

To what extent does the 'quatuor pour la fin du temps' reflect Messiaen's desire for an end to musical time, in the sense of eliminating a regular beat in the music?

The translation of the title of the piece means: The quartet for the end of time. It was written by Messiaen whilst he was in a prisoner of war camp during the Second World War. His main influence as a composer was Debussy, but as a prisoner he had many other influences, for instance, he was suffering from severe hunger to the extent that he was hallucinating. And of course all the horrors of the war would serve in the way he composed.

His hallucinations would have been vivid because his synesthesia would have created a colour to them. Synesthesia is a symptom caused by a malfunction in the senses. Messiaen only had a handful of musicians to write for, this means that the quartet was written for the strange combination of piano, clarinet, violoncello and violin. This made the task hard for him, but the musicians knew that this performance was more than just a composition; it was a spiritual connection with God.

The end of time would most probably of been a feeling that was shared with all the prisoners of war. Messiaen put this idea across in his music therefore creating a theme: the end of musical time. This can be looked at in the way of losing a regular pulse or time signature, but also, can represent an end to music which would be, for a large majority, the eternal end of time.

To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower
Hold infinity in the palm of you hand
And eternity in an hour
(W. Blake, Auguries of innocence)

Messiaen was a very religious man, for him eternity could represent heaven and the cessation of time as we know it. Messiaen tried to create a timeless mood, he does this by closing his listeners awareness's of past, present and possible future events. This idea suggests why certain movements like movement six have no time signature or key; music exists as sounds unfolding through time. This idea would not happen in a piece written by Mozart as he defines the key and uses fairly predictable cadences. Messiaen used this to his advantage; he made use of eliminating time signatures and regular pulses. We see this in movements III, V and VI as none of them have time signatures and the bars are not of equal length.

He also started using scales of limited transposition like the octatonic scale or the whole tone scale. Messiaen did not base his composition on the typical western 12 note scale; instead he used a set of scales based on a pattern of different tones and semi-tones. The octatonic scale is made up of a semi-tone, tone, semi-tone, tone... this creates an 8 note scale. He also uses a number of modes one of which is mode 3 this is created by 3 tri-chords (each note being a semi-tone apart) separated by a tone. We find examples of this in the first sections of movement IV.

He also made use of la Valeur ajoutée: a short value added to any rhythm, whether by a note, a rest or a dot this changes the length of bars and therefore creates a feeling of lost time. There are examples of this in the first two bars of movement VI.

- When you add a small note or rest to a normal time signature, IE add semiquaver note or rest or make a quaver dotted it will change the time signature and it will feel very out of time. Adding this to a bar will stop any sense of time as the whole bar will be out of time. Examples in movement VI bar 1- 10- 11. If these notes or rests were omitted the bar would be back to a normal 4-4 beat.

He uses a lot of augmented or diminished rhythms: increasing or decreasing note values to create a second motif that is rhythmically similar to the original, this means people can recognise the motif but realise that it has been shortened creating the effect that time is slowing down. There are many examples of these in movement III from bars 25 to 27.

He uses non-retrograde rhythms to create the effect of timelessness; these when read either right to left or left to right have the same order of note value. There are many examples of this between [F] and [G] in movement VI.

Messiaen uses a pedal note and scribes it as being 'an independent rhythm, which continues tirelessly, with no regard for the rhythms that surround it. This happens throughout the 17 chord ostinato of the first movement.

The idea of the end of time is portrayed through out the piece the movements that show the eternity and timelessness more than the others are I, V, VIII, Messiaen wrote eight movements, this represents the days of the week, six days created the world and Sunday for rest, the eighth movement represents judgement day and the everlasting light and eternal peace. This idea was taken from Messiaens preference.

How does the device create it?! Explain what each thing does...