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Messiaen: Quatuor Pour La Fin Du Temps (Cambridge Music Handbooks)



Synopsis

This book is about one musical work, the popular Quartet for the End of Time by the great French composer Olivier Messiaen. Like virtually all of his works, the Quartet combines the striking technical achievement of Messiaen's rich and attractive musical style with a deeply felt theological inspiration. Anthony Pople's book provides an introduction to Messiaen's style through an examination of this great work, showing how it came to be composed while Messiaen was a prisoner-of-war and premiered under extraordinary conditions in Stalag VIIIA in 1941. He gives an in-depth assessment of each of its eight movements.

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Customer Reviews

Olivier Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la Fin du Temps* is, in many ways, a textbook example of all of the techniques he had consolidated up until 1941 (and is still a characteristic "textbook" up until 1950). This explains the profusion of examples from this work that find their way into Messiaen's literal textbook dating from this period, *Technique de mon langage musical*. Considering this, Anthony Pople's handbook on *Quatuor pour la Fin du Temps* is an excellent entry into the world of Messiaen. Pople amply extracts the most prevalent techniques in this music directly from *Technique de mon langage musical* (A publication relatively hard to find outside of the university or conservatory library), and elaborates on them. Due to the length and space (as well as the presumed targeted audience) provided for Cambridge Handbooks, some of the analysis is rather glossed over: the

rhythmic and harmonic pedals in 'Liturgie de cristal', for example, do indeed have variation, contrary to Pople's explanation of these cycles. To Pople's credit, he points out one of the instances of this in the rhythmic pedal of the cello. As this may only occur in the first printing of this book, the following may be excused if it has been corrected in subsequent editions. In the Appendix that cites the modes of limited transposition, there is a mistake in the example of Mode 7. The correct version in C transposition is C, Db, D natural, Eb, F, F#, G, Ab, A natural, B (enharmonically spelled). Although this may seem like nitpicking, the suggestion will surely be helpful to the frustrated student trying to realize the 6 proper transpositions to no avail. This is obviously a misprint, as Anthony Pople correctly cites the mode in his paper "Messiaen's Musical Language: An Introduction", in *The Messiaen Companion*. Overall, this is a wise place to start in any study or appreciation of Olivier Messiaen's music, and Anthony Pople should be commended for this exceptional work.

Anthony Pople's work on Olivier Messiaen's war-time masterpiece "Quatuor pour la fin du temps" is, like all entries in the Cambridge Music Handbooks series, a rigorous musicological examination. The introduction of the work gives some background on Messiaen, speaking about his life and earlier works (useful for understanding where some of the material of the fifth movement came from). The the Quatuor's creation, within the Stalag prisoner-of-war camp in Nazi Germany, is legendary and receives some discussion here, although those hoping for even more information on the setting should turn to Rebecca Rishin's "For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet" (Cornell University Press, 2003). Each of the eight movements of the Quatuor has its own chapter, and the analysis differs based on the special properties of each. For example, form and colour are the focus of the second movement ("Vocalise..."), while birdsong is the major topic of the third ("Abime des oiseaux"). The quartet was written as Messiaen was conducting the experiments that led to his early book "Technique", and Pople carefully charts the innovations of rhythm and pitch that Messiaen was developing at this time. As with all entries in the CMH series, quotations from the score abound. If you have some musical training, Pople's book will vastly expand your appreciation of the "Quatuor". I went from thinking it a juvenile work compared to "Des canyons aux etoiles" or "Eclairs sur l'aux-dela" to seeing it as a piece of marvellous ingenuity.

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