

# URSULA OPPENS

PIANO

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*The New York Times* MUSIC REVIEW | 'OLIVIER MESSIAEN AT 100'

## Glimpsing the Apocalypse

By [ALLAN KOZINN](#)

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Olivier Messiaen's centenary celebrations have made his music more plentiful than usual this season, but it's not as if his works were neglected at other times. Organists play his challenging, visionary music regularly, and if the orchestral works could stand greater exposure, the chamber and vocal scores have become staples both in concert halls and on recordings. Certainly his "Quartet for the End of Time" (1941) is regarded as a modernist classic with a berth in the standard canon.

The quartet was a pillar of "Olivier Messiaen at 100," a centenary tribute at Symphony Space on Thursday evening that included another major score, the otherworldly "Visions de l'Amen" (1943). Both are steeped in the Roman Catholic mystical imagery that informed virtually every note Messiaen composed, and both are exquisite examples of his idiosyncratic, wholly expressive style, in which dissonant harmonies are matched with melodies drawn from bird song and Indonesian gamelan music.

Probably what makes the "Quartet for the End of Time" so enduring is the way Messiaen used this deeply personal language to offer glimpses of the apocalypse. The finely polished reading by members of the New Millennium — Alan R. Kay, clarinetist; Sunghae Anna Lim, violinist; Gregory Hesselink, cellist; and Margaret Kampmeier, pianist — focused on the score's uncommon beauty in ways that took a moment to get used to. Mostly this was an unusually gentle, fluid reading, but instead of reducing the score's impact, this graceful, precise approach made Messiaen's more vehement passages stand out in bold relief. The individual playing was magnificent as well. Mr. Kay's "Abîme des Oiseaux," in particular, was spellbinding.

**The pianists Ursula Oppens and Jerome Lowenthal took a necessarily more extroverted approach to "Visions de l'Amen," an ecstatic meditation on the mystical underpinnings of the universe, from the conceptual ("Amen du Désir" and "Amen de l'Agonie de Jésus") to the more grandly physical (the movements devoted to stars, planets and bird song). In some ways this is a work of almost Minimalist gestures (simple, repeating figures) set in a Maximalist frame (its brash dissonances and rhythmic complexities), and the most striking aspect of Ms. Oppens and Mr. Lowenthal's performance was the seamlessness with which they melded those sharply contrasting elements.**

The concert opened with an evocative account of "Le Merle Noir" (1952), one of Messiaen's bird-song transformations, in a supple, energetic performance by the flutist Tara Helen O'Connor and Ms. Kampmeier.

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