



## PROGRAM NOTES

### **Albert Roussel: *Trio for Flute, Viola & Cello, op. 40***

In 1894 a twenty-five year old Albert Roussel, having resigned from the French Navy after spending seven years as a midshipman, began his first formal studies in harmony and counterpoint. This also marked the beginning of his first serious efforts in composition while studying with Vincent d'Indy at the Schola Cantorum in Paris. In his autobiography he wrote that his style in those years was “slightly influenced by Debussy,” (more than a slight understatement).

Composing came to a standstill for Roussel, as it did for so many, during World War I, when he served as an ambulance driver and later artillery officer on the Western Front. In the midst of the horrors of that war, he wrote to his wife,

We shall have to begin to live again under a new conception of life; which is not to say that everything that was done before the war will be forgotten, but that everything that will be done after it will have to be different.

A new conception of life for Roussel included a new conception of music: music of the past not forgotten – but, somehow, different. His search for a newly conceived music after the war did not go unnoticed. The French impressionists felt betrayed. Critic Emile Vuillermoz wrote, “Albert Roussel has deserted us.”

In 1918 Roussel bought a summer house in Normandy and, now approaching age fifty, finally settled down to devote the rest of his life to composing, finding his own distinctive neo-classical voice, still with echoes of impressionism, creating his most distinctive and well-known works.

The 1929 *Trio for Flute, Viola and Cello* is a wonderful example of Roussel’s neoclassical turn to the idea of counterpoint – not so much a return to 17th/18th-century models and strict rules of species counterpoint, but a reimagining of the fundamental nature of counterpoint. The old note-*contra*-note “rules” were not entirely ignored – after all, Roussel’s harmonic palette was still fundamentally tonal – but their definition was enlarged. As jazz pianist and Pulitzer composer Mel Powell once put it, counterpoint today is best defined as “the art of creating multiplicity.”

When Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, the 20th century’s “patron saint of chamber music,” offered a commission to Roussel in 1929, she only stipulated that one of the instruments be a flute. Roussel initially thought of writing for flute and piano; flute and string quartet; or flute, violin, and cello, perhaps with piano. He finally settled on a highly unconventional choice: a flute, with its naturally bright timbre and high range, and two strings, viola and cello, with their naturally more mellow timbre and lower range. Besides the contrast of bright vs. mellow, this choice leaves a large gap between the natural pitch ranges (tessituras) between flute and strings. Given the ensembles he was considering at first, it’s obvious that Roussel purposely made his selection both for the contrast in colors and for the gap in the trio’s overall tessitura. And these “quirks” in turn affect the counterpoint that permeates this piece. Throughout, the voices alternate roles in unexpected ways; impinge on one another’s territory; occasionally cooperate to accompany





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a theme played solo; unify long enough to express a single idea, then split off in two or three directions.

One of the memorable moments in this work occurs about halfway through the last movement. While the flute is playing a lovely melody, the viola and cello are imitating the flute's characteristic sound by playing "natural harmonics" (touching a string lightly at certain nodes, producing overtones that usually sound higher than the node). The result is not a flute melody supported by the usual accompaniment from voices below, but a flute melody embraced by a halo of flute sounds. A reimagined counterpoint. And a touch of impressionism – not forgotten, but now different.

Stephen Soderberg

### **Camille Saint-Saëns: *Fantaisie for violin & harp, Op. 124***

The *Fantaisie* was composed on a trip to the Italian Riviera in March of 1907 when Saint-Saëns was 70. It was written for the Eissler sisters: Marianne, a violinist and Clara, a harpist; Saint-Saëns had met them some ten years earlier and promised them a duo. The sisters, together with their pianist sister Frida, were trained at the Vienna Conservatoire and developed separate solo careers, but they often toured Europe together throughout the last decade of the nineteenth century. The Eissler sisters played the *Fantaisie* for Saint-Saëns on a trip through Paris in May of 1908. Saint-Saëns wrote to his publisher, "The Demoiselles Eissler were in transit in Paris and have played my duo for me, which pleased me very much." They premiered the work in London that July. The beauty of the piece and its thoroughly romantic style made it an instant favorite with audiences.

Saint-Saëns knew both instruments well by this time, and the *Fantaisie* teems with highly idiomatic and virtuosic writing throughout for both violin and harp. Analytically the work is in one movement with as many as seven, or as few as four, distinct sections, depending on how one wishes to parse it. One interesting (and easy to hear) technical feature occurs toward the end as the violin recalls the floating theme from the opening, but now played over this two-bar ostinato in the harp.

("Ostinato," Italian for "obstinate," is the term for the obstinate repetition of a musical figure (usually a bass) over and over, such as the unforgettable bass pattern that's the ground for the Pachelbel *Canon*.)

This two-bar ostinato pattern is repeated twenty times over 40 bars. Both violin and harp become more and more agitated, cresting a fortissimo after 16 repetitions of the ostinato and then beginning to calm as the ostinato stutters to a standstill. The end is now close – just 40 more bars – as we begin to hear elements of the opening music, adding just a touch of symmetry. Then a little while and the harp's two final harmonics.

Stephen Soderberg





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### **Olivier Messiaen: *Quartet for the End of Time***

OLIVIER MESSIAEN'S 'Quartet for the End of Time' is most famous for having been written in the German prison camp Stalag VIIIa, where it had its first performance in 1940. Having found a clarinetist, a cellist, and a violinist at the camp, Messiaen began to write a piece for the available forces (which included himself at an understandably sub-standard upright piano); when he finished, they gave it what will forever stand as one of the weirdest and most moving premieres in musical history.

Surprisingly, Messiaen's stated intentions for the work have very little to do with apocalyptic behavior from the nations of the world, and just as little to do with his own internment. In retrospect and with critical distance, we might say that its end-time themes must have arisen at least in part from the war and from the horror we (ought to) immediately associate with prison camps – it is nearly impossible to imagine that a work composed under such circumstances could represent birdsong without longing for flight, or announce global cataclysms without reference to those so close at hand. But then Messiaen was an odd bird.

The 'Quartet for the End of Time', like virtually all of Messiaen's oeuvre, is a profoundly Catholic piece of music. Its title is taken from Revelation 10:6, wherein the last (seventh) angel announces: 'there shall be no more delay'; or, in a somewhat drier (and less common) reading of 'chronos' or 'tempus': 'there shall be time no longer.' Many readings of this passage take it to be a fairly straightforward announcement of the beginning of the end (i.e., "This is It."); Messiaen chose a more nuanced reading, derived from the second translation, which takes the passage to mean that Time itself will cease to have meaning. This idea raises a profound issue for a composer: what is music without time? (And what, then, will all those angels do with all those harps?) The 'Quartet for the End of Time' attempts to make manifest – with all that 'manifest' may religiously imply – music in the absence of time and the presence of eternity.

The techniques which Messiaen employed to create this sensual illusion were very radical; by way of introduction, here is a brief description of four of them, all rhythmic (his pitch strategies are related, but harder to describe in a short space):

1. Using rhythmic palindromes ('non-retrogradable rhythms'), whose reversibility implies a strange Alpha-Omega equivalence in past and future and an ambiguity in temporal motion:
2. Using sequences of rhythm and pitch with prime number length against one another, making gargantuan polyrhythms which meet only rarely. (The cycle in the first movement of the 'Quartet' uses 17 pitches against 29 note-values. Combined with the line of the cello, the patterns would take more than two hours to come full circle.) Patterns of this scale are not directly or completely perceptible, but live just below what is apparent, and give the sense of something much, much larger than we are:
3. Adding extra notes to irregularize counting and to simulate ancient Greek and Hindu poetry rhythms:





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4. Employing tempos so slow that they defy the impulse to measure time in music: the fifth movement's tempo marking is 'infinitely slow'.

In addition to giving a brief explanation in the published version of the piece for some of his compositional strategies, Messiaen gave a brief background for each of its movements. It reads (translated from the French) as follows:

1. Liturgy of crystal. Between three and four o'clock in the morning, the awakening of the birds: a blackbird or a solo nightingale improvises, surrounded by efflorescent sound, by a halo of trills lost high in the trees...

2. Vocalise, for the Angel who announces the end of Time. The first and third parts (very short) evoke the power of this mighty angel, a rainbow upon his head and clothed with a cloud, who sets one foot on the sea and one foot on the earth. In the middle section are the impalpable harmonies of heaven. In the piano, sweet cascades of blue-orange chords, enclosing in their distant chimes the almost plainchant song of the violin and cello.

3. Abyss of the birds. Clarinet alone. The abyss is Time with its sadness, its weariness. The birds are the opposite to Time; they are our desire for light, for stars, for rainbows, and for jubilant songs.

4. Interlude. Scherzo, of a more individual character than the other movements, but linked to them nevertheless by certain melodic recollections.

5. Praise to the Eternity of Jesus. Jesus is considered here as the Word. A broad phrase, infinitely slow, on the violoncello, magnifies with love and reverence the eternity of the Word, powerful and gentle, ... 'In the beginning was the Word, and Word was with God, and the Word was God.'

6. Dance of fury, for the seven trumpets. Rhythmically, the most characteristic piece in the series. The four instruments in unison take on the aspect of gongs and trumpets (the first six trumpets of the Apocalypse were followed by various catastrophes, the trumpet of the seventh angel announced the consummation of the mystery of God). Use of added [rhythmic] values, rhythms augmented or diminished... Music of stone, of formidable, sonorous granite...

6. A mingling of rainbows for the Angel who announces the end of Time. Certain passages from the second movement recur here. The powerful angel appears, above all the rainbow that covers him... In my dreams I hear and see a catalogue of chords and melodies, familiar colors and forms... The swords of fire, these outpourings of blue orange lava, these turbulent stars...

8. Praise to the Immortality of Jesus. Expansive solo violin, counterpart to the violoncello solo of the fifth movement. Why this second encomium? It addresses more specifically the second aspect of Jesus, Jesus the Man, the Word made flesh... Its slow ascent toward the most extreme point of tension is the ascension of man toward his God, of the child of God toward his Father, of the being made divine toward Paradise.

Whatever Messiaen intended for the meaning and reception of the Quatuor, it has come to mean a great many things for a great many people. One startling example of this comes from the pianist Charles Bodman Rae, who was boarding at the home of Polish architect Aleksander Lyczewski and innocently preparing for a performance of the Quartet in 1981:





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One day, I heard Aleksander Lyczewski rushing downstairs from his painting studio and he then burst into my room with a mixed expression of confusion and distress on his face. He said he recognized the piece I was playing and wanted to know who had composed it. He sat down and I explained.... He then recounted to me his experience as a prisoner of war in the same camp... it took him some time to regain his composure... he remembered his fellow-prisoners remaining in complete silence for the hour or so that it took to perform the piece... (Pople, p. 9)

Recalling the first performance, Messiaen wrote that he had 'never... been listened to with such consideration and understanding.' Messiaen must surely have understood that some, or even most, of the audience's understandings were not Catholic. As is made musically explicit in the first movement, however, Messiaen was as prepared as anyone to allow for the existence of themes and systems larger than the scale of individual understanding.

Tim Summers

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