

Centrestage

Contemplating the end of time

We may not find a neat solution to end war and injustice, but we can dare to dream of a better world through music.

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There are songs that we carry with us through life like talismans, providing us with comfort, counsel, and delight. As we grow older and come to terms with the world, the message and emotional impact of these songs take on fresh meaning in our lives.

I am a professional musician and I have carried many songs in my head and hands over the years. However, Olivier Messiaen's Quartet For The End Of Time is the only piece of music that holds this special power for me. I first encountered this monumental work in 2008 as a chamber music assignment at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music. At 16, I was in awe of the ingenuity and complexity of the music and overwhelmed by its weighty context and Messiaen's extraordinary personal response.

The Quartet was composed during the Second World War at the Stalag VIII-A prisoner-of-war

camp where Messiaen, who served as a medic in the French army, was held captive by the Nazis. Its premiere took place not in a concert hall but in a prison hut for an audience of Nazi guards and Allied prisoners of war. The date was 15 Jan 1941, the end of the war still four long years away with its outcome as yet uncertain.

Messiaen's Quartet does not express any trace of personal anger, grief or defiance – emotions which we might normally expect in response to the atrocities of war. Instead, Messiaen, a devout Catholic, drew inspiration from the biblical Book of Revelation, reflecting on the dissolution of our earthly existence and the promise of an eternal paradise to come. There are scenes of divine wrath but no human angst or rallying call for action. There are moments of profound sorrow, but much of the music is suffused with wonder and joy.

I am turning 30 this year, the same age Messiaen was when he was incarcerated. I have continued to mull over Messiaen's Quartet and revisit it as a performer and educator. The injustices of Messiaen's time have repeatedly reared their head in global political events in our own lifetimes.

Just as Messiaen might have feared for his life as a prisoner of war, the harsh reality of human mortality continues to assert itself in our personal lives and in the suffering of so many people around the world. The more I contemplate the Quartet and the similarities between its context and our present day, the more I am

moved and astounded by Messiaen's response.

He fleshed out his deeply personal vision not just in musical notes but in vivid words, describing "a dizzying fusion of superhuman sounds and colours". Reading Messiaen's score feels like receiving a message in a bottle from 80 years ago. I desperately wish that I could write back. I would certainly want to ask him about the final movement of the Quartet, an achingly beautiful Louange (song of praise). As the music ascends into the highest registers of the instruments, Messiaen's performance directions for the solo violinist are simple yet cryptic: play "with love".

Even for a staunch believer, Messiaen's words are startling. Difficult times bring out different coping responses in people. It is possible that music itself provided a form of comfort and personal preservation for Messiaen in the camp. But music can also seem futile and pointless in the face of adversity. How was it possible for a prisoner of war to respond to such unimaginable darkness with a song of praise and love?

One year after I first performed the Quartet, I was practising for an audition when I received a phone call with devastating news about my mother's cancer diagnosis. I was 17 and had the music of the great composers literally at my fingertips. But playing the piano seemed inane that day and during the painful journey ahead. It is difficult to speak of love (For God? For music? For other people?) when the sheer brokenness of our

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And if we do choose to speak, would anyone hear and understand? I wonder to what extent Messiaen's first audience really understood the Quartet, even though he later claimed that they listened with rapt attention. The music, which many musicians today might still consider esoteric, can come across as cerebral and strange, subverting our sense of pulse with experimental rhythmic devices.

A recent interaction I had with a 13-year-old student helped me to realise that Messiaen's Quartet can indeed speak powerfully and effectively, even across generations and geographical distance. I had played an audio

recording of the 6th movement of the Quartet, entitled Dance of Fury, for the seven trumpets. The student recoiled physically and looked at me wide-eyed.

"What instrument is that? This sounds scary!"

It was truly an unrecognisable, disconcerting sound that could not have been produced by any single existing instrument. Instead, it was formed by the unusual composite timbres of the piano, violin, cello and clarinet. (The instruments Messiaen had access to at the camp) playing together in perfect, terrifying unison.

From hushed whispers to crashing granite blocks of sound, the four instruments remain resolutely, unyieldingly fused together. It is remarkably fitting that Messiaen, seeking to depict a day of divine judgment, conceptualised this new super-instrument with a sound that had never been heard by man before. The 13-year-old got the message instantly: this is frightening, otherworldly stuff.

In Messiaen's Quartet, this apocalyptic soundscape is bookended by another song of praise and a section that evokes "the ineffable harmonies of heaven". It seems paradoxical to desire to bring an end to the flow of time while simultaneously filling it with music, but Messiaen tries his best to achieve this. His score is marked "infinitely slow", "ecstatic" and "dreamy", as the solo cello sustains a soaring melody that seems to emanate from a place beyond the limits of human experience.

Messiaen's Quartet does not ignore wickedness and trauma nor dismiss our need for justice. Yet it speaks in hope of a future that would have nothing to do with suffering, oppression, and the failings of mankind.

My student's reaction to the Quartet, and our meaningful discussion that followed, underscored the importance of engaging with this music (and other works of art, literature, dance and theatre). By carrying this music with us and telling these stories, we help each other to make sense of our world and perhaps come to a more compassionate understanding of the worlds and lives of others.

We may not find the answers we want, nor find a neat solution to end war and injustice. We will continue to rage and grieve and cry out "why as the waves of life buffet us.

But we have a space to escape, if only for a moment, to share a brief glimmer of empathy with another human being. We have an opportunity to give voice to our fragile yet beautiful shared humanity with each other and with future generations – and together, perhaps, dare to dream of a better world.

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• Centrestage is an occasional op-ed series featuring the lives, perspectives and work of Singaporeans in the field of arts and culture.