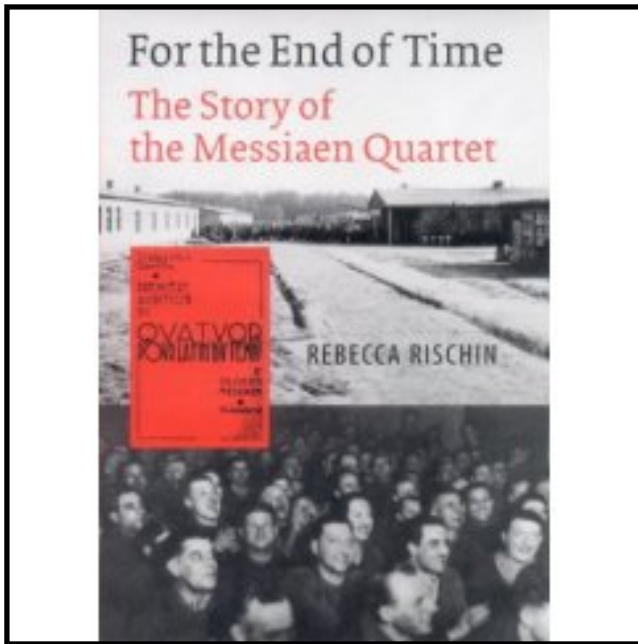


Olivier Messiaen's Quartet for the End of Time



The writing and first performance of French composer Olivier Messiaen's Quartet for the End of Time, in a German POW camp in the bitter winter of 1941, is one of the great stories of 20th century music. Ohio University music professor Rischin has gone to heroic lengths to separate the facts from the legends that have grown up about it. Some of these legends, as she demonstrates, were encouraged by the composer himself, who would tell interviewers the whole work was composed at **Stalag VIIIA** in Silesia, that its form was dictated by the instrumentalists available there (piano, cello, violin and clarinet), that the cellist played with only three strings and that there was a rapt audience of thousands. In fact, Messiaen (1908-1992) had written the work's celebrated clarinet

solo, "Abyss of the Birds," some time before with clarinetist Henri Akoka's participation; cellist Etienne Pasquier had his full quota of strings; and the camp building could hold at most 400 or so. Rischin tracked down the elderly Pasquier and violinist Jean La Boulaire (who lived his postwar life as an actor) and also talked to Messiaen's widow and Akoka's surviving family. Oddly, none of them had been interviewed about the occasion, which made the work Messiaen's most celebrated. These interviews show a remarkable picture of life at a desperate time-and of how the German authorities were anxious to show their civilized side to the French. The players come off better than the deeply religious, aloof, rather ethereal Messiaen, who seems to have been so otherworldly as to recoil from life's messiness. This is a fascinating, and finally believable, account of a remarkable occasion.

Page last revised 11/28/2006

[Print This Article](#)