

Manchester Collective: The End of Time Programme Notes

Setlist

Nicola Matteis, Alia Fantasia (5")
Caroline Shaw, Gustave Le Gray (9")
Frédéric Chopin, Mazurka in A minor, Op.17 No.4 (5")
Olivier Messiaen, Theme and Variations (10")

Interval

Olivier Messiaen, Quartet for the End of Time 47"

Line-up

Rakhi Singh — Violin
Nick Trygstad — Cello
Sergio Castelló López — Clarinet
Kathryn Stott — Piano

FEATURED WORKS

Nicola Matteis 'Alia Fantasia'

Solo violin, c.1710

How violinists across England hold and play their instruments today probably has something to do with Nicola Matteis Jr. A Baroque violin virtuoso described as "stupendous" by a contemporary observer, Matteis was a key figure in the development of violin playing in England, helping make a switch to an Italianate style that involves a different hold of the bow (holding it only by the wood) and placing the instrument slightly higher up towards the chin. Matteis' status as a technician of the violin is demonstrated perfectly in this short prelude to the concert; by stretching the performer's technical abilities, he astutely weaves multiple interdependent lines into one voice that's coherent and occasionally crunchy.

Caroline Shaw 'Gustave Le Gray'

Solo piano, 2012

"When someone asks me, 'So what is your music like?', I'll sometimes answer 'Kind of like sashimi?'" When Caroline Shaw wrote 'Gustave Le Gray' back in 2012, she understood her music as something where "chords and sequences presented in their raw, naked, preciously unadorned state—vividly fresh and new, yet utterly familiar." In the 11 years

since, that utter familiarity has grown even stronger, as her style has solidified and her work become better known.

The scholar Lydia Goehr once spoke of an imaginary museum of musical works. Along similar lines, 'Gustave Le Gray' (named after the French artist and photographer) would take in the modern wing of the imaginary musical art gallery: one of living portraits, where both creator and viewer are encouraged to step inside the world of their subject. Shaw paints in words as well as music, using descriptions such as "like the fragmented hem of a song from a long time ago" or "like an expensive Hermès silk cravate", what she describes as a "multi-layered portrait" of the Chopin Mazurka heard next in the programme.

With 'Gustave Le Gray', Shaw puts a traditional new frame around an old work. She identifies some of the Mazurka's key tropes—the dripping tap repetitions, its particular rhythmic feel, a general maudlin yearning. The feeling it gives is one of foggy recollection; like stumbling upon an old film photograph, it gives an insight into a moment, but also encourages the viewer to piece back the memories out of shot.

Frédéric Chopin 'Mazurka in A minor, Op.17 No.4'

Solo piano, 1834

"Chopin is a different type of chef," Caroline Shaw writes. "He covers much more harmonic real estate than I do, and his sequences are more varied and inventive. He weaves a textured narrative through his harmony that takes you through different characters and landscapes." Listen for the way Chopin takes listeners through a range of emotions: insecurity, dreaminess, nostalgia, and sadness, ending back where he started: with a few simple chords, an open question that doesn't command an answer.

Olivier Messiaen 'Theme and Variations'

Violin and piano, 1932

Thème: Modéré

1: Modéré

2: Un peu moins Modéré

3: Modéré, avec éclat

4: Vif et passionné

5: Très modéré

Written in 1932 as a present to his first wife, Claire Delbos, Messiaen's 'Theme and Variations' is all about musical development through rhythmic variation. But unlike a composer such as Steve Reich, where minute shifts of rhythm and groove are at the foreground of the music, the moulding and contorting of rhythms is one of a number of parameters that Messiaen fiddles with as a way of testing the flexibility of his Theme, heard in the opening violin statement and traceable through each section of the piece. As a result, there's a strong sense of momentum gathering through the piece, like watching a large dark

wave build and eventually crash; listen for that moment of release as the piece enters its fifth searing variation. The 'Theme and Variations' is a great gateway to Messiaen, with a lucid structure, rhythmic fire, transcendental soaring, and plenty of spectacular virtuosity on show.

Olivier Messiaen 'Quartet for the End of Time'

Violin, cello, clarinet and piano, 1941

- I. Liturgie de cristal [Crystal liturgy]
- II. Vocalise, pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps [Vocalise, for the angel who announces the end of time]
- III. Abîme des oiseaux [Abyss of birds]
- IV. Intermède [Interlude]
- V. Louange à l'Éternité de Jésus [Praise to the eternity of Jesus]
- VI. Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes [Dance of fury, for the seven trumpets]
- VII. Fouillis d'arcs-en-ciel, pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps [Tangle of rainbows, for the angel who announces the end of time]
- VIII. Louange à l'Immortalité de Jésus [Praise to the immortality of Jesus]

Of Messiaen's many sources of inspiration—colour, birds, Catholicism—the context that surrounds the 'Quartet for the End of Time' is perhaps the most famous.

Called up for military service in World War II, Messiaen was captured in May 1940 and sent to Görlitz, a prisoner-of-war camp for Allied soldiers that today lies in the Poland-Germany borderlands. He was released in the spring of 1941, but in that time, he had composed an early masterpiece in more than trying circumstances. Aided by Karl-Albert Brüll, a sympathetic guard, Messiaen was provided with manuscript paper, extra food, and a guard for his room so he could compose in peace. He wrote for the unusual quartet of musicians at his disposal—a violinist, a cellist, and a clarinetist (all professionals), with Messiaen joining on piano. Of the premiere in the camp on 15 January 1941, Messiaen wrote "never have I been heard with as much attention and understanding." It's impossible to translate these events into a reading of the piece, though they do pose an interesting question throughout it: how to remain steadfast in one's faith, when faced with unimaginable circumstances.

In the preface to the score, Messiaen—never short of a word or two about his music—stated his goal of "dazzlement" through the score. I reckon he succeeded on that front: in the Quartet, textures gleam constantly, shifts between extremes of colour, rhythm, melody, and speed are deft and unexpected, and there's something about the way that he sparingly uses all the instruments together that makes each shine a little brighter. You can't help being dazzled by all this when it's mixed together, especially when, on top of all that, it's imbued with some energy from Messiaen's heady, all-encompassing faith.

The piece opens with Messiaen's beloved birdsong—a nightingale meets a blackbird. Then, an angel appears, a triumphant, terror-filled moment as they announce the end of time

around “sweet cascades of blue-orange chords” (according to Messiaen, an artist with synesthesia who closely associated his music with particular colours). A heart-stoppingly slow movement for solo clarinet follows, that’s relieved by an unexpectedly jerky interlude; ecstatic intensity rises as Messiaen fixes his gaze on Jesus, before the angel figure appears again. The piece concludes with a second, purer tribute to Jesus, and eventually finishes with final transcendence. Through a combination of technique and feeling, Messiaen aims to subvert linear time, but in the Quartet, he seems to stop it altogether.

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