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Reaching for the End of Time

I FIRST encountered Olivier Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time* in 1971, in the basement of Florida State University's music library, where I was employed as a work-study student. The folio had languished on a low, dusty shelf for years, never checked out, and I, a scavenger delighting in all things offbeat and obscure, pounced on the composition. The quartet was scored for violin, cello, piano, and clarinet—my instrument. Here, I naïvely thought, was a piece no one else knew! Leafing through it, I noticed Messiaen's fervent dedication: "in homage to the Angel of the Apocalypse, who raises a hand toward heaven saying: 'There shall be time no longer,'" and saw that the third movement, "Abyss of the Birds," was written for solo clarinet. No matter how it sounded—I was no score reader, then—I had to be part of this ambitious work.

To start, I would perform the solo movement alone in recital, bringing the "lost" quartet to light. I took the music to my clarinet professor, a pedagogue and technician who with one glance pronounced it negligible. I would have to negotiate the odd rhythms, rickety birdcalls and excruciatingly long-held tones of the "Abyss" (like "oms" that grow louder and louder) by myself. A composer on the faculty helped me find the single available recording of the quartet, and in the music library I listened through enormous headphones to the entire "wondrous strange" piece over and over, moved by its spiritual vigor, a quality no other contemporary music in my experience offered. The severe leaps within its stretching lines were the antithesis of chant, and yet, they *were* chant. The quick turns between dour, weighty statements and bold, flashy warblings might have mocked ritual, and yet, they were as keenly calculated as the pairing of the stern sermon and the joyful hymn that follows. With the intensity of an evangelist, I took up my clarinet and began to practice. But by the time I had rehearsed "Abyss of the Birds" well enough to try it in public, my pride in ferreting out the music had slunk away. The solo required more physical stamina than I'd thought possible, and I was afraid that under pressure I'd crater on it, which I did, in the very last measure, the final flourish. Instead of piping a waterfall of song, I produced one long, desperate squawk.

Thus began a pilgrimage that continues, in all of its uncertainty, today.

At the time I found Messiaen, Florida State's campus was roiling with political

demonstrations, a growing drug culture, “free love,” and other expressions of rebellion that marked the late sixties and early seventies. Other than a memorial march for the victims of the Kent State shootings and a few experiments with marijuana, I was not part of that scene. I remember well the night of the first “streaking” on Landis Green. A violist friend, her violinist fiancé, and my boyfriend, a pianist, had to concede that watching more adventurous students race naked in front of the library was worth setting aside scale practice for one hour, and the four of us met at the appointed time in the safe shadow of a giant oak at the edge of the green. I could never have torn off my clothes, as one co-ed did in order to be chased by an entire fraternity, and the lily-white blind boy who galloped into the green’s fountain with no accessory but a cane took my breath away: how could he do that if he didn’t know what he looked like? Yet the desire for a fresh way of regarding the world lived in us cloistered music students just as surely as it lived in those who engaged in public defiance of “the system.” For me, art music, and particularly the *Quartet for the End of Time*, with its deeply spiritual impulse and wild combination of musical materials, satisfied my needs for both a meditative foundation and a radical mode of expression. I may have faltered miserably in the first performance, but “Abyss of the Birds” would help me develop the solo voice I yearned for.

In taking on “Abyss of the Birds,” I thought I was breaking ground, and maybe, in the hinterlands of north Florida, I was. Little did I know that everywhere else, other musicians of my generation were unearthing the same work. One year after I struck gold in the music library, the maverick Marlboro Music Festival ensemble Tashi—clarinetist Richard Stoltzman, violinist Ida Kavafian, cellist Fred Sherry, and pianist Peter Serkin, the first nationally known chamber group to perform in hippie garb—made a recording of the quartet that for many listeners remains the standard, though other excellent ensembles have recorded the work since. The spiritual depth and technical challenges of the quartet attracted many musical children of that time who sought strong contemporary statements and performance occasions to which they might rise. The *Quartet for the End of Time* is monumental: with eight movements and a running time of nearly one hour, it is one of the longest pieces of chamber music in the repertoire.

After leaving Florida I vowed to perform the entire quartet, and would not wait for opportunities, but create them. The first took place at the University of Michigan, where I was a graduate student. My compatriots and I were guided by the venerable vocal coach Eugene Bossart, who told me he had always wanted to learn the quartet, and the results, heard in a modest recital hall, were astonishingly lyrical—an argument for the teaching of instrumentalists by experts on the human voice. Two years later, while teaching at Loyola University in New Orleans, I assembled a faculty group to play the quartet in a Catholic church on

Saint Charles Avenue. I remember the Sunday afternoon sunlight flickering and flaring through the stained-glass windows and the feeling that Messiaen himself might be listening from a back pew, pondering his creator. The third performance was given in Austin, Texas, in 1983, soon after I moved there, in the opera theater at the University of Texas with faculty from that music department. Of my three performances it was the only one offered on a proscenium stage, and although it went well, we were too far away from the audience, a predicament borne by many chamber musicians obliged to play in large venues. Light, close scoring calls for, and deserves, an intimate space where all communicants can share equally. I reveled in the close-knit ensemble, but missed the intensity I wanted from our listeners.

Each of these performances needed many hours of rehearsal time, because the work demands formidable technique. For example, the swift sixth movement, “Dance of Fury, for the Seven Trumpets,” is completely in unison, requiring precise intonation. To adjust pitch, the violinist or cellist must quickly, instinctively roll or slide a finger of the left hand ever so slightly, infinitesimally, up or down the active string. The clarinetist will add or subtract pressure of the lips on the mouthpiece, choose an alternate fingering, or even lower some fingers closer to inactive holes, which dulls the timbre and might not so much flatten the pitch as darken it—an illusion. No matter which instrument one is playing, the finely calibrated ear drives the physical response. The “Dance of Fury” is also unmeasured, with varying time values from bar to bar, so players must rapidly and internally count the sixteenth-note subdivisions in diamond-cut accord, even as they achieve a flexible, mellifluous sweep. As with so many beautiful works, both exactness and unpredictability underpin the ethereal.

There are other technical challenges in the quartet. The clarinet and strings are often required to play in the extreme high register, which, even among virtuosos, can be maddeningly precarious. Dynamics run from barely discernable to blazingly loud. And the number of sustained single pitches, like tightly strung, oscillating filaments, also tax the players, even the pianist, who must dedicate her entire upper body and a well-timed pedal in service of the long, tenacious line.

Every generation spawns composers who write music that pushes previously held limits and which traditionalists pronounce unplayable. In postwar Paris, one of those composers was Messiaen.

Olivier Messiaen wrote the *Quartet for the End of Time* during the winter of 1940-41 while incarcerated in Stalag VIII A near the village of Görlitz in the Silesian mountain region that today is part of Poland. The story goes that the young composer managed to make off with a pencil and some music paper and hid out in the latrines at night, writing secretly, furiously, the piece that would later be regarded as the finest chamber work produced during wartime

imprisonment. With special permission from German authorities, he premiered the quartet with three other musicians who had landed in the camp. A crowd of prisoners, many of them badly wounded and borne to the hall on stretchers, made up the audience. This scenario alone might explain why Vietnam-era musicians embraced the work and brought it to the attention of American audiences. However, the *Quartet for the End of Time* did not represent Messiaen's wish for an end to personal incarceration and World War II. It was, he explained, a sustained meditation on the Book of Revelation—a hymn to eternity.

Olivier Messiaen is one of the few major twentieth-century composers whose output was openly, uncompromisingly inspired by his religious faith. The only child of the Shakespeare scholar Pierre Messiaen and the poet Cécile Sauvage, who composed a book of poems titled *The Flowering Soul* while pregnant with her son, Messiaen taught himself to play the piano and at age eleven wrote his first piece, a work for piano titled “The Lady of Shalott,” based on the poem by Tennyson. Contact with Debussy's colorful, impressionistic opera *Pelléas and Mélisande* made a lasting impact on the boy—it was a formal model for his own opera—but Messiaen was, from the very start, it seems, dedicated like no other composer of his time to expressing his Catholic faith. Here is an oft-quoted excerpt from his personal manifesto:

The emotion and sincerity of the work.
 Which shall be at the service of the dogmas of Catholic theology.
 The subject theological? The best, for it comprises all subjects.
 And the abundance of technical means allows the heart to expand freely.

Messiaen's musical language is among the most distinctive of the twentieth century. The composer was intrigued by nature, particularly birds; he was a devoted amateur ornithologist who roamed the French countryside with a tape recorder, collecting the birdsongs he later transcribed and used in his music. Messiaen was also a splendid instrumental colorist, having been blessed with vivid color-sound associations because of a condition called synaesthesia—any sound he heard immediately produced a color in his mind's eye, and vice versa. And so the fresh combinations of instruments he employed yielded otherworldly timbres evocative of the stained-glass windows in La Trinité, the Paris church where he served as organist for more than forty years. “During my captivity,” he said, “it was colored dreams that gave birth to the chords and rhythms of my quartet.” Messiaen was engrossed by rhythm as well. His study of Hindu music led to a lifelong preoccupation with palindrome rhythms, mirror-structures that for him were symbols of eternity because they have no defined beginning or end. Messiaen's life spanned the entire twentieth century, with the exception of exactly eight years each, forward and aft. He was born in 1908 and died in 1992.

After my third performance of the quartet, in 1983, I suspected I might never play the work again. Messiaen's masterpiece, for all its beauty and meaning, had produced carpal-tunnel pain in my right wrist and a temporary loss of control in the fourth and fifth fingers. Repetitive motion injuries are common among today's musicians, who rehearse for technical precision to a much higher degree than did our predecessors fifty and more years ago. In the early 1980s, when my problems began, only a few doctors focused on the medical concerns of musicians; today, musician health is a legitimate specialty.

As I gained some relief through cortisone shots and chiropractic adjustments, I gradually accepted the challenge of keeping my hands nimble enough to perform works less taxing than the quartet. That left a lot of repertory; still, the loss of the quartet would foreshadow the eventual loss of my life as a vibrant performer. Any musician will tell you that there is no substitute for music making at physical peak, when the body, mind, and spirit are equally, consummately engaged. Performing is who you are, and where God is. Now I was past peak and had to figure out how to alter the conventional arc, to pitch a tent close to the apex by recapturing and maintaining the passion the quartet engendered. I could do this, I thought, by listening to Messiaen's music. If I entered others' performances passionately as auditor, I might reconnect with what Messiaen must have had when he wrote the quartet: a direct line to a spiritual power. Such intensity would be difficult to achieve by way of recordings. I would have to place myself as close as possible to the music making, listening only to live performances, to which I would travel.

My notion of having to make multiple pilgrimages was realistic, because concerts of Messiaen's music were hard to come by. I would have to leave central Texas to catch the best ones. Two exhilarating evenings stand out in my memory: an organ recital by the late composer-organist William Albright in Dallas and a concert in Boston featuring the *Turangalila* Symphony played by the BSO, led by Seiji Ozawa. In both, Messiaen's interpreters achieved such perfect symbiosis among composer, performers, and listeners that I might as well have been on stage, playing my clarinet. Time stopped.

As my travels proceeded and my knowledge of Messiaen grew, it occurred to me to ingest all of the religious symbols and technical devices behind the music. I should do this, I thought, because it would put me inside the composer's head, surely the source of the intensity I wished to recover. But each time I approached the music this way, I felt stymied by Messiaen's overwhelmingly Catholic "program," and retreated. I couldn't force myself to go this route; mine was a quest of the heart and body, not the intellect. Besides, I was the last person to plunge into what I saw as a theological swamp. My spiritual life hadn't been formally linked to a religion since childhood church attendance, which was

mostly benign Methodist (my father's brand), except when my mother, raised Unitarian, switched us over to a Presbyterian church for a time, and then an Episcopal one, because the pastors wrote better sermons. Having a deep-seated aversion to anything resembling a club, I've never as an adult wanted to articulate a faith or join an organized religion. The first activity would devalue an inner experience—to describe it in words would limit it—and the second, which seems to me to be based on fear and tribalism, closes off possibilities.

Still, I have always dabbled in religious matters, which might make me a sort of aspirant, implying upward movement toward some sort of triumph. But I am continually quashing the vertical impulse and reacting against it in others. I want the Shaker hymn "Simple Gifts," not the Protestant battle anthem "Onward Christian Soldiers." There was a time in my thirties, not long after the third quartet performance, when Pope John Paul passed through San Antonio, and the idea of a pope, a king of a religion, struck me as so preposterous that I cultivated a collection of pope memorabilia as a local corrective. Friends aware of my delight in pontiff kitsch made me gifts of pope paper-dolls, pope snow globes, pope soap-on-a-rope. My most prized possession was a signed and numbered pope lawn sprinkler: a three-foot replica of John Paul, painted on plywood, fitted on the back with a hose connector and some plastic tubing. When hooked up to a hose, the pope's hands spouted water. The sprinkler's official name was "Let Us Spray," and it was the envy of my unchurched friends, as well as many of the churched ones. One morning I found it missing from my garden, and though I was angry about the theft, I joked that God was not amused by my irreverence and had seen fit to cast out my graven image. The next time I moved, I carried the rest of my pope trumpery to the Salvation Army. Presumably it was divided into piles headed for the toys and housewares departments, and even women's clothing, where an "I Prayed with the Pope" T-shirt from Denver, featuring the pontiff surrounded by a pestilence of prairie dogs, was snatched up, I hope, by someone with a sense of humor.

While I was traveling to hear Messiaen and chuckling over the pope, the daily newspaper in Austin hired me as music critic, and I began an accidental writing career. Even so, I continued to perform in chamber groups and the city opera orchestra with the help of chiropractors, yoga instructors, and a gifted Rolfer whose manipulations increased my height by half an inch. Working with both music and words was often frustrating. I found that I couldn't practice the clarinet, put down the instrument, and immediately take up the pen. There had to be a transitional hour between the use of each language, during which I would perform a household task such as baking bread or gardening. In shuttling back and forth from one to the other, I experienced a physical sensation, a light-headedness. A neuroscientist could explain exactly why this was so; put simply,

verbal and musical language centers reside in different parts of the brain. I felt a slight but real chemical switch.

Eventually, though, words achieved a solid, practical purchase on my life. I returned to school for a degree in writing, and then, sixteen years after my final performance of the quartet, I resigned from my last ongoing chamber group and moved to Ithaca, New York, for a post-doc in writing at Cornell. I embraced a hermetic existence there, retreating to my rented cottage after school, listening not to Messiaen but to recordings of the late Beethoven quartets, as if confirming my musical dotage.

But Messiaen returned to me, upstaging Beethoven, when a Cornell faculty group invited me to take the second clarinet part in a performance of his splashy, fluttery *Oiseaux Exotiques* for piano and small orchestra. By then I played so seldom that it would take two months of rigorous daily practice to execute my part in a professional manner. And, whether or not I was practicing, the carpal tunnel pain in my right wrist now woke me up at night, spasming up my arm, into my shoulder and neck. One of the doctors I consulted identified mild scoliosis, a structural imbalance that at middle age was affecting more than the wrist; all of my limbs were vulnerable.

Yet I eagerly accepted the invitation to perform *Oiseaux Exotiques*. It was a gift I hadn't expected: a last chance, a coda. And with that commitment in hand, I took on another: a two-month bird-watching course offered by Cornell's renowned ornithology department. My motivation had nothing to do with Messiaen, I thought. I simply wanted to take advantage of a fine program that would force me to get out of the house on Saturday mornings.

The Messiaen concert thrilled me—how could it not, since my job was to plant myself within an ecstatic sound-tapestry, chirping and shrieking the calls of the wood thrush, the lark, and even the prairie chicken? *Oiseaux Exotiques* contains the songs of forty-six birds from India, China, Malaysia, the Canary Islands, South America, and North America, including the Chinese leiothrix, four different vireos, and a vivacious little singer Messiaen calls the Carolina troglodyte, commonly known as the Carolina wren. Within this aviary, the pain in my wrist, arm, shoulder, and back temporarily evaporated, and I walked off the stage and into the night, glowing.

The next morning, in the cold spring rain, I gulped extra-strength Tylenol and drove one-handed with thirty other aspiring birdwatchers to the Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge near Seneca Falls, where transient Canada geese, mallards, and dozens of other waterfowl species clogged the marshes, looking to me misplaced and confused. I remember envying the sharp-sighted engineering major who later that day spotted a female ruby-crowned kinglet flitting among the branches of an evergreen thicket. The female bears no red cap; she looks like any number of what our instructor called LBJs, or Little Brown Jobs. How could

that young man possibly distinguish her, I wondered? She wasn't even singing.

At the end of that year, I moved to the desolate reach of Wyoming to write, and eventually to teach writing and music history at the state university in Laramie. I was lonely there, and resumed my Messiaen excursions, fixating first on the composer's only American commission, a piece for solo piano, horn, xyloimba, glockenspiel, and orchestra, titled *From the Canyons to the Stars*. For this project, Messiaen was determined to find inspiration in the American landscape, and in 1971, lured by a photograph of Bryce Canyon, he bought a plane ticket to Salt Lake City and spent a month in southern Utah, visiting Bryce Canyon, Cedar Breaks, and Zion National Parks. The result was a gloriously excessive work of twelve movements that takes an hour and a half to play.

Knowing I was not likely ever to hear a live performance of *Canyons*, I found the only recording in print, loaded it into my car's CD player, and on one bright weekend in May, the same time of year that Messiaen went west, drove over to Utah to hike Bryce and listen to the same birds Messiaen would have heard exactly thirty years before. I knew my desire to retrace his steps was impure—a greed for someone else's transcendence—but set it aside, for I had come to realize that moving my body through space, by way of motorized vehicles or my two feet, had become a partial substitute for the physical intensity of music. I'd completed my transformation from music maker to witness, relinquishing musical notes, instrument, and stage for words, pens, and geography. I *had* to do this.

I had made a list of Messiaen's Utah birds, whose songs I had learned from a CD of birdcalls acquired at Cornell. I had brought binoculars and a camera, too. But on that morning as I walked the dry red path among the luminous pink spires and hoodoos carved by centuries of wind, rain, and snow, I heard and saw nothing that had anything to do with birds. Had Bryce's environment changed that much in twenty-five years, or had I simply missed the dawn chorus? Once, I spotted a small specimen on a branch of one of the gnarled pines bunched here and there on the canyon floor, but it didn't sing and didn't even fly when I came close. It might as well have been a decoy.

I turned on my booted heel and started up Wall Street, a dark, damp trail that ran between two mammoth bulwarks of stone so high and close together that there was but a slice of light at the top, where the two walls nearly met. The sounds of my boots, heel-toe, heel-toe, bounced off the rock dryly, like castanets. I stopped to listen to the echo, and in that moment an elderly couple appeared at the other end of the tipped walls, and seeing me, paused. Then they began to speak softly, and their words did not ricochet off the stone edifices, but rather wafted down to me like feathers. They were French.

The woman turned back to rest, but the man continued toward me, to explore

the length of the path. As he approached, I greeted him, “Bonjour,” and his face brightened as he responded at length in his language.

This was his first visit to the United States, he said. He and his wife had heard of Bryce’s beauty and wanted to be sure to see it. I confessed I was there to retrace the steps of his countryman, Olivier Messiaen.

“Why do you want to do this?” he said.

“I want to hear what he heard,” I answered.

“And that is....”

“Birds,” I said. “But all I hear today is the wind.”

“Perhaps what you hear is enough,” said the Frenchman.

A year later, the San Francisco Opera mounted Messiaen’s only stage work, an opera based on the life of Saint Francis of Assisi. It would be the first American (and only third ever) production of *Saint-François*, and I flew over for the weekend to witness it—the complicated travel from Laramie taking longer than the time I actually spent in the city. The opera, a series of tableaux dramatizing significant events in Saint Francis’s life, started at six-thirty PM and ended close to midnight, and required an orchestra so large and varied that wide stage extensions had to be built, eliminating several rows of seats in front. From my perch in the first balcony, I gazed down on what looked like a giant painting of musical hell by Hieronymus Bosch, jammed to the edges with musicians curled around one another, instruments wedged into adjacent armpits or pressed into stomachs. In contrast, when the curtain lifted, I saw a striking, minimal set by Hans Dieter Schaal in shades of gray, with thick moveable walls and a raised walkway that curved back to infinity. Hovering over this was an immense round ball: the sun, the moon, an egg, a soul? Together, these represented a monastery, its rooms, its garden, and all that existed within them. With the exception of an angel, who appeared in bluebird blue, all the characters were clad in neutral colors. Messiaen’s aural reds and greens, purples and oranges, made up the rest of the spectrum.

The work proceeds with deliberate majesty. A few listeners in my balcony row grew audibly impatient; our seats in the venerable old opera house were tight, and one had the choice of sitting straight up or squinching forward, elbows or forearms on knees: the house-side version of the arrangement in the pit. As much as I loved Messiaen’s music, I began to wonder if I’d flown all that way to witness a dud. And then came—at precisely the right place in the opera, in the evening—the scene where Saint Francis, after a prolonged, agonizing buildup, reaches out with one hand to touch, and finally embrace, a leper, risking his life to pass the love of God directly to the decaying man, flesh upon flesh. I could not hold back the sudden tears; the impact of the *Quartet for the End of Time* had returned to me.

Yet after I returned to Wyoming I embarked on a head-trip, snatching up the Catholic authors Messiaen revered, as if by reading I could sustain the effect of Saint Francis's touch. I found Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Heart of the World*—beautiful, but not as accessible as I'd hoped—and tried to connect with Paul Claudel's poems and his commentary *A Poet Before the Cross*, which I tossed aside after the first chapter—nothing there for me. Finally, I reread the Book of Revelation—the inspiration for the quartet—and some recent interpretations of it, and at last realized how wildly mutable and kaleidoscopic that book is. An angel with a rainbow crown and clothing of clouds, one foot in the sea and one on earth? No wonder “godless” musicians of the Vietnam era had latched onto Messiaen's quartet. Revelation was the ultimate trip, complete with symbols one could contemplate long after the drug of the moment—be it chemical, material, or what Karen Armstrong calls a “bad religion” (one that stifles “the individual's search for transcendent meaning and the absolute truth beyond ego”)—wears off. Like music, John's vision can be variously perceived, and I began to regard Revelation as a grand, hallucinogenic painting, kin to Messiaen's opera for *Saint-François*, not holy writ ossified by tradition. Here was a section of the New Testament I could view as more than a historical myth toward living a right life. It was wild, hairy literature; it was, as Messiaen knew, a basis for art.

I put away my books and forgot about Messiaen until a faculty ensemble at the University of Wyoming, planning a performance of the *Quartet for the End of Time* in response to the Iraq war, asked me to speak at the concert. One of them had spotted me marching in an antiwar demonstration in front of Laramie's snow-covered courthouse. The Iraq war was not as unpopular in Laramie as Vietnam had been in Tallahassee; for every passerby who waved in support of our peace march, another gave us the finger. At the performance, I offered a description of the quartet's premiere, stressing Messiaen's heroic feat, his making of art under extreme conditions. Then my colleagues began to play, and I yearned to be the clarinetist, to help sing Messiaen's sorrowful, joyous, mysterious songs. But it could never happen, not now. Although my right wrist had been surgically healed of carpal tunnel syndrome, the pinkie of the same hand resembled a sausage link, bent slightly in the middle. My body had generated a new, more unusual hand ailment, Dupuytren's contracture, a thickening of fascia along the tendons in the palm and fingers. During the “Abyss of the Birds,” the crimped finger twitched, a broken wing.

Not long after the concert I happened upon the last book I would ever read about Messiaen. *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet*, had just been published by Rebecca Rischin, a clarinetist who traveled to France to hunt down the details of the quartet's composition in Stalag VIII A. I was shocked to learn that after the war, the composer developed a simplified story (the one I had known and passed on) of the quartet's genesis, glorifying himself at the expense

of others, flattening the fascinating facts, obscuring his compositional process and magnifying his suffering and the loathsome conditions under which he worked. His wife, Yvonne Loriod, who had been his student and frequently performed his work, tended his musical legacy after his death and further embroidered the tale. Until Rischin made the effort to interview musicians and others who were in the camp, musicologists accepted Messiaen's exaggerations as gospel.

The long-held myth says that Messiaen composed the entire quartet within the walls of Stalag VIII A, when in fact he wrote "Abyss of the Birds" earlier, while stationed as a medical orderly at Verdun. There he met the cellist Étienne Pasquier and clarinetist Henri Akoka, who played together in a military orchestra, and, inspired by Akoka's style and the birds in the area, Messiaen composed the clarinet solo with no thought of a larger work. Then the Germans roared in, and the three musicians were captured. Akoka managed to take his clarinet on the ensuing forty-three-mile march to an encampment near Nancy, and while waiting to be sent to Stalag VIII A, he sight-read "Abyss of the Birds" for Messiaen. Pasquier, who had been obliged to leave his cello in Verdun, held the music for him.

Messiaen also claimed that the fourth movement, "Interlude," was the first he wrote, although it could have been the first he composed in Stalag VIII A, for it is scored only for violin, clarinet, and cello. (Violinist Jean Le Boulaire joined the group in the camp, and Pasquier was given a cello there. The piano was made available later.) Additionally, the fifth movement, "Praise to the Eternity of Jesus," and the eighth, "Praise to the Immortality of Jesus," respectively for cello with piano and violin with piano, were not lightning bolts from the clouds over Görlitz, but refashionings of pieces Messiaen had written before the war. Cannibalizing or building upon previous work is common among composers and other creators—after all, many believe that God cobbled us together from earlier projects, such as clay.

It seemed odd that Messiaen would deny this practice.

More importantly, there is the tale, kept vividly alive by his wife, of Messiaen sneaking into the camp latrines to compose. Those who were there told it differently. Early on, Messiaen was recognized as a famous composer, relieved of physical labor, and given the materials and privacy to write music. "What I know is that we were not allowed to disturb him," Pasquier told Rischin. Pasquier himself was relieved of work in a granite quarry and assigned a job as camp cook once he was identified as a famous cellist. Le Boulaire and Akoka fared well, too. Anyone familiar with accounts of concentration camp orchestras knows the Reich sometimes protected musicians, providing them instruments, music, rehearsal time, and, in the context of horrible deprivation, relatively easy labor. Many accounts cite one key German—a music lover or secret humanist—who served as intermediary or protector for musicians. In Messiaen's case, it was an officer named Karl-Albert Brüll, who spoke fluent French and whose father was president

of the Catholic Youth of Silesia. He was also sympathetic to the Jews. But despite Brüll's extraordinary assistance to Messiaen, the composer failed to acknowledge him publicly until 1991.

A long time ago I must have decided that anyone who creates great art must be an admirable person. It was a naïve assumption, or perhaps it was a desire. I wanted the whole package to be perfect, one part a reflection of the other. In wishing this, I succumbed to the vertical impulse, building an exceedingly high pedestal for Olivier Messiaen. Down he crashed, and one day, on a hike in Wyoming's Snowy Range, I found myself, after all those years, talking to him. Why did you lie about the composition of the quartet? Why did you deny Brüll?

Rischin offered possible answers regarding the composing process, politely speculating that Messiaen was motivated by practicality, pedagogy, and kindness. He wanted to make the story simple for students, scholars, and the press, paring down the analytical details of the work, citing the modest fourth movement as the first one composed, even though it meant obliterating the histories of the phenomenal solo movements (the third, fifth, and eighth). "From a compositional standpoint," Rischin wrote, "a less complex and less ambitious movement might serve as a starting point—the prelude to rather than an interlude for—a much greater composition." No matter the sequence of composition, she added, Messiaen might have decided on three solo movements to give his compatriots equal roles in the birth of the work. But however it happened, Rischin concluded the composer wanted to "leave no doubt that he intended a quartet all along."

"His omissions serve[d] to preserve the myths surrounding the piece and the mystery surrounding the man," she wrote.

And Karl-Albert Brüll? Having known a number of image-conscious composers, I began to see how Messiaen and his wife might have wished to impress the public with his brilliance and devotion to art, dramatizing his ability to create heaven-inspired work against the most horrifying odds. Acknowledging Brüll, the real hero of the day, would have blown the couple's miraculous story, revealing an iconoclastic composer to be a mere human being who depended upon, and then selfishly disclaimed, a daring generosity that, like Saint Francis's, transcended doctrine. I will probably never know the full truth—no doubt there are facts and nuances waiting for the next researcher—but the truth Rischin uncovered for me was the image of a gangly fellow in a beret brilliantly working the levers and pulleys of his art and craft, to the glory of something greater than himself, yet not without the pretensions artists attempt and often fail to erase. Messiaen's connection to God came not from something he owned, but something he could only yearn for, and in that sense, he was no different from the rest of us.

My relationship with Messiaen is not over; at the very least, it is teaching me I

can't get out of living with contradictions. Last year I consulted a hand specialist who advised surgery for my Dupuytren's. The thickening in the right little finger had increased and dropped down into the palm between the fourth and fifth fingers—the typical starting point for the affliction before it worms its way across the hand. This was the location of my initial carpal tunnel symptom; the insidious groundwork had been laid since the first performance of the quartet. I put off the surgery, hoping the disease might stall, until one cold day I spilled the contents of my change purse onto the floor of the Laramie Kmart and had to accept the help of a small child to retrieve the coins. How essential is the littlest digit to the most ordinary tasks, such as picking up a dime between the thumb and forefinger. Without their fellows in concert, the big guys are clumsy, inflexible.

To remove Dupuytren's tissue, a surgeon can't simply slice straight down the center of the finger. A to B would deny access to the thickening that has crept into pockets along the sides, and would leave an inflexible scar. The most desirable incision zigzags crazily across the finger and palm. Afterward, the patient embarks on weeks of physical therapy to regain something close to normal functioning. One day I asked my therapist if I could do more at home than repeat my finger exercises and squeeze clay.

“Did you say you were a clarinetist?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“The best thing you can do is play your instrument. Practice the piece you love most.”

I stared at this strong, ruddy woman, whose clientele consisted mostly of daredevils: bronco-busters, downhill skiers, mountain climbers. What could she possibly know about musicians?

Then I thought of the “Abyss.” “I haven't played it in twenty-two years,” I said. “My fingers won't work right. I'll sound terrible.”

“But you love it. Do it. Trust me,” she said.