“…Peasants, laborers, intellectuals, career soldiers, medics, priests…” this was the diverse crew in attendance at the now almost legendary premier of Olivier Messiaen’s *Quartet for the End of Time* (Golèa 63). It was a crowd that was hardly knowledgeable about Messiaen’s stylistically unique approaches to composition – most of them probably knew little about music at all. Yet approximately five thousand morale-deprived prisoners at the Stalag VIII A Nazi prison camp, many of whom were starved or wounded, braved the -4 degrees Fahrenheit cold to form an impassioned and understanding crowd whose quiet, sympathetic temperament was like nothing Messiaen had ever experienced in his life: “…we were all brothers because we were all in the same situation…. they listened with a religious silence. Never before had I been listened to like that…. Even if these people knew nothing about music, they readily understood that this was something special” (Samama).

While the mystical and eerily enchanting conditions of the infamous premier of the *Quartet* make the event inimitable, to say the least, audiences today, listening even in the most comfortable concert halls, continue to find Messiaen’s masterpiece portray the same passions and sensations it illustrated at its debut at the Silesian Nazi camp. Indeed, the most profound qualities of the *Quartet* - the release from the perils of time, the hope and anticipation of eternity, and the perpetuation of the transcendental and super-temporal - are quite clearly implied in the aesthetic principles found in the work and can be comprehended through attentive listening. Yet the primary subject that Messiaen sought to address in the *Quartet*, the cessation of mortal time, begs a thorough examination of the piece to uncover all of the instances in which the topic is addressed. Messiaen relates the topic of the end of time to the listener by focusing on the apocalyptic theme of the Biblical book of Revelation, chapter 10:1-7:

> And I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow on his head; his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire….Setting his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land…and, standing on the sea and on the land, he raised his right hand toward Heaven and swore by He who lives forever and ever... saying: “There will be no more Time; but in the days when the...
seventh angel is to blow his trumpet, the most of God will be fulfilled.” (Rischin 129, translation of Messiaen’s preface)

While the religious backdrop of the work is important not only for its topical basis but to the Catholic faith Messiaen often fervently portrays in his music, Messiaen notes that the crux of the *Quartet* is primarily focused on his own fascination with the philosophical understanding of time and its expiration, rather than the calamitous expositions of the book of Revelation:

With regard to the apocalyptic character [of the *Quartet*], to regard the Revelation merely as an accumulation of cataclysms and catastrophes is to understand it poorly; the Revelation also contains great and marvelous lights, followed by solemn silences. Moreover, my initial thought was of the abolition of time itself, something infinitely mysterious and incomprehensible to most of the philosophers of time, from Plato to Bergson… (Golèa 70)

Therefore, in order to fully appreciate the purpose of the *Quartet for the End of Time*, we must examine and attempt to interpret the most notable and important inferences of the dissemination of time in both time’s abstract sense and its existence within the measure of classical meter. While numerous analogies to time can be interpreted in the piece subjectively, the scope of our discussion will be limited to the clearest metaphors of time and the eternal found in the specialized compositional methods and structures of the work.

Hints of the end of time are littered virtually everywhere throughout the *Quartet*. In fact, a subtle yet omnipresent gesture of eternity is indicated before a single note is even played. This inference comes from the actual number of movements that make up the whole work, which totals eight. Messiaen explains his reasoning and meaning behind this particular numerical choice in the preface to the *Quartet*’s score: “This *Quartet* comprises eight movements. Why? Seven is the perfect number, the Creation in six days sanctified by the divine Sabbath; the seventh day of this repose extends into eternity and becomes the eighth day of eternal light, of unalterable peace” (Rischin 129). Scholars are uncertain whether or not Messiaen planned the *Quartet* to have this significance from the inception of its composition (Pople 11). However, the number of movements utilized is assuredly not simply a byproduct of the compositional process. Moreover, Messiaen’s theological explanation of the number is not some just a forced interpretation. After all, if Messiaen had meant to have any fewer than eight movements, he could have promptly done away with the fourth movement, an *Intermède* which, as Anthony Pople notes in his *Messiaen: Quatuor pour la Fin du Temps*, lies outside the “apocalyptic orbit” of the rest of the work (47).

Alternatively, Messiaen could have considered not using either of the eulogistic
fifth or eight movements, Louange à l’Éternité de Jésus (Praise to the Eternity of Jesus) and Louange à l’Immortalité de Jésus (Praise to the Immortality of Jesus) respectively, both of which are transcriptions of earlier works for different instrumentation. This is not to say that these movements do not serve very important purposes within the context and thematic flow of the whole work - they unquestionably do - but Messiaen was perfectly knowledgeable of the character of his music: if he had wanted to have any other number of movements in the work but eight, it was easily within his capability to make it happen.

Messiaen denotes two over-laying musical ideas in the preface that symbolize time in the Quartet, the first being his “modes,” which refer to his “Modes of Limited Transposition.” Introduced first in his preface of La Nativité du Seigneur (The Nativity of the Lord) and explained more fully in his Technique de mon langage musical (The Technique of My Musical Language), these scalar organizations are composed of seven primary modes that, to Messiaen, contain a timeless affinity for “bring[ing] the listener closer to infinity, to eternity in space” (Rischin 129). This sempiternal essence is achieved by the fact that the construct of the modes permits them to contain only a few levels of transposition. Some of these modes include rather commonly known scales such as the whole-tone and octatonic, both of which have only two levels of transposition and lack a gravitational root (leaving them indifferent to a tonic note). The implication of the modes’ usage clearly represents the unhindered nature of infinity and the freedom of eternity, but Messiaen never uses these modes in an obvious manner. Quite to the contrary, in many of his works, and particularly in the Quartet, Messiaen avoids making conspicuous usage of these modes by straying from plainly ascending or descending through them and often forms triads from them to produce a sort of tertian harmony that may resemble more diatonic music. Messiaen was by no means the first to use this modal formula to evoke connotations of the supernatural. Composers such as Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov utilized non-gravitational scales even in the 19th century to distinguish such concepts (Burkholder 708). What makes Messiaen’s usage of them unique within the context of the Quartet is his apparent implication for the modes to resemble the noncentrality of eternity.

The second over-laying idea Messiaen mentions in the preface to the Quartet is his “special rhythm.” Considering that Messiaen dubbed himself to be specifically a “rhythmitician” (alongside his favored titles of composer, performer, and amateur ornithologist) and that this particular Quartet is allegorical with the concept of time itself, it should be plain to see that the intricacies of the work’s rhythms contain some of the most numerous and vital metaphors for the distance of mortal and musical time. Indeed, to Messiaen, rhythm, time, and eterni-
ty are all correlated. His ontology of rhythm in a unified cosmological idea presented in his *Conference de Bruxelles*, explains this idea by stating that a single beat within eternity creates a point that finds eternity before it and eternity after it. Subsequently, a second beat created after the first creates a rhythm within the space of time, which is within eternity (11). Even so, Pople notes that some scholars such as Ian Darbyshire have found this idea problematic, saying that eternity by its definition lies outside the confines of time, and furthermore, that there is a difference between the relation of time and eternity and the relation between points in time in eternity (14). Yet aside from these philosophical arguments, it suffices to say that Messiaen understood the limitations of any sort of musical language to convey such an incredible idea. After all, in the preface for the *Quartet*, he states quite humbly: “The special rhythms, independent of the meter, powerfully contribute to the effect of banishing the temporal. (But given the awesomeness of the subject, all of the above serves merely as inarticulate and tentative explanation!)” (Rischin 129).

So how is Messiaen able to use rhythm to convey the titanic concept of exiling the temporal? Interestingly enough, it is deducible that the concept is juxtaposed with his popular hypothesis that with the destruction of time also comes the destruction of space. As we will find, Messiaen’s rhythmic formalities cannot thrive within the atmosphere of metered time just as eternity cannot coincide with space, and thus in the same way begs to be free and exist in a dimension without boundaries.

The foremost result of Messiaen’s need to establish a free-moving rhythmic space is the complete absence of any valid time signatures in the *Quartet*. While clearly it would have been hypocritical of the maestro to include time signatures in a work whose whole purpose is to break free from time, one might be surprised to find that the absence of restrictive meters actually also serves as a beneficial way for the performers to read the score. In his *Technique*, Messiaen outlines four categories of notation, the first and fourth which are used in the *Quartet* (the second and third are mainly used to solve problems faced by an orchestra). The first category of notation, in which the majority of the *Quartet* is written in, contains any number of beats within a measure with bar-lines being used only to indicate periods and reconfigure accidentals (Pople 51). The rhythmic values of individual measures in the *Quartet* hardly ever add up to a congruent time signature that could carry over between several measures. One can imagine how relatively futile and somewhat of an eyesore it would be for the performer to have perpetually new time signatures thrown at him or her. The fourth notation, found in full effect in the first and fourth movements, as well as in parts of the second and seventh, implements a false meter – “false” in the
sense that the true rhythmic value the composer has set in place is superimposed over this “meter” via syncopations and accents. For instance, the bar-lines in the *Intermède* suggest a 2/4 time signature, but while the rhythmic value of the time signature is noticeable, the hemiolic effect of the piece’s “true rhythm” unveils the reality that the “meter” is only there for the benefit of the performers. Therefore, while the measures are equally metered in resemblance to a coherent time signature, it would be false to say that any of the movements in this notation are actually written in one since the rhythms are meant to sound and feel completely different.

Time signatures are further rendered obsolete by the execution of “additive rhythms.” Throughout the work, there are numerous instances where a measure contains an extra one or more short values of rhythm, providing a rhythmic asymmetry that would severely misalign any sort of natural time signature. Let us take, for example, the sixth movement entitled *Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes* (*Dance of Fury, for the Seven Trumpets*). If we were to look at the first three measures without the “added” sixteenth note, we would find that the “time signature” would add up neatly to 4/4. If we try to implement a time signature with the added rhythms in place, however, we get strange results: two measures of 4.25/4 and one of 4.5/4. Obviously, we could subdivide the rhythm into sixteenth notes to create even integers, yet such a method would become cumbersome and ultimately useless for counting the true rhythmic value of the piece (Messiaen himself, in the “Advice to the Performers” section of the preface, actually advises against performing the non-metered pieces with a strict sixteenth count) (Rischin 133-144). Likewise, having composite time signatures that simply “add in” the extra value, such as, for instance, 4/4 +1/16 or 1/16 + 4/4, are not only even more cumbersome, but are not true to the actual rhythmic interpretation since the added value often comes in the middle of the beat or on a similarly obscure placement. These added rhythms further stimulate the freeing of time from normal meter and project the space in which meter can be notated into the direction of boundlessness.

Yet even though Messiaen frees his composition rhythmically from practically all time-restricted limits, there is an astonishingly serene order to his rhythmic structure so that both the intellectual and legible acuteness of his rhythm remains intact. Three basic rhythmic functions carry this order throughout the piece. The first of these is Messiaen’s concept of “rhythmic augmentation or diminution” (Rischin 132). In this process, a given rhythm is immediately followed by a corresponding variation of a character that is ultimately up to the composer’s discretion. For instance, a given rhythmic pattern of [h q h] might be immediately followed with [q e q] to show an example of standard...
diminution (the values between notes have all been diminished by half). Another example might be that of adding a dot to a given rhythmic value, so that our first [h q h] turns into [h. q . h .]. Messiaen lists a total of eleven types of augmentation or diminution in the preface to the Quartet (see figure A), and further notes that some augmentations and diminutions may be “inexact:” [q q q] could feasibly transform into [e e e] even though the mathematical formula for this change is not precise. For the principle of these modulating rhythmic patterns to succeed, they must be considered on their own value-based merit, which would make accomplishing this task within the spectrum of pre-measured time useless, disadvantageous at best.

The second unique structure of rhythmic foundation that Messiaen employs within the Quartet is the palindrome, or, as he coined the term, “nonretrorgradable” rhythm. Loriod Messiaen, Olivier’s wife, explains:

...nonretrorgradable rhythms are quintessential Messiaen; if you read them from left to right or from right to left, you have the same order of note values. It was an extraordinary discovery because these rhythms were within time and yet had the possibility of independence. And in the Quartet for the End of Time (it’s with a capital “T”), Messiaen imagined the moment in which there would be no more Time, in which Time would rejoin Eternity. (Rischin 126)

Nonretrorgradable rhythms infer eternity quite clearly in that, though the rhythms are played within what we perceive as the time of performance, there is no “forward” or “backward” motion to them. They simply exist in a stasis of equidistance, much like how the concept of eternity can be considered as “is,” not “will be” or “has been.” These rhythms also share a similarity with Messiaen’s modes of limited transposition in that there is no essential starting point or gravitational pull toward an end or a beginning, further symbolizing their infinitude. These rhythms occur more in specific moments in the Quartet rather than serve as primary rhythmic sources, but their defined occurrences — such as in the cello melody throughout the first movement, the Liturgie de Cristal (Crystal Liturgy, see figure B) , the clarinet figure toward the end of the seventh movement, Fouillis d’arc-en-ciel, pour l’Ange qui annonce la fin du Temps (Tangle of Rainbows, for the Angel Who Announces the End of Time) and all the instruments in the Danse de la fureur — make clear their purpose of outlining the eternal.

The last of these three basic rhythmic employments is the ostinato. While the ostinato is not indigenous to Messiaen’s rhythmic language by any means, he uses the gesture in a unique fashion to create an unrelenting rhythmic independence in a single instrument that segregates itself from other ongoing rhythmic values. The most apparent example of this autonomy is seen in the

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Liturgie de Cristal, in which the cello and piano create what Messiaen defines in his Technique as a “rhythmic pedal” — “An independent rhythm which constantly repeats itself, without paying heed to the rhythms which surround it” (Pople 24). The ostinato comes in a variety of complexities within the Quartet. In the Liturgie de Cristal, the independent ostinatos in the cello and piano provide a rich textural journey as the cello’s thirty-three eighth note nonretrogradable ostinato (which is comprised of a five note melody) is played against the piano’s contrasting non-palindromic twenty-six eighth note ostinato (which is comprised of twenty-nine different chords). The two instruments never again interlock in the piece as they do in the beginning, thanks to Messiaen’s predilection with prime numbers that are used in the eighth note count of the cello and piano. In fact, as Pople notes, given the composer’s metronome marking, if the piece continued past its nearly three-minute duration and the cello and piano continuum proceeded, it would take approximately two-hundred thirty minutes for the two instruments to match up again as they do in the beginning (Pople 26). Therefore, the ostinato in this case acts in more of a supplementary role to the greater idea of rhythmic independence and the connotations of eternity noted by the relation between the repeated cycles of the cello and piano. Messiaen surely understood the concept of the ostinato as a seemingly never-ending and infinite figure when he composed the Quartet’s eighth movement, for here the ostinato in the piano is rhythmically simple and unambiguous, providing the listener with no difficulty in understanding its enchantingly ceaseless state.

Regardless of whatever rhythmic function is used, we find that rhythm is always underpinned by the time-dictated concept of tempo. Unlike meter, it would be impossible for Messiaen to completely do away with the practical functions of tempo. After all, even though the Quartet is about the end of time, the actual performance of the piece (or any piece of music, for that matter) must logically adhere to the principles of music being a time-based art. Otherwise, to do away with tempo might hypothetically do nothing but create a state of silence. Yet even this idea might seem quite applicable when considering Messiaen’s depiction of “the harmonious silence of heaven” in his description of the Liturgie de Cristal (in the preface to the Quartet) and the striking natural silence found at the end of the seventh and eighth movements (Rischin 130).

While such a concept might make for an interesting art piece along the lines of John Cage’s 4’33”, Messiaen, instead of abolishing tempo, makes symbolic use of it throughout the piece. The maestro particularly has an affinity for the usage of slow tempos and associates them with a state of ecstasy (Pople 81). This emotional assignment can be seen in the Infiniment lent fifth movement and extrémement lent eighth, both of which are meant to depict the most sublime and allur-
ing concepts of the entire *Quartet*. Indeed, Messiaen even goes out of his way in the preface to emphasize the necessity of the performer’s ability to “sustain implacably the two extremely slow movements” (Rischin 134). He also stresses the significance of the “long-phrases” of the cello in the fifth movement and the violin in the eighth (Rischin 130-131).

Tempo finds itself as an important aspect to the music in other movements as well, particularly the third movement, entitled *Abime des oiseaux* (*Abyss of the Birds*). Here, the exchange of varying tempos can be perceived as demarcating the different sections of the ABA-structured movement. While this kind of tempo-based organization at first glance may seem to serve only a musical end, it is necessary to keep in mind that most interpretations state that the whole purpose of this movement is to compare the restrictiveness of the temperate abyss of time (described by the A section) to the freedom of the birds, which Messiaen symbolizes as our “longing for light” and our “desire for flight” (described by the B section) (Rischin 60). Given these connotations, it is clear to see how tempo in the *Quartet* actually serves a quintessential function in exposing the qualities of time that Messiaen seeks to identify.

What we have examined in this essay are the relatively concrete inferences of time and eternity in Messiaen’s *Quartet* that occur either motivically throughout the work’s eight movements or pervade the nature of the piece altogether. While he clearly wanted to be respected in his complexities as a composer, (Rischin 125), Messiaen also understood his listeners perfectly, observing that the details of his meticulous description of time are subordinate to the overall presentation of his work. As he mentions in his *Technique*,

...think of the hearer of our modal and rhythmic music; he will not have time at the concert [i.e., while listening] to inspect the nontransposition and the nonretrogradations, and, at that moment, these questions will not interest him further; to be charmed will be his only desire. And that is precisely what will happen; in spite of himself he will submit to the strange charm of impossibilities... which lead him progressively to that sort of *theological rainbow* which the musical language...attempts to be. (71)

Indeed, just as the musically uneducated prisoners at Stalag VIII A found themselves wrapped in the mysterious beauty of the *Quartet for the End of Time*, the work continues to this day to be not just a piece for those limited connoisseurs of intricate music, but a piece for all, who like Messiaen, are fascinated by and readily anticipate the hidden wonders of the end of time.

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*Roughly paraphrased citations:*

1. Rischin, 60
2. Rischin, 130-131
3. Rischin, 125
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Ordinarily, as in the examples above, the rhythm is almost always immediately followed by the added value, without having been heard previously in its simple form.

b) Augmentation or diminution. A rhythm may be immediately followed by its augmentation or diminution, following various forms. Here are several examples (in each of which the first measure contains the normal rhythm, the second measure the augmentation or diminution):

Addition of a third of the value: \[\text{\ldots}\]
Subtraction of a quarter of the value: \[\text{\ldots}\]
Addition of a dot: \[\text{\ldots}\]
Subtraction of a dot: \[\text{\ldots}\]
Standard augmentation: \[\text{\ldots}\]
Standard diminution: \[\text{\ldots}\]
Addition of double the value: \[\text{\ldots}\]
Subtraction of two thirds of the value: \[\text{\ldots}\]
Addition of triple the value: \[\text{\ldots}\]
Subtraction of three fourths of the value: \[\text{\ldots}\]

Inexact augmentations and diminutions can also be employed.

Example: \[\text{\ldots}\]

This rhythm contains three eighth notes (standard diminution or three quarter notes), with a dot (added value), which results in an inexact diminution.

c) Nonretrogradable rhythms. Whether read from right to left or from left to right, the order of their values remains the same. This feature was
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Figure B