



Eternal Quartets

Messiaen and Schubert

7:30pm | Wednesday | 11 April 2018
City Recital Hall



What's On



Fairy Tales: Schumann, Bruch and Borodin

Schumann Märchenerzählungen (Fairy Tales) for Clarinet, Viola and Piano

Hogarth Trio [Australian Premiere]

Bruch Eight Pieces for Clarinet, Viola and Piano

Borodin String Quartet No. 2 in D major

Master Series

2:30pm | Sun | 17 Jun
Utzon Room, Sydney
Opera House

sydneyoperahouse.com
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Love: Weber and Franck

Elgar Romance for Bassoon and Strings

Weber Quintet for Clarinet and Strings

Brophy We Two Boys Together Clinging

Franck Sonata for Violin and Piano

Virtuoso Series

7:30pm | Wed | 18 Jul
City Recital Hall

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Vocalise: Rachmaninoff and Poulenc

Special Guest: Lee Abrahmsen, soprano

Poulenc Selected Chansons, Banalités and Poemes

Rachmaninoff Selections from 14 Romances, Op.34

Munro A Forest of Birds [Australian Premiere]

Master Series

2:30pm | Sun | 21 Oct
Utzon Room, Sydney
Opera House

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Joy: Farrenc and Beethoven

Schubert Notturmo in E flat major

Beethoven Violin Sonata No.5 in F major

Farrenc Nonet in E flat Major

Kats-Chernin Russian Rag (Nonet arrangement)

Virtuoso Series

7:30pm | Tue | 25 Sep
City Recital Hall

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Momentum: Schubert and Mendelssohn

Bruce "Gumboots" for Clarinet and String Quartet [Australian Premiere]

Schubert String Quintet in C major

Mendelssohn String Quintet No. 2 in B flat major

Virtuoso Series

7:30pm | Tue | 13 Nov
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Eternal Quartets

Messiaen and Schubert

Wednesday 11 April 2018

7:30pm

City Recital Hall

Presented as part of the
2018 Virtuoso Series

Samuel Barber

Adagio for Strings

Franz Schubert

String Quartet No.14 in D minor, 'Death and the
Maiden', D.810

Interval

Olivier Messiaen

Quatuor pour la fin du temps (Quartet for the
End of Time)

The concert will last approximately 120 minutes, including a
20 minute interval.

Approximate work durations (minutes):

8 – 40 – Interval – 50



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Introduction



Olivier Messiaen at the piano

YouTube has a wonderful clip of Olivier Messiaen improvising at the organ on the plainchant, *Puer natus est*. It tells us a lot, both about Olivier Messiaen's amazing musicianship and the intense religious faith that underpins almost every note he composed. In the latter regard he was atypical: sure, there are great religious works that date from the mid-20th century – Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*, for instance, or the choral works of György Ligeti (made famous by Stanley Kubrick's 2001: *A Space Odyssey*) to name but a few. But those composers were by means committed Christians and their works by means orthodox expressions of faith. Only with the fall of the Soviet Union in the century's last decades did we see the emergence of devout 'great composers', such as Arvo Pärt or Sofia Gubaidulina, for whom religion was a comfort and a form of political resistance.

Messiaen, one of the towering figures of the last century's music, dutifully played the organ

at weekly services in Paris's la Trinité for some sixty years, yet published only one short piece for specifically liturgical use, the motet *O Sacrum convivium*. His faith presented no impediment to representing erotic love as a reflection of divine love, as in the song cycle *Harawi* or the massive *Turangalila Symphony*; he developed an intensely personal musically idiom to reflect his unfashionable theological meditations, yet was the revered teacher of generations of composers as diverse as Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez and Iannis Xenakis through to the much feted (and much younger) George Benjamin; he went 'back to nature' and explored bird-song to create a music anything but primitive or naive.

Puer natus est (a boy was born) has been sung for centuries at Christmas-time. But there is no saccharine 'O-Little-Town-of-Bethlehem' flavour to Messiaen's improvisation, nothing that suggests a silent night with the Holy Family

surrounded by shepherds, magi and surprisingly continent livestock. The boy in this case – Jesus – is no less than the incarnation of the Lord of Creation, and Messiaen's powerful, vertiginous, highly coloured and energetic treatment of the tune leaves us in no doubt of that fact, or the awe that it inspires in him.

Messiaen explored this at greater length in his 1935 *La Nativité*, which deals primarily, though not exclusively, with the joy of the Incarnation. In order to express this joy, and the sense of the eternal uniting with the temporal, Messiaen explores complex rhythms. There is much use of *ostinato*, or repeated rhythmic patterns; balancing this is the composer's love of irregular rhythms. Put simply, where much Western music conceives of rhythm as the division of an unvarying pulse, Messiaen, inspired by Greek poetic metres and Indian music, creates interest by the unexpected addition of rhythmic elements: where we expect four beats, he will suddenly write five and so on. Our expectation of the downbeat is constantly surprised, and such 'distortions' of regular pulse remind us of variation in nature: no two waves are ever quite the same shape. You'll hear some of this playful manipulation of rhythm in the *Quartet for the End of Time*; in some cases Messiaen ignores other musical elements, like harmony, and has the whole group playing in sinuous unison.

In his harmony, Messiaen creates a sense of timelessness without becoming bland. Using his own system of modes, or scales, he creates chords which can be extremely tense, or conversely, lush (although the lushness, paradoxically, is achieved through the constant presence of mild dissonance.) This accounts for the yearning quality of much of Messiaen's music, such as we hear in the gradual, inexorable soaring of the violin, over disembodied simple chords, in the last movement of the *Quartet for the End of Time*.

Awe is never far from Messiaen's music, and

awe in the contemplation of nature is, for him, the same as awe in the presence of God. Such works as the orchestral *Des Canyons aux étoiles* (*From the canyons to the stars*) celebrates the composer's reaction to spectacular desert formations in Utah, as well as his enduring love of the night sky. Messiaen's acceptance of the doctrine of the Incarnation, that God became fully human in Jesus, makes the whole material universe sacred. Remembering Paul Dukas's comment, 'Listen to the birds. They are great masters', he came to feel that birdsong had a sacramental quality, the voice of the earth singing praise to God. That is certainly the sense we get from the counterpoint of birdsong that opens the *Quartet*.

Messiaen's faith may well have been tested by the experience of war, and his captivity as a POW in the winter of 1941 at Stalag VIII A, in Görlitz. Much, however, of the *Quartet for the End of Time*'s musical 'imagery' refers explicitly to that of the Apocalypse, or Book of Revelation in the New Testament, and like St John's vision of the ultimate battle and triumph of Good over Evil, the piece is intended to comfort, rather than frighten, in the face of uncertainty.

Schubert, like Messiaen was raised in the Catholic faith, though his feelings towards religion were much more ambivalent, and seemingly of little comfort as syphilis took its toll and his health deteriorated. In 1824 he wrote to friend:

I find myself to be the most unhappy and wretched creature in the world. Imagine a man whose health will never be right again, and who in sheer despair continually makes things worse and worse instead of better; imagine a man, I say, whose most brilliant hopes have perished, to whom the felicity of love and friendship have nothing to offer but pain at best, whom enthusiasm (at least of the stimulating variety) for all things beautiful threatens to forsake, and I ask you, is he



Samuel Barber, 1956. Photo: Yousuf Karsh

not a miserable, unhappy being? 'My peace is gone, my heart is sore, I shall find it nevermore'. I might as well sing [that] every day now, for upon retiring to bed each night I hope that I may not wake again, and each morning only recalls yesterday's grief.

Despite his illness, Schubert worked on several things at this time, including the *String Quartet in D minor*, whose slow movement is a set of variations of his song, 'Death and the Maiden'. Its poem, by Lutheran pastor Matthias Claudius reflects the burgeoning Romantic movement, which began in reaction to the authority of Church and State, but more abstractly, questioned the very notions of reason and rationality that had underpinned the Enlightenment. Nature, the Medieval world, folktales and the supernatural became the currency of Romantic poetry, and the greatest escape from those arbitrary authorities was, of course, represented by death. One of the first

poets of the Romantic movement in German, Novalis, wrote his *Hymnen an die Nacht*, or 'Hymns to the night' – some of which Schubert set to music – which famously equate death with ecstasy. In fact at one point Novalis says 'you are Death, and only you can make us well'. And Romanticism arguably reached its climax in the erotically charged deaths of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, some decades later.

Schubert's song is a dialogue, where the agitated music of the terrified maiden contrasts with the calm and comforting responses from Death. Significantly, Schubert only uses Death's material, but of course writing music, and especially variations, is a symbolic way of staving off the end, what scholar Maynard Solomon describes as a 'bulwark against extinction.'

Samuel Barber would have disagreed, saying 'it's only music' – referring, specifically to the celebrated *Adagio* which began life as the slow movement of his *String Quartet*. As a stand-alone work for string orchestra the *Adagio* immediately acquired connotations of solemnity and grief in the lead-up to World War II and with the death of President Franklin D Roosevelt. But Barber perhaps undermined his protestations of it being 'only music' when he arranged it as an a cappella setting of the *Agnus dei* – a prayer for forgiveness and peace that occurs before communion in the Latin Mass.

Neither Barber nor Schubert enjoyed the seemingly unshakeable faith of Messiaen; for Schubert, 'comforting perceptions of a brighter and better life' were to be found in music (especially Mozart's), and that, perhaps, is what each of the works in this program of Eternal Quartets offers in its own unique way.

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About the music

Samuel Barber (1910–1981)

Adagio for Strings

In 1938 Arturo Toscanini had heard Barber's *Symphony* and asked for a new work. Barber provided two: the *Adagio for strings* and the first *Essay for orchestra*, and both were performed and broadcast by the NBC Symphony Orchestra. The *Adagio* instantly brought its composer high standing with audiences and sneering dismissal by the more learned. Reviewing another work of Barber's, Virgil Thomson offered the backhanded compliment that 'the only reason Barber gets away with elementary musical methods is that his heart is pure'.

In its original version, however, the *Adagio* is the slow movement (originally marked *Molto adagio*) from Barber's *String Quartet Op.11*, where it is framed by two fast movements. The first movement creates drama through its use of musical diversity, whereas the *Adagio*, with its eternal note of sadness, its sense of constant yearning, dwells on its limited thematic material: a slowly unfolding Bachian melody is subject to gradual changes to its contour and harmony as it gathers intensity. After an impassioned climax, and moment of silence, the music returns to earth.

Franz Schubert (1797–1828)

String Quartet No.14 in D minor, 'Death and the Maiden', D810

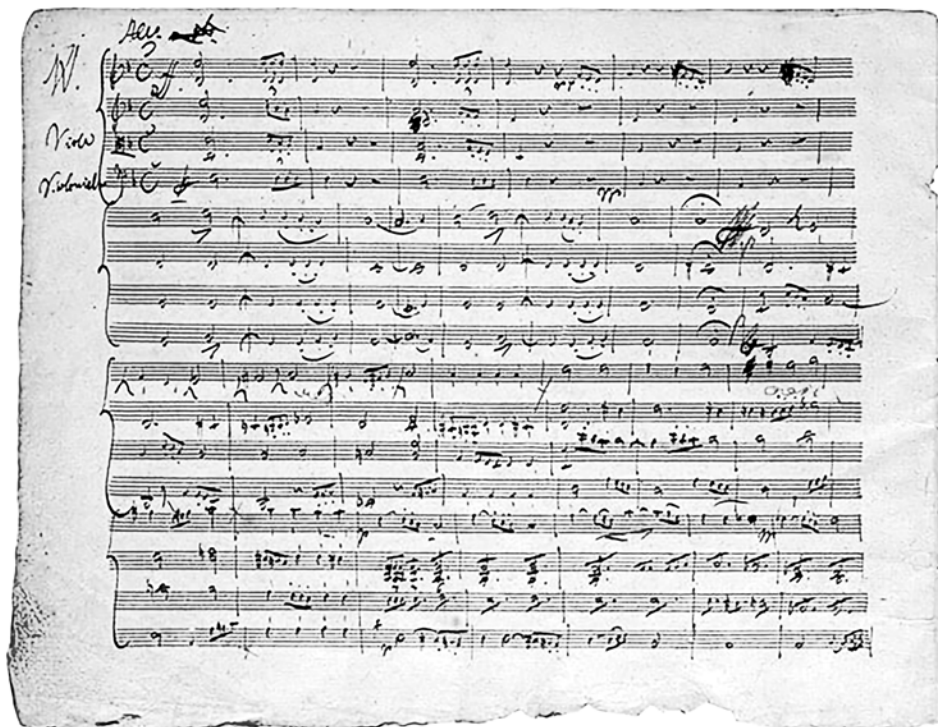
- I. Allegro
- II. Andante con moto
- III. Scherzo: Allegro molto – trio
- IV. Presto

Violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh and his quartet were busy with challenging new works in the mid-1820s: Beethoven had produced his five 'late quartets' for Schuppanzigh's ensemble. And then there was Schubert, who produced three great quartets in the period 1824–26. The D minor '*Death and the Maiden*' was performed at a private concert early in 1826. At the rehearsal, according to one story, Schuppanzigh told Schubert that it was 'no good. Go back to your songs'!

Of course, he had 'gone back to his songs' in this quartet and the '*Trout*' quintet. Schubert's returning to his 1817 song, *Death and the Maiden*, at this point in his life is particularly poignant. In early 1823 he developed symptoms of syphilis, then a terminal disease; his health would deteriorate over the next years.



Opening passage from Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*



Original manuscript of Schubert's 'Death and the Maiden', 1824. Source: The Mary Flagler Cary Music Collection, the Morgan Museum, New York

In Matthias Claudius's poem, a young woman pleads with Death:

'Pass by, you cruel skeleton! I am still young... leave me untouched.'

And Death replies:

Give me your hand, you pretty,
sweet creature,
I am your friend; I have not come to
punish you.
Be of good courage! For I am not cruel;
Gently, in my arms, you shall sleep.

In the song, the maiden's music is agitated and unstable, while Death has a serene, hymnal voice, and that is what forms the theme for the set of five variations and a coda in the slow movement

of his D minor quartet.

Some commentators have suggested that the first movement, with its passionate unison gesture at the start and the ebb and flow of emotional tension that ensues, 'represents' the maiden's terror in this quartet. Be that as it may, the movement's dramatic surges and enigmatic ending make for a perfect contrast with the chorale-like chords and simple rhythm of the 'Death' music that follows.

The second movement explores a number of emotional implications of the theme, but closes as it began, in resigned serenity. The pithy Scherzo has a deliberately strenuous manner, contrasting with long-breathed lyricism in the central, major-key Trio. Much more dance-like

is the finale, the first theme's insistent triplets recalling the tarantella. The second theme of this sonata-design movement – passed from instrument to instrument amid a scampering of triplets – recalls in contour, rhythm and phrasing another early song of Schubert which deals with the ambiguities of fear and seduction as another young person is taken before his time: *Erkönig*.

Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992)

Quartet for the end of time

- I. Liturgy of crystal
- II. Vocalise, for the Angel who announces the end of Time
- III. Abyss of the birds
- IV. Interlude
- V. Praise to the Eternity of Jesus
- VI. Dance of fury, for the seven trumpets
- VII. A cluster of rainbows for the Angel who announces the end of Time
- VIII. Praise to the Immortality of Jesus

Messiaen's most famous work was first performed to some hundreds of Allied prisoners of war and their German captors at Stalag VIIIA, in Görlitz, Germany, in the depths of winter in 1941. Messiaen had begun by writing the Interlude movement for three of his fellow prisoners, notwithstanding the parlous state of their instruments, but when a battered upright piano was found, he completed the work's seven other movements. The eight movements reflect the Biblical seven days of creation and God's eternal Sabbath thereafter.

Pierre Boulez once remarked that the older composer's 'big contribution' was in his 'reflections on time...on time-spans and on the utilisation of time generally'. Messiaen departs from the post-Renaissance traditions of western music by writing a music that avoids the usual patterns of tension and release. His music is about being, rather than becoming. It reflects those 'eternal truths' through long time spans,

rhythmic organisation which is often repetitive, though supple, and a harmonic language where chords are considered as sensual entities, rather than stepping stones in the development of a musical argument. His music is thus closer to certain Eastern music, not because of his interest in gamelans or Indian *rāgas* or Greek metres or bird song, but because of this fundamental view of time.

In 1941, of course, he was also writing in the face of death, so much of the *Quartet's* musical 'imagery' refers explicitly to that of the Apocalypse, or *Book of Revelation* in the New Testament. The composer's notes on the individual movements include the following:

Liturgy of crystal

Between three and four o'clock in the morning, the awakening of the birds: a blackbird or a solo nightingale improvises, surrounded by efflorescent sound, by a halo of trills lost high in the trees...

Vocalise, for the Angel who announces the end of Time

The first and third parts (very short) evoke the power of this mighty angel, a rainbow upon his head and clothed with a cloud, who sets one foot on the sea and one foot on the earth. In the middle section are the impalpable harmonies of heaven. In the piano, sweet cascades of blue-orange chords, enclosing in their distant chimes the almost plainchant song of the violin and violoncello.

Abyss of the birds

Clarinet alone. The abyss is Time with its sadness, its weariness. The birds are the opposite to Time; they are our desire for light, for stars, for rainbows, and for jubilant songs.

Interlude

Scherzo, of a more individual character than the



Olivier Messiaen during a campaign in the east of France, Metz 1939/40.
Source: The archive of Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen, Paris.

other movements, but linked to them nevertheless by certain melodic recollections.

Praise to the Eternity of Jesus

Jesus is considered here as the Word. A broad phrase, infinitely slow, on the violoncello, magnifies with love and reverence the eternity of the Word, powerful and gentle, ... "In the beginning was the Word, and Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Dance of fury, for the seven trumpets

Rhythmically, the most characteristic piece in the series. The four instruments in unison take on the aspect of gongs and trumpets (the first six trumpets of the Apocalypse were followed by various catastrophes, the trumpet of the seventh angel announced the consummation of the mystery of God). Use of added [rhythmic] values, rhythms augmented or diminished... Music of stone, of formidable, sonorous granite...

A cluster of rainbows for the Angel who announces the end of Time

Certain passages from the second movement recur here. The powerful angel appears, above all the rainbow that covers him... In my dreams I hear and see a catalogue of chords and melodies, familiar colours and forms... The swords of fire, these outpourings of blue-orange lava, these turbulent stars...

Praise to the Immortality of Jesus

Expansive solo violin, counterpart to the violoncello solo of the fifth movement. Why this second encomium? It addresses more specifically the second aspect of Jesus, Jesus the Man, the Word made flesh... Its slow ascent toward the most extreme point of tension is the ascension of man toward his God, of the child of God toward his Father, of the being made divine toward Paradise.

Program notes © Gordon Kerry 2018

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Alexandra Osborne, violin
Veronique Serret, violin
Catalin Ungureanu, violin
Airena Nakamura, violin
Neil Thompson, viola
David Wicks, viola
Paul Stender, cello
Howard Penny, cello †
Alex Henery, double bass
Sally Walker, flute
David Rowden, clarinet
Lloyd Van't Hoff, clarinet †
Celia Craig, oboe
Josh Oates, oboe
Ben Hoadley, bassoon
Michael Dixon, horn
Maria Raspopova, piano
Samuel Hogarth, piano †
Lee Abrahmsen, soprano †

† = Guest Artist

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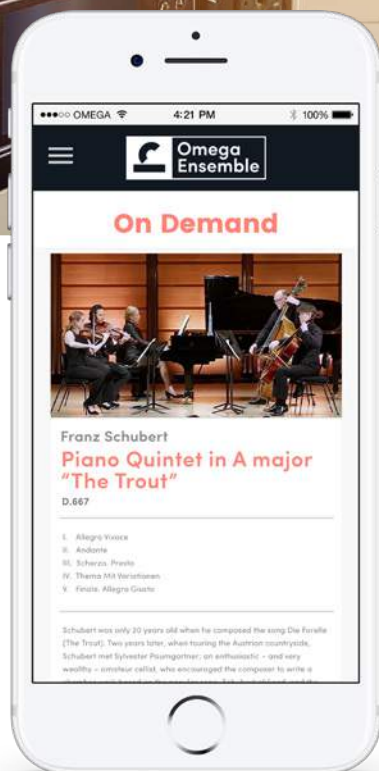


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