retrogradable rhythms, that is to say rhythms that are palindromic; and lastly, rhythmic pedals (rhythms that provide a fundamental basis for the music). These four, plus Greek and Hindu rhythms and the use of polyrhythms (more than one rhythm played at the same time), give Messiaen a boundless range of rhythmic possibilities that can be astonishingly complex.³⁶

In fact, Messiaen sought to manipulate time through many specific musical techniques including repetitive forms, structural units in mosaic patterns, isorhythmic motets, palindromes and symmetrical patterns, monothematicism, monotonicity, unity of atmosphere, avoidance of conflict, neutralized dissonance, extremely slow tempos, static formal plans, fixed orchestration and relatively stable levels of tension.³⁷ There is clear evidence that later in life he was aware of the power a composer has over his material and of the effect that this has on the listener. In the first chapter of the *Traité*, Messiaen acknowledged that because the composer:

knows in advance all the pasts and the futures [of the work] [...] he can transform the present so that it touches the past or the future [...] he can push his research in all possible forms offered by inversions or permutations of duration: forward

³⁴ *Ecclesiastes*, 3:1 ff.

³⁵ *Revelation*, 10:1 ff.

³⁶ Lavignac's *Encyclopédie de la Musique* (the 120 *deçi-tâlas* listed by Sharnigadeva in his treatise *Samgīta-ratnākara*). A. Lavignac and L. de la Laurencie (eds), *Encyclopédie de la musique et dictionnaire du conservatoire* (Paris: Delagrave, 1913–31).

³⁷ See for example, Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time* (London/Boston: Faber & Faber, 1985), and Diane Luchese, *Olivier Messiaen's Slow Music: Glimpses of Eternity in Time* (PhD dissertation, Northwestern University, 1998), especially chapter 2, pp. 10–65.

motion, retrograde motion, movement from the centre to the extremes, movement from the extremes to the centre, and a multitude of other movements.³⁸

This manipulation of musical material affects the listeners regardless of their knowledge of any extra-musical programme so, to a certain extent, Messiaen's programme *is* going to be evident in the music even if the listener is not aware of the programme prior to hearing the music. The music does 'map' to the programme to a large extent and because the human response to music is broadly the same (for example, slow and quiet = calm), there is an extent to which Messiaen's broad intentions may be perceived without prior knowledge of the programme (or ignoring it). We can then perhaps understand Eliot when he says: 'We had the experience but missed the meaning' (DS, II, 93) and we can perhaps recover some of the meaning through listening, even if the listening is according to our own wisdom.

It is worth looking in some detail at a specific movement of the *Quatuor* to see how Messiaen pushed the boundaries of technique to a programmatic end. I have previously undertaken a brief hermeneutical analysis of 'Crystal liturgy' in which I discussed the curious and ambiguous title and attempted to relate it to the apocalyptic programme and to analyse the extra-musical elements including the epigraph and annotations in the score.³⁹ Messiaen's commentary for this first movement states: 'Between three and four o'clock in the morning, the dawn chorus: a blackbird or a nightingale soloist improvises, surrounded by a shimmer of sound, a halo of trills lost very high in the trees. Transpose this to the religious plane: you will have the harmonious silence of heaven.'⁴⁰ The most significant part of this description is the final sentence in which Messiaen asks us to make a huge leap of imagination (and faith) and transpose a mundane scene to a heavenly one. If we are willing and able to do this we might be able to hear the 'harmonious silence of heaven', an image Eliot suggests is perhaps a type of music 'heard so deeply / That it is not heard at all' (DS, V, 210).

There are two notable techniques in the 'Crystal liturgy' that contribute to the attempt at the negation of time and the illustration of heaven. The first is the use of 'isorhythm'. This technique combines a pattern of melodic or harmonic material (called the 'color') over a different pattern of rhythmic material of a different length (called the 'talea'). In 'Crystal liturgy', the piano has a sequence of 29 chords, which is played to a rhythmic sequence of 17 values. Once the rhythmic pattern has been completed it begins again on the 18th chord and then when the chord sequence has finished it begins again, this time on the 13th rhythm of the second time through the rhythmic sequence. Obviously it would take a long time to play out all the 493 possibilities of this isorhythm until the two sequences realign

³⁸ Messiaen, *Traité I*, p. 28.

³⁹ See: Andrew Shenton, *Olivier Messiaen's System of Signs: Notes Towards Understanding His Music* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 65–67.

⁴⁰ Messiaen, *Quatuor*, Prêface, p. i.

at their respective beginnings, so what we hear is a fragment, one that is isolated and taken out of time.

The cello part in this movement is also organized using isorhythmic technique, but there is a further innovation in this part. The melodic material of the cello part, (the 'color'), is a five-note melodic shape. The innovation is to be found in the rhythmic ostinato, which is a 15-note figure made up of two cells, one of three notes and one of 12. Both of these are non-retrogradable, that is to say they are palindromic about their midpoint. We may not be aware of these subtleties when we are listening, but it is certain that Messiaen was aware of the effect they would have at some level on the audience as he manages his material towards both an explicit and implicit goal.

In Messiaen's commentary for this movement he describes the dawn chorus in a forest scene but suggests that it has a heavenly counterpart. Could it be that the clarinet and violin represent the mundane, planted on earth and fixed with birdsong, and at the same time a parallel universe unfolds in the piano and cello that allows us a distorted glimpse of heaven, where (to use St Paul's analogy) we see through the glass a little less darkly?

The unattended moment

One of the central themes in *Four Quartets* is a moment 'in and out of time', a moment of 'sudden illumination' where we perceive what Eliot described in his earlier poem *The Waste Land* as 'the heart of light, the silence'.⁴¹ The timeless moment is a moment of spiritual fulfilment beyond description by mere words which 'strain, / Crack and sometimes break, under the burden' (BN, V, 149). It comes without warning, and, as I quoted above, Eliot suggests that although 'We had the experience but missed the meaning', the meaning can be recovered at least in part because 'approach to the meaning restores the experience / In a different form, beyond any meaning / We can assign to happiness' (DS, II, 94). In the fifth section of 'The Dry Salvages' Eliot summarizes the experience of the moment and outlines the action it behooves us as humans 'Caught in the form of limitation / Between un-being and being' (BN, V, 167), to take in order to restore the meaning:

But to apprehend
The point of intersection of the timeless
With time, is an occupation for the saint—
No occupation either, but something given
And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,
Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender. (DS, V, 200)

⁴¹ *The Waste Land* (London: Faber & Faber, 1922), I, 'The Burial of the Dead', line 41.

The timeless moment, the 'unattended moment', can happen anywhere. At these places we may be joined with time past and time future, but for Eliot the moment of sudden illumination can only be recalled as a moment in time because:

[...] only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,
 The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,
 The moment in the draughty church at smokefall
 Be remembered; involved with past and future. (BN, II, 86)

The isolated moments are only 'hints and guesses, / Hints followed by guesses' (DS, V, 212), however, we are able to partly restore the meaning through a combination of 'prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action' (DS, V, 214).

This 'unattended moment' occurs many times in Messiaen's music. For example, in the *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité* Messiaen tries to describe God's tremendous presence, suggesting in 'Méditation IV' that 'the strangeness of the timbres and the bird song chosen should evoke an unknown dimension', and that 'all we can know of God is summed up by these words that are so complex and yet so simple: *He is*. Words that we can only comprehend in flashes, in rare and brief moments of illumination'.⁴²

In the *Quatuor*, Messiaen is at one point explicit about this other-worldly moment. In the programme note for the seventh movement, he describes a state whereby in his dreams he remarks that: 'I hear and see ordered melodies and chords and familiar hues and forms; then following this transitory stage I pass into the unreal and submit ecstatically to a vortex, a dizzying interpretation of superhuman sounds and colours'.⁴³ His description is of mystical encounter and his language is revealing: unreal [*irréel*], ecstatic [*extase*] and superhuman [*surhumain*]. Musically the surreal dream is reinvisioned through trills, glissandi, tempo changes, coloured chords and arpeggiated figures, especially at figure K in the score, where the composer submits completely to the ecstatic experience. By putting this experience into music he is able to partly restore it and to share it with his listeners. As Eliot noted, 'approach to the meaning restores the experience / In a different form', so we are not able to duplicate Messiaen's dream exactly but, since he is a composer of remarkable genius, these musical 'hints and guesses' are often enough to allow any listener some sort of mystical encounter of their own.

Messiaen also tries to depict heaven itself. In the first movement, 'Crystal liturgy', this is an attempt to evoke the 'harmonious silence of heaven'. In the second movement, 'Vocalise, for the angel who announces the end of Time', the music is divided into three sections: the first and third parts are short and, in Messiaen's own words, 'evoke the power of the mighty angel, his hair a rainbow, and his clothing mist'. The second, more extended section portrays

⁴² Messiaen, *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité* (Paris: Leduc, 1973), preface to 'Méditation IV', p. 29.

⁴³ Messiaen, *Quatuor*, Préface, p. ii.

what Messiaen described as 'the ineffable harmonies of heaven'. The musical means of achieving this effect are, in Messiaen's words, 'soft cascades of blue-orange chords, encircling with their distant carillon the plainchant-like recitative of the violin and cello'.⁴⁴ Like the cluster of rainbows that surround the Angel of the Apocalypse, this heaven is vague and immaterial, serene and tranquil, echoing the paradoxical 'harmonious silence' Messiaen describes in the first movement. Messiaen's language signifies a religious heaven with its 'carillon' and 'plainchant'. This heaven is, of course, personal and unique, but it is interesting to note that is not predicated on any description of the New Jerusalem as describe in *Revelation* and, consciously or unconsciously, Messiaen never overburdens it with any dogmatic language that would preclude a non-Catholic from appreciating or even participating in this vision. In fact, as I have noted before, 'it is difficult for us to define an eschatology for Messiaen, because his oeuvre is not a catechism and does not address any defined Catholic notions of death, human destiny, the Second Coming or the Last Judgment'.⁴⁵

The still point of the turning world

Recalling the unattended moment, or trying to regain it, requires for Eliot moving towards the 'still point of the turning world'. This concept is born of the philosophical model of serenity and stillness that imagines a single point at the centre of a circle or globe, which is a point of complete stillness. This state of grace, 'a condition of simplicity / (costing not less than everything)' (LG, V, 253), Eliot believes should be the pursuit of every Christian. The choice is to go by way of possession (the way up), or the way of dispossession (the way down), both of which the poems' epigraph from Heraclitus informs us will bring us to the same place, to 'the still point of the turning world' (BN, II, 62). Eliot has called for this serenity several times in the earlier quartets such as in *East Coker*, where he writes, 'I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you / Which shall be the darkness of God' (EC, III, 112), and he urges us that 'We must be still and still moving / Into another intensity / For a further union, a deeper communion' (EC, V, 204). This same attitude of prayer as the inspiration for our daily lives is also expressed in *Ash Wednesday* where Eliot writes: 'Teach us to care and not to care / Teach us to sit still' (VI, 211). Prayer is however, 'more / Than an order of words, the conscious occupation / Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying', (LG, I, 46) it is 'a lifetime burning in every moment' (EC, V, 194).

The two 'Louange' movements of Messiaen's *Quatuor* are for me superb examples of how Messiaen has composed music that moves us to the 'still point'. Although perhaps heretical to those people who believe that Messiaen's word is the final one regarding comprehension of his music, we have to acknowledge that

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. i.

⁴⁵ Shenton, *Olivier Messiaen's System of Signs*, p. 27.

for many people Messiaen's text is an impediment to listening and although they may be drawn to the music they are not drawn to the programme. In truth, when I hear these movements I do not hear them as paeans to Jesus, though I may be partly conscious of Messiaen's commentaries. For me, the long and ecstatic phrases in the string parts and the regular pulsing of the piano are part of a formal design that transcends the mundane and is in many ways a transformative experience.

The form of these movements is important to the effect Messiaen is trying to create. Eliot, perpetually concerned with technique, suggests that:

Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
Moves perpetually in its stillness. (BN, V, 140)

Eliot's image of a Chinese vase that although stationary has perpetual circular movement by virtue of its shape and perhaps its painted design, is a strong parallel to Messiaen's music in these movements which itself moves perpetually in its stillness.

Messiaen may himself have had this experience of the unattended moment, of contact with the divine, many times, but, for most of us, as Eliot points out:

[...] there is only the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time,
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all [...] (DS, V, 206)

By giving his music an explicit programme Messiaen has asked for it to be more than 'absolute' music (music for its own sake), and he thereby assigns it a function beyond that required of a piece of music without a programme. Its success should therefore be judged, at least in part, on the fulfilment of extra-musical function. Messiaen's *Quatuor* has served us well if it has caused us to reflect even for a moment on war or enticed us to (re)read the *Book of Revelation* or to think about time and the way it affects our lives.

But, if it has helped us to mediate our relationship with our own God (bearing in mind the cautionary epigraph Eliot uses for his *Quartets* that 'although the word is common to most, we live as if we each had a private wisdom of our own'), then it has achieved both its implicit and explicit goals. The same is true for Eliot in his *Quartets*, although because his medium is language, his ideas and the ones they spark in us are perhaps easier for us to verbalize and therefore comprehend.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ For more discussion on the question of understanding, see Shenton, *Olivier Messiaen's System of Signs*, especially pp. 3–11, and 159–171.

In conclusion I would like to leave you with two thoughts that perhaps provide a way to understand Messiaen's theological music for both the Christian and the non-Christian alike. The first is simply stated in an essay by the English poet W. H. Auden:

You cannot tell people what to do, you can only tell them parables; and that is what art really is, particular stories of particular people and experiences, from which each according to his immediate and peculiar needs may draw his own conclusions.⁴⁷

Messiaen gives us much extra-musical information, but he is not proselytizing; rather he invites us to partake of the music and theology only to the extent we are willing and able.

Eliot himself summarizes our engagement with any music, and especially with the transformative aspect of music whether that is the transcendence of time, the moment of revelation or the move towards 'serenity, stillness and reconciliation'. In the fifth section of 'The Dry Salvages' (line 211), Eliot reminds us of the most crucial and overwhelming feature of music and its manifold capabilities:

you are the music / While the music lasts.

⁴⁷ W. H. Auden, 'Psychology and Art To-day', in *The Arts To-day*, ed. Geoffrey Gregson (London: John Lane, 1935), p. 18.