



Review of Anthony Pople, *Messiaen: Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

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[1] Anthony Pople's *Messiaen: Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* is a book you might rightly judge by its cover: a volume in concise format, with serious design, and careful craftsmanship. Pople's work is precisely that, proving itself to be an excellent analysis of one of the twentieth century's musical masterpieces. This book goes beyond most other writings on this composition, writings that often accomplish little more than identifying Messiaen's signature techniques in the same superficial way that a field guide might identify birds in a forest.

[2] The 115 pages of *Messiaen: Quatuor pour la fin du Temps* include an introduction, individual chapters devoted to each of the eight movements, and a concluding chapter, followed by an appendix of Messiaen's seven modes of limited transposition, endnotes, and a select bibliography. Throughout the text, short musical examples illustrate passages under discussion.

[3] Pople demonstrates extensive knowledge of the composer's style and works. As he progresses through individual movements, he carefully identifies and explains many of the techniques that Messiaen wrote about in his 1944 treatise, *The Technique of My Musical Language*. Notable among them are nonretrogradable rhythms, modes of limited transposition, rhythms with added values, inexact augmentation and diminution, rhythmic pedals, chords on the dominant, and chords of resonance. Pople compares several passages from the quartet with excerpts from other Messiaen compositions that display similar thematic material and compositional procedures. For example, he shows a passage from the sixth movement ("Danse de la fureur") as a derivation of the opening bars of "L'Ange aux parfums" from *Les corps glorieux* (1939), highlighting motives identical in contour and rhythm, although different in mode and tempo. He identifies the fifth and eighth movements as borrowed transcriptions of sections from two earlier compositions, *Fete des belles eaux* (1937) and *Diptyque* (1930).


[4] Pople has not only an appreciation of the historical circumstances surrounding the composition's genesis but also a deep understanding of its significant theological program. He recounts the story of the quartet's composition while Messiaen was incarcerated during World War II, and explains how the circumstances of his internment with three other musicians in the same camp led to its instrumentation. From Messiaen's accounts, recollections of the cellist who first played it, and comparisons of the movements, Pople proposes a hypothetical order in which the movements may have been composed. He discusses the theological issues underlying the *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*, an integral part of the quartet's expression, and

explains (page 14) that some movements contemplate the qualities of eternity while others are concerned with the events of the apocalypse (“the end of time”) as described in the Bible’s tenth chapter of the book of Revelation. Pople also gives the dramatic account of the work’s first performance in January of 1941, for some five thousand prisoners assembled in a freezing building.

[5] Pople’s writing shows true craftsmanship. It is usually clear and concise. Often, it is poetic. For example, after citing Messiaen’s description of the fifth movement’s melody as a song sentence, he writes:

“Though arguably no more than a description of the melody’s formal outline, this lends new meaning to the association of the music with the Word: if this is a ‘song’ then it is surely a song-without-words, but it is not Wordless. And it may be that the transfer of this melody from the ondes Martenot to the tangibly physical medium of the cello’s upper register—in which, for example, the motions of the player’s left hand on the neck of the instrument are frequently audible alongside the musical notes—was comparable for Messiaen with the theological fact of the Word made flesh” (page 55).

[6] Pople’s analysis is straightforward, direct, and insightful. He thoroughly points out the thematic, tonal, textural, and formal relationships found within and between movements. He uses short musical examples effectively to illustrate compositional processes, melodic structures, and harmonic progressions. He distinguishes chords that serve as harmonizations of melodies from those independent of melody having strictly coloristic functions. Citing Messiaen’s words about the colors that are depicted—a result of his rare and individual condition of synaesthesia—he admirably handles the difficulties that sometimes arise from the composer’s detailed color descriptions. Pople can be commended for placing the lighthearted character of the ‘Intermede’ in context; few scholars convincingly address such lightheartedness in Messiaen’s music.

[7] Pople further illustrates some of Messiaen’s innovative techniques by way of comparison with fabricated hypothetical traditional Western models. This kind of illustrative stylistic comparison is instructive. For example, the opening five bars of ‘Abime des oiseaux’—an application of one of Messiaen’s preferred melodic contours⁽¹⁾ using his second mode of limited transposition, added values, and inexact diminution—are shown as a derivation of a hypothetical, yet conceivable, four-bar tonal model in  (page 42). While both musical examples are given for comparison, Pople is careful to present Messiaen’s music above the fabrication in order to stress that the derivation is hypothetical and to emphasize that “there is no suggestion that Messiaen actually worked in this way, let alone that he worked with the actual substance of this example in mind” (page 42).

[8] If there is any substantial fault to this book, it is that it is sometimes too concise. For example, the analysis of the first movement lacks detailed discussion of the principal theme, the clarinet part. Instead, Pople focuses on the rigorous organization of the panisorhythmic piano and cello parts, undoubtedly because these parts also can emphasize several of Messiaen’s innovations. He shows the five motives that are chained together to form the violin part and then states that “the clarinet’s music proceeds similarly” (page 27). This is not entirely true. Although both parts are a kind of stylized birdsong, the more subordinate violin plays nothing more than its five motives (with some repetitions and order changes) while the clarinet’s initial theme goes through more interesting developmental variations.

[9] Some confusion may arise from Pople’s initial description of the solo clarinet movement’s form. After asserting that the sections are defined by changes of tempo (page 41), he lists the measure corresponding to the second powerful crescendo on a sustained E as a separate section, “C,” because of the changed metronome marking needed to indicate the desired length of the note. Because later in his discussion Pople interprets this note as an introduction to the “presque vif” section that follows it (page 44), it seems that the chart below the initial assertion that tempo changes determine form gives misleading or at least confusing information.

[10] I recommend this book especially to musicians wanting to learn more about the “Quatuor pour la fin du Temps” or Messiaen’s style in general. Anthony Pople conveys a sincere appreciation of both the composer and his great work. As his last sentence so eloquently states, the Quartet “remains a unique document of a great composer at the height of his powers responding to extraordinary circumstances with sustained and magnificent invention” (page 95).

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Footnotes

1. Messiaen identifies this pattern with Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov*.

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