

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Alice Sara Ott & Friends: Quartet for the End of Time

Thursday 22 June 2023, 6.30pm & 8.30pm

Purcell Room at Queen Elizabeth Hall

Welcome to Classical Music: Spring/Summer 2023. With this programme, we continue to celebrate classical music in all its forms with leading artists and ensembles from the UK and around the world.

In close collaboration with our dynamic family of Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists, we are presenting the full spectrum of classical music, as well as embracing new approaches to how we do so. We are thrilled to welcome such an incredible range of global artists to our spaces – and beyond – to perform, and you to see them.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Olivier Messiaen (1908-92)

Quatuor pour la fin du temps (Quartet for the end of time) 50'

- I. *Liturgie de cristal*
- II. *Vocalise, pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin du temps*
- III. *Abîme des oiseaux*
- IV. *Intermède*
- V. *Louange à l'éternité de Jésus*
- VI. *Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes*
- VII. *Fouillis d'arcs-en-ciel, pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin du temps*
- VIII. *Louange à l'immortalité de Jésus*

Performers

Alice Sara Ott *piano*

Thomas Reif *violin*

Sebastian Klinger *cello*

Sebastian Manz *clarinet*

From around the age of 50, Olivier Messiaen was an international figure, travelling the world to attend performances, give lectures, and go out to listen to the birds, whose songs fill his music. He spent his 80th birthday here at the Southbank Centre, when his opera *Saint François d'Assise* was presented for the occasion.

From long before, though, he was thoroughly French. His father was a lycée teacher of English, his mother, Cécile Sauvage, a poet. From her he picked up a surrealist vision of immaterial shapes and shapings as vividly present – a vision that in his case became a joyous Catholic faith he expressed in nearly all his music. One further outcome of this faith was his decision to train as an organist and serve, as he did throughout his adult life, at one of the great churches of Paris.

To be a composer was also an early aim. He started at the Paris Conservatoire in 1919, when he was 11. By the time he left in 1930 he was already writing music of a completely original kind, warm and strange, with regular consonances moving along unusual paths or remaining totally still. He went back to the Conservatoire to teach during World War Two, and stayed there for decades, his pupils including many who became prominent composers themselves, from Pierre Boulez to George Benjamin.

It was the war that took him out of France for the first time. Called up for military service, he was captured as France fell to German forces in the early summer of 1940. His destination was a prisoner-of-war camp in eastern Germany, where he set about writing a piece for himself, on piano, and three fellow musicians, on clarinet, violin and cello. This was the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (Quartet for the End of Time), which he and his colleagues performed for an audience of prisoners and guards on 15 January 1941, under freezing conditions.

Each performance lasts approximately 1 hour without interval.

There are many reasons why Messiaen at this moment could have felt close to the end of time. His country was under enemy occupation. He was separated from his wife and their young son. But, as ever, the topic took on a religious colouring, and his thoughts turned to a passage in the last book of the New Testament – the Apocalypse, or Revelation – in which a great angel comes down from heaven to declare, amid potent imagery of fire, sun, rainbow and trumpets: ‘There will be no more time.’

Messiaen had already composed organ works in several movements commenting on aspects of an idea or story from the Bible. Now he did the same, but for the mixed quartet given him by circumstance. The instruments present the end of time as the end of progression, with passages of whirling repetition or mysterious unchangingness, sudden change or virtual stasis. They take us into worlds of exhilaration, wonder and dread, and ultimately of supreme love. Such is the nature of God for a Catholic believer – though, even if theological references are inevitable in speaking of Messiaen’s intentions, the music passes beyond words and beyond belief systems.

In the first movement, ‘Crystal Liturgy’, piano and cello set up a quasi-eternal mechanism, hailed by clarinet and violin with birdsong solos. After this comes a wordless song on violin and cello for the angel, with ‘rainbow water droplets’ from the piano, all set inside music evoking the heavenly being’s majestic might. Then the clarinet, alone, brings together two opposed images: the abyss of death in great crescendos, arpeggios straddling the instrument’s range and slow melody, and against all this, escaping, the eternal song of birds.

The fourth movement is an interlude, a scherzo, omitting the piano: the composer rests to listen. This is followed by a hymn to Jesus as Eternal Word, scored for cello and piano in utterly calm E major under the marking: ‘Infinitely slow, ecstatic.’

Zooming back to angelic power, the sixth movement is music of the ‘irresistible movement of steel, of huge blocks of purple fury, of abandonment frozen’, as Messiaen’s preface puts it, and he draws attention also to how the instruments imitate trumpets and gongs. The piece is based on a powerfully rhythmic theme, worked to a climax in which it is distended in time and register.

The seventh movement refers back to the second, whose melodic and dynamic ideas are first alternated, then combined. Against all physical possibility, rainbows are bunched together in what Messiaen calls ‘a gyrating interpenetration of superhuman colours’. The finale then takes a further step on from the fifth movement, into a higher realm of ecstasy, as violin and piano sing in praise of Jesus as Resurrected Man.

Released later in 1941, Messiaen returned to Paris, to his organ, and to his students, among whom was a gifted pianist, Yvonne Loriod. She became his next performer of choice for a long sequence of works. In 1961, two years after Messiaen had lost his first wife, he and Loriod were married, and she was then his constant partner.

Programme notes © Paul Griffiths

Find out more

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