

Headline: Captivity Breeds Creation: Arts at noon plays Oliver Messiaen's POW piece
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A prisoner of war camp during World War II may seem an unlikely place for inspiration and composing music. However, in French composer Oliver Messiaen's case, captivity bred creation. He composed his "Quartet for the End of Time," during his time of captivity in 1941.

This piece will be performed by 4 Grand Valley State University faculty members as part of the Arts at Noon performance series.

The forty-five minute piece includes a piano, violin, cello and clarinet and is comprised of 8 movements.

Music Professor Pablo Mahave-Veglia of GVSU, who is playing the cello in the piece, said it is appropriate that the piece should be played in winter because it was first performed in February to an audience made up of inmates and guards at Messiaen's prison camp.

Mahave-Veglia said Messiaen most have had an amazing sense of introspection to compose while under the stressful situation of being held prisoner.

"A P.O.W. camp is not the place to collect your thoughts. Most people just focus on their own survival, but he pondered the great mysteries of life dealing with spiritual meaning and religious transcendence," Mahave-Veglia said.

MingHuan Xu, Professor of music at GVSU and the violinist of the quartet, agreed it was an amazing feat to compose yourself, let alone compose music under such horrible circumstances.

"They don't know what their future is. They don't even know if they have a future or not. They might never get out," Xu said.

The clarinetist wanted Messiaen to make an important political statement with his composition, because of their situation, to take a stand against their captors, but Messiaen argued, what is more important than the mysteries of life?

The quartet is, also described by Mahave-Veglia as able to endure for centuries and awe-inspiring.

"It is an extremely well-written piece in which every different combination of instruments is exploited," Mahave-Veglia said.

The piece is made up of much of what became Messiaen's trademark musical language, Mahave-Veglia said. He was one of the most influential composers of the 20th century and helped change the musical language, writing a new auditory dictionary. He used musical palindromes that are the rhythmic equivalent of symmetry.

Another aspect of Messiaen's music was the use of birdsong for inspiration, which comes through especially in the first movement that sounds like birds chirping.

"He was really obsessed with birdsong," Xu said. "He would wake up at 3 or 4 in the morning, go out and record the birds and then try to match them with notes on the piano. It drove his wife crazy."

Being a devout Catholic also affected Messiaen's work, music history Professor Lisa Feurzeig of GVSU said.

"He is guided by specific dogmas and yet it doesn't matter because his composing transcends the specific, it communicates to everyone," Feurzeig said.

Feurzeig has seen the piece played 3 times live and said that it is never the same hearing it recorded.

“It is one of the most remarkable pieces of music to hear live,” Feurzeig said.

The rhythm is hard to play together, Xu said, a challenge to play as a group. However, it is a significant piece that shows the importance of teamwork when it comes to music.

“It’s good for students to see their teachers playing together. It’s a learning experience for us as teachers, but it is also a good opportunity for the students,” Xu said.

Xu sees the piece as having a lot of depth, heaviness and a lot of extreme emotions.

“It is a very effective piece, something you don’t forget, very powerful,” Xu said.

The free performance will be held in the Cook-Dewitt Center from noon to 1 p.m. on Wednesday, February 18.

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