

**eric hofbauer quintet**

—  
**prehistoric jazz — volume 2**

**quatuor pour la fin du temps** 47.00

— olivier messiaen

arranged by eric hofbauer

eric hofbauer — guitar

jerry sabatini — trumpet

todd brunel — Bb clarinet & bass clarinet

junko fujiwara — cello

curt newton — drums & percussion

produced by eric hofbauer  
(erichofbauer.com)

©&© 2014 creative nation music



cnm026

also available: prehistoric jazz, vol. 1 — the rite of spring (cnm025)



eric hofbauer quintet — prehistoric jazz — vol.2 — quatuor pour la fin du temps



**eric hofbauer quintet**

—  
**prehistoric jazz — volume 2**

# QUINTET FOR THE END OF TIME

## the background

— Long before the emergence of a formal “third stream” movement in the mid to late ‘50s, the fluid boundary between classical music and jazz (or pre-jazz) was an established fact. Scott Joplin and his forebear Louis Moreau Gottschalk were among the composers who birthed a new American sound, steeped in European Romanticism but also the vernacular of Joplin’s African-American Texas and Missouri, or Gottschalk’s Jewish-Creole New Orleans.

Against this background it’s gratifying to see young jazz bandleaders of our day reinvent the music of Shostakovich, Webern, Ligeti, Machaut and others. For Boston-based guitarist Eric Hofbauer, who confronts monumental works by Stravinsky and Messiaen on *Prehistoric Jazz*, Vols. 1 & 2, the goal was not a melding of genres or a salute to “serious” music in general, but rather a puzzling over matters of timbre and instrumentation, improvisational pathways and harmonic implications specific to these composers and not others. The orchestrations are rigorous yet everywhere is the spark of the unexpected. Hofbauer’s take on the encounter of European modernism with the America of blues and jazz follows in the best tradition of Joplin and all that came after.

It’s hard not to think of Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du printemps* (The Rite of Spring) and Messiaen’s *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (Quartet for the End of Time) as big and scary pieces, loaded with historical significance. But

they’re on a par with other unlikely works that Hofbauer has explored in a solo guitar context: “Hot for Teacher” by Van Halen, or “West End Blues” by Louis Armstrong and His Hot Five, or “Everybody Wants to Rule the World” by Tears for Fears. Hofbauer’s solo guitar trilogy—*American Vanity* (2002), *American Fear* (2010) and *American Grace* (2012)—was remarkable in the way it expanded the song canon, and with it the idiomatic reach of the instrument. The jump from this to deconstructing great orchestral and chamber music might have been bold, but it made perfect sense.

## quartet for the end of time

— The title almost could have been thought up by a metal band. Olivier Messiaen himself described one movement of *Fin du temps*—for violin, piano, clarinet and cello—as “music of stone, fearful granite sonorities; the irresistible movement of steel, enormous blocks of purple fury, of icy intoxication.” (All Messiaen quotes are from the booklet of the 2000 Deutsche Grammophon recording, with Gil Shaham on violin.) But oddly, Messiaen intended “the end of time” as a vision of hope, citing words from Revelation 10:1–7 concerning a “mighty angel” with “feet as pillars of fire.” The angel plants one foot on sea and the other on land and declares the end of time—not a cataclysm so much as a moment when “the mystery of God should be finished.”

As is true of most of his life’s work, Messiaen offered *Fin du temps* in devotion to his Catholic faith. But what makes *Fin du temps* remarkable is the backstory: he wrote it while being held in a Nazi P.O.W. camp (Stalag VIII A in Görlitz, to be exact), after being captured at Verdun. Among his fellow prisoners were cellist Etienne Pasquier and other members of the very first *Fin du temps* quartet, who premiered the piece—in the camp, no less—in January 1941. (Messiaen played piano.) To this day *Fin du temps* evokes a kind of mystical transcendence, a steadfastness in the face of terrible conditions.

Messiaen’s vastly mysterious harmonic language continues to fascinate many jazz artists. Guitarist Bruce Arnold and the band Spooky Actions recorded a treatment of *Fin du temps* in 2005. Drummer Ben Perowsky played a ripping trio version of the “Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes” in 1999, on a live album with Chris Speed on clarinet and Scott Colley on bass. Hammond organist Brian Charette, meanwhile, has developed a vocabulary for improvising based on what Messiaen called “modes of limited transposition.”

But Eric Hofbauer approaches *Fin de temps* entirely on his own terms, much as he does with Stravinsky’s Rite on *Prehistoric Jazz*, Vol. 1. These sister CDs feature the same exceptional chamber-jazz lineup, with Hofbauer on guitar, Todd Brunel on clarinet and bass clarinet, Junko Fujiwara on cello, Jerry Sabatini on trumpet and Curt Newton on drums. (See my notes to Vol. 1 for additional remarks on the

personnel.) But while there’s much that unifies the two performances, the contrast between the sonic worlds of Stravinsky and Messiaen can be dramatic.

“They’re both master explorers of timbre and dynamics,” Hofbauer says. “But where the Rite goes through relatively quick and very dramatic changes, *Fin du temps* likes to simmer and meditate on extreme quiet for extended periods, or dig into a timbral palette by focusing on long solo features.” There’s also substantial difference in how Stravinsky and Messiaen use “strong motivic ideas, riffs almost,” Hofbauer continues. “Where Stravinsky is a motivic deconstructionist, Messiaen is a motivic developer. Like Coltrane bringing back the *A Love Supreme* theme throughout that piece, Messiaen uses small ideas, usually his bird-call melodies, which may be nothing more than an interval set to a specific rhythm, all throughout *Fin du temps*.”

Another difference: Hofbauer’s Rite was scaled down from the full orchestral score, whereas the Messiaen involved translating one chamber group format to another—and the addition of drums. “Cello and clarinet are in the original,” Hofbauer says of his *Fin du temps* instrumentation. “Trumpet took over the violin voice, and the guitar took on the monumental task of the piano part. That left the drums to play parts that needed accenting, or provide coloristic percussion, or keep solid time either in odd meters, marches or most importantly, swinging. There was plenty of room for Curt to do what he

does best—improvise and interact creatively.” Hofbauer gives Newton’s role a name, in fact: “rogue interloper.” In the Rite, by contrast, it is the leader’s guitar that functions as rogue (again, see my notes to Vol. 1 for more on this).

The key link between these works, for Hofbauer, lies in their harmonic systems, and their compatibility with a theory of Hofbauer’s own called the Diamond. As he explains in the notes to Vol. 1, this Diamond “is the inter-relationship between four (hence the diamond shape) dominant chords built from a diminished 7th arpeggio. (ex. C, Eb, Gb, A).” Hofbauer sees aspects of the Diamond at work in Bartok, Ives, Coltrane, Eric Dolphy and others, including the two giants represented on *Prehistoric Jazz*. It’s a thread running through 20th-century classical music and innovative postwar jazz, and Hofbauer knows just how to get lost in it.

“Messiaen seems to utilize more of the minor-third relationships in the Diamond, giving the harmonies of *Fin du temps* a stronger sense of polytonal independence,” says the guitarist. “He also tends to use harmony very familiar to modern jazz: whole-tone and Lydian b7 scales, lots of major 6 and dominant 7 #11 chords.”

Much like in Hofbauer’s Rite, themes get isolated or stretched as vamps, riffs or other jazz-like devices, while new rhythmic settings arise—such as the swing feel for the middle of “Vocalise, pour l’Ange qui annonce la fin du temps.” Citing one of Messiaen’s “many ostinato moments where he lingers on a two-bar

quarter-note phrase,” Hofbauer explains, “to me that is a walking bass line. So the next logical step was to turn that into a dialogue between clarinet and trumpet, with deconstructed guitar comping over the cello ostinato.” (Messiaen described this movement as “gentle cascades of blue-orange chords,” conjuring the “impalpable harmonies of heaven.”)

What Hofbauer does with “Abîme des oiseaux” (abyss of the birds), originally a nine-minute tour de force for solo clarinet, is intriguing: he adds guitar. So the “Abîme” and “Louange [Eulogy] à l’Éternité de Jésus” (originally for cello and piano) become the twin duo sections, effective spotlights for Brunel and Fujiwara respectively. “Being the top-notch classical players that they are, Todd and Junko have played those features for years,” Hofbauer says. “They’re important parts of their repertoire. I didn’t want to mess too much with what the master did with those melodies. But I could recast them, reset them as part of a dialogue with an improvising voice and perhaps offer a new perspective on their timeless emotional power. Todd and Junko played their composed parts as written with just a few liberties of phrasing and timbre. I read their parts directly from the score (the clarinet part in Bb and cello in alto clef!) and improvised to, along with, around their parts.”

A second “Louange,” this one “à l’immortalité de Jésus,” concludes the CD. Originally for violin and piano, Hofbauer’s reading finds Sabatini on trumpet instead, with himself on

guitar and Newton on limited percussion. "I distilled that melody down to a lead sheet structure, head-solo-head with lots room for liberties with pulse. Think *Sketches of Spain*, so it's modal but more elastic in terms of time and form. Curt's part calls for cymbal colors and other tinkling percussive sounds only, no drums, and I 'comp' the progression but only use various harmonics—natural, tapped, pinched, etc."

Coexisting with these quieter meditations are the "fearful granite sonorities" and "purple fury" that Messiaen mentioned above. He was referring to the "Danse de la fureur" movement—"rhythmically the most characteristic piece of the set," in the maestro's words. "Messiaen's rhythmic vocabulary is more traditionally post-romantic European than Stravinsky's," says Hofbauer, "which means it's very complicated and often intricately subdivided, though not necessarily syncopated. This was the most interesting aspect of arranging the piece for jazz quintet: how does one make these ideas come alive in a modern jazz rhythmic sense?"

In the case of the "Intermède," which Messiaen called "a scherzo of more superficial character," Hofbauer altered melodies to start and end on the upbeat, or broke up eighth-note lines with triplets in unexpected places. He would also accent the backbeat (on the opening "Liturgie de cristal," for instance) or use odd-meter ostinatos and grooves (e.g., "Danse") to create momentum in the ensemble.

When describing "Fouillis d'arcs-en-ciel, pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin du temps,"

Messiaen reached for some particularly colorful prose. The first clause of the title translates as "tumult of rainbows," or perhaps "tumbling rainbows." It's worth quoting the composer more fully:

In my dreams, I hear recognized chords and melodies, I see known colours and forms; then, after this transitory stage, I pass beyond reality and submit in ecstasy to a dizziness, a gyratory interlocking of superhuman sounds and colours. These swords of fire, these flows of blue-orange lava, these sudden stars; this is the tumult of rainbows!

For Hofbauer, this tumult winds up being the most grounded and elemental form you could name: the blues. "Messiaen plays with I-IV-I and V-I throughout the whole movement up to that point, and that pattern sounds like a blues to me. In fact, the stop-time cello and drum figure that starts the improvised section is directly from the original score, except I syncopate it and set it up as a 12-bar blues that builds for four choruses, finally arriving on a swinging collective improvisation. All the clues were in the original. I just refine it to its core elements and built it back up as the blues, but the genetic material is the same."

Both these masterworks, the Rite and *Fin du temps*, share intense spiritual underpinnings, even if the former depicts a pre-Christian Slavic world while the latter venerates Jesus. Noting the centrality of the tritone—bebop's famous flattened fifth—in multiple sections of *Fin du temps*, Hofbauer mentions its fraught history as "the devil's interval." "I hear it

as duality, good and evil again. For every 'Amen' plagal cadence there are five or more tritones—is that evil in triumph? No, just a deep understanding that life is a struggle full of conflict in a cosmos full of suffering. The plagal cadence represents hope while the tritone represents the reality of nature, which is both good and evil."

Even if Stravinsky depicted pre-Christian Slavic rituals while Messiaen composed in the

throes of Catholic reverie, Hofbauer sees the two touching on the same ancient, eternal conundrum: the purpose of human existence and the struggle between life and death. Perhaps it's what Charles Ives meant by "the unanswered question." "It's something that art must tackle," Hofbauer insists, "if it strives to be universal and touch the hearts of others."

David R. Adler

New York, July 2014

- 1 liturgie de cristal <sup>3.43</sup>
- 2 vocalise, pour l'ange qui annonce la fin du temps <sup>4.18</sup>
- 3 abîme des oiseaux <sup>7.50</sup>
- 4 intermède <sup>1.54</sup>
- 5 louange à l'éternité de jésus <sup>7.54</sup>
- 6 danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes <sup>8.09</sup>
- 7 fouillis d'arcs-en-ciel, pour l'ange qui annonce la fin du temps <sup>7.46</sup>
- 8 louange à l'immortalité de jésus <sup>5.24</sup>

recorded (04/14), mixed & mastered at the rotary records (rotaryrecords.com) by warren amerman — design by benjamin shaykin (benjaminshaykin.com) — liner notes by david adler (adlermusic.com) — photo by lauren poussard (laurenpuussard.com) — printed by dwri letterpress (dwriletterpress.net)



also available: prehistoric jazz, vol. 1 — the rite of spring (cnm025)