

True Beauty Anchored in God and Creation

The following is from Colson and Fickett The Good Life 2005

THIS IS THE story of the premieres of two of the most celebrated musical compositions of the twentieth century. One took place late in the summer of 1952, in leafy Woodstock, New York, where the softly arcing Catskill Mountains fall down to narrow valleys that are watered by trout streams. The other was performed during a bitter, wartime winter, in the border area between Germany and Poland known as Silesia. The American concert was attended mainly by professional musicians on holiday from the New York Philharmonic. The Silesian concert was attended by French and Polish soldiers captured by German forces not long after the outbreak of World War II. Both new compositions came from musicians who were, in very different ways, deep thinkers. Both pieces owed their inspiration to religious quests. Neither piece spoke directly to the time and place of its composition, yet each has come to stand as the symbol of its world.

SILESIA PRISON CAMP, FRIDAY, JANUARY 15, 1941

The wintry Silesian concert took place at six o'clock in the evening in Barracks 27B of Stalag Villa. The German prison camp held between 20,000 and 30,000 prisoners, most in outpost barracks near work sites. In these far-flung barracks the prisoners were forced into labor, timbering and making bricks. Those who were housed directly within the barbed wire confines of Stalag Villa performed the cooking, cleaning, washing, and other domestic chores for the German administrators. The Germans loved music, and they put any captured musicians by themselves in Barracks 27B, to which they allotted a better ration of coal.

The camp was a place of extreme privation. The Germans had not expected to capture so many so quickly at the outbreak of the war. Prisoners were given no bread. They survived on one portion of watery soup per day and two distributions of grease pretending to be cheese. Even those imprisoned for a short time lost their teeth as a result of the diet. Men were shot for stealing as few as three potatoes.

Barracks 27B, the camp's "concert hall," served as a haven from the stalag's brutal monotony. Every Friday night the musicians gave classical concerts, followed by the prisoners' theatrical productions and lighter musical revues. The audience enjoyed hearing Bach and Brahms and Beethoven from four outstanding musicians: pianist Olivier Messiaen, clarinetist Henri Akoka, cellist Etienne Pasquier, and violinist Jean Le Boulaire. All had attended France's premier musical institute, the Paris Conservatoire.

Olivier Messiaen was already known as his generation's star composer. So his fellow prisoners were understandably intrigued when they heard that a new Messiaen composition—most of which he had written while in camp—would be performed at the regular Friday evening concert. It was to be a piece of chamber music called *Quartet for the End of Time*.

The music was likely to be above their heads, but Messiaen's comrades were so excited about the performance that they asked permission for prisoners in the outlying barracks to attend. Furthermore, they insisted that quarantined prisoners awaiting repatriation—the Germans were sending thousands back into France every day—also be allowed to attend.¹ The German commandant, thinking to use the concert for propaganda purposes, allowed a printed program to be created for the occasion.

The audience assembled, walking through snowdrifts from the outlying barracks under armed guard, scrambling from kitchen duties, or breaking away from the huddles that ringed the barracks' coal stoves. Muffled in the heaviest possible clothes to ward off the freezing cold, they packed Barracks 27B. The German officials were there, too, sitting in front of the makeshift stage. The captured French priests came out in force as well. From former university professors to day laborers, across class, religious, and national boundaries, the crowd assembled to hear what music Messiaen might have dreamt in the midst of their desolation.

WOODSTOCK, NEW YORK, AUGUST 29, 1952

At the American premiere, professional musicians and others on holiday stepped into the Maverick Concert Hall for an evening benefiting the Benefit Artist Welfare Fund. The men wore their fifties-style double-pocket, short-sleeved shirts, khakis, and boat shoes; the women had their hair up in kerchiefs and wore pedal pushers, their calves bright with sunburn and lotion. The Maverick Concert Hall, a "music chapel" built by Hervey White in 1916, was a barnlike wooden structure that opened up in the back to the surrounding woods. Over its four Gothic-arched doorways rose a pointed tympanum of six painted windows. Ivory-tinted walls were ribbed with logs that arched upward along broken angles to the pine roof. This music chapel smelled of rain, sun, dust, and the resinous metals of the many percussion instruments on the stage.

The audience knew that they would be hearing mainly atonal or nonharmonic works dominated by rhythms no conventional score could accommodate. This was what the featured composers Morton Feldman, Earle Brown, and John Cage were famous for. The audience was game because they understood all the conventions that were to be broken, they thought. The press had already given these composers a lot of notice, particularly Cage. He was famous for inventing the "prepared piano"—a regular piano turned into a percussion instrument through applying mechanical restraints to the strings. Cage's prepared piano *plunked* and *tonked* and *whapped* and *ticked* unpredictably, even when the same keys were pressed. 'What would Cage have up his sleeve?

Before the concert at Stalag VIIIA, the composer Olivier Messiaen stood in front of his barracks-busting audience of four hundred in his bottle-green prison uniform. Although his hair was beginning to recede and thin on top, it fluffed out in ringlets on the side. He wore round glasses with thick black rims his eyes focused keenly. His cheeks had lost their usual cherubic fullness, but his nose remained fleshy, his lips full, if blue from the cold. He looked the Harlequin—a disturbing clown. The minute he spoke, however, he assumed a new authority. He told his audience that his composition *Quartet for the End of Time* took its inspiration from the New Testament book of Revelation. He read aloud the relevant passage:

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 the land [he] raised his right hand to heaven and swore by him 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 mystery of God will be fulfilled."²

Messiaen said his music was spiritual, that it expressed his Catholic faith. He hoped that his *Quartet for the End Time* would bring the listener closer to the presence of eternity in their midst³

The quartet's first movement, "Liturgy of Crystal," tried to capture that time between three and four o'clock in the morning, when the birds first awaken. His audience would hear a blackbird or a nightingale improvising in praise of the rising sun. "For me," Messiaen said, "the bird's call transposes the harmonious silence of heaven."⁴

With that, Messiaen sat down at the old, out-of-tune upright piano and looked to Henri Akoka, the clarinetist, who was an Algerian and, unbeknownst to the Germans, a Jew. Henri's narrow, shadowed eyes set atop a long, flaring nose gave him a badgered look. Yet he was so full of optimism, charm, and life that women thought of him as dashing. He smiled at the audience and immediately drew them in. He took up his clarinet and began to play. The blackbird sang.

What the audience heard was like nothing they had ever encountered. Messiaen's *Quartet* was structured more like a poem than conventional chamber music. There was no dominant melody. Each movement had a "signature," or typical progression of harmonizing chords. The music proceeded like a prayerful meditation, like windows opening to an eternal music that was always present and yet otherwise unheard.

The imitations of birdcalls that Messiaen used in the piece's first movement came from one of the profound and repeated experiences of his life. For the brief time he was a soldier, he arranged to have his guard duty during the hours when dark turns to dawn. He loved how the birds began calling; first one, a tentative peep in the night, then after a few more moments, another, more quickly another, until the birds' voices pooled with first light. The birds sang to herald the sun, report their plans, and agree on awaiting tasks. Then they flew away into the early morning quiet as the sun mounted higher, gaining strength. Messiaen rejoiced in how the orchestra of the world tuned up each morning.

In the second movement the angel from the Apocalypse announced the end of time with strange harmonies. The music seemed to remind the prisoners of a place they had never been and yet could not forget—perhaps heaven.

A long, dragging clarinet solo followed, suggesting what **it** was like to be subject to monotony—the "abyss" of time the prisoners knew so well.

Then came "Praise to the Eternity of Jesus," a complex Christmas carol. The cello announced that something great had happened, something wonderful, something close and dear—the coming of eternity into history through Jesus.

Then, cataclysmic events were at hand. There was terror—the kind one might feel in the presence of angels. That signature theme of the second movement returned. The angelic hosts were going into battle. The speed of the music increased until, like the spokes of a spinning wheel, the music seemed to stand still. The cataclysm—the end of time—was accomplished, and all four instruments joined in a closely harmonized final chord.

The last movement, indescribably beautiful, was Messiaen's praise to the immortality of Jesus. Here the violin led the other players in a poignant song. The earthly—the birdsong at morning greeting the dawn—and the heavenly—the terror-invoking angel—merged, as the Babe of the carol ascended to the Father and humanity received divinity through turning toward God. The violin climbed higher and higher into a final reconciling note.

Despite few having ever heard anything remotely like *Quartet for the End of Time*, the Barracks 27B audience kept absolutely silent through the nearly hour-long performance. When it ended, the silence continued for a moment or two before hesitant applause broke out and grew into unrestrained celebration, wild applause, and cheers. The Poles, the French, the Germans, enemies and friends alike, made that cold barracks shake the chill off with their fervent approval. The word most frequently mentioned in reference to the performance is *miraculous*.

The depth of the audience's reaction might be judged by its aftershocks years later. When Aleksander Lyczewski, one of the Polish prisoners in attendance, heard the music played unexpectedly years later at a friend's house, he began to weep. It took some time for him to regain his composure. He explained to his host, the British musicologist Charles Bodman Rae, that he had been present at the *Quartet's* premiere—its miraculous birth.

After reading numerous accounts of the event, I like to imagine the conversations that must have ensued among the prisoners. Imagine three Frenchmen, their teeth already rotting, being marched under guard back to their outlying barracks that night.

"So that was all very well done," Jean says. "What was it?"

"Didn't you read the notes about the Scripture? The use of bird-song?" says Gilbert.

"I couldn't tell what was what with all that squiggling on the clarinet," Jean says. "What about you, Emile? You had your eyes closed. Were you praying?"

Emile says nothing at first.

"Transported to heaven with the angel, were you?"

Emile gives Jean a sidelong glance. "I haven't been able to pray. Who can pray in a place like this? I was thinking."

"What about?" Gilbert asks.

"At the end there, I was thinking about waking up beside my wife on a Sunday morning. The sun coming through the window. Being warm. Being with her."

"That would be heaven, or pretty close," Jean says.

"For myself," Gilbert says, "it made me feel free. It was like an act of revenge against our captivity."⁵

"Yes," Jean says, "at moments, I have to admit, I caught myself believing in a better world."

Messiaen profoundly influenced the worldview of the cellist, Etienne Pasquier. He ceased to be an avowed agnostic and opened his mind to God. He wrote the following dedication to the composer on the back of his copy of the program notes: "The camp at Gorka... Here, is a miracle... The quartet 'for the end of time' transports us to a wonderful Paradise, lifts us from this abominable earth. Thank you immensely, dear Olivier Messiaen, poet of Eternal Purity."⁶

In Woodstock, the program notes announced the premiere of John Cage's *4' 33"* (four minutes thirty-three seconds) after the works of Brown and Feldman. When the time arrived, a young pianist, David Tudor, took his place at the Maverick's grand piano. Critics said that Tudor was so adept at playing the difficult scores of experimental composers that he could play the raisins in a fruitcake. As Tudor prepared to

begin, John Cage's mother whispered to her friend that what was to follow could be thought of as being "like a prayer."⁷

For the first movement, Tudor opened the lid on the keyboard and waited with his hands poised above the keys. He waited for the exact period of time called for by the score. Then, without ever having struck a key, he closed the piano's lid on the first movement. He waited a moment. For the second movement he opened the lid once more. Then again, after the specified period, he closed it, never having played a note. The third movement saw the same opening, the same closing, and silence throughout. The performance had taken exactly four minutes and thirty-three seconds—the inspiration for the title.

At the end of the concert, the featured composers, Earle Brown, Morton Feldman, and John Cage, went onstage to take the audience's questions. Cage's *4'33"* made a lot of the professional musicians and others in the audience angry. "There was a lot of discussion," Earle Brown recalled. "A lot of uproar. ... It infuriated most of the audience." Another attendee, Peter Yates, remarked, "The audience had come prepared to be shocked but not to be dismayed."⁸

From all I have read of the incident, the question-and-answer session with Cage must have gone something like this.

"What was that, Cage? That four-minute-thirty-three-second thing? Was that supposed to be some kind of a joke?"

"Not at all."

"But the pianist didn't play anything. Silence isn't music!"

"Was it silent?" Cage asked.

"It's not even pianissimo if the player never touches the keys!" "What did you hear?"

"Nothing!"

"That's not what I heard," Cage might have said, becoming bold.

"What I heard was the sound of the wind in the trees in the first movement. The delightful rain on the roof in the second. And for the finale, some very interesting muttering among the crowd."

"Those are sounds, Cage, not music."

"Is there a difference?"

Born in 1912, John Cage was the son of an inventor with a background in electrical engineering. A gifted child, Cage began playing the piano at the age of nine and immediately began studying the original, classical scores in the Los Angeles Public Library's collection. His early ambition had been to follow his grandfather into the Methodist Episcopal Church ministry, but he abandoned this goal soon after reaching Pomona College at age sixteen.

After two years of college, Cage left formal studies and spent a year in France, where he studied painting, architecture, and music, taking piano lessons with Lazare Levy, the leading teacher at the Paris Conservatoire.

Back in Los Angeles in 1931, living at his parents' home in Pacific Palisades, Cage tried to support himself by giving lectures on writing, painting, and composing. When the time came for him to lecture on twentieth-century composers, he realized he knew nothing about one of its masters, Arnold Schoenberg. So he found a Schoenberg expert, Richard Buhlig, and asked him to explain Schoenberg to him. After Buhlig gave him lessons in composition, Cage resolved to devote his life to music.

In 1934, Cage studied with Schoenberg himself, and in the process Cage confronted his great musical disability - he had no feeling for harmony. For that reason, Schoenberg was less than encouraging to his devoted pupil. He did understand the young man's gifts, however. Later, he told the critic Peter Yates that Cage was "not a composer, but an inventor—of genius."⁹

Because Cage had no feel for harmonics, he turned to composing percussion music. He made up his own instruments out of things such as automobile brake drums and hubcaps. His "prepared piano" followed in 1938. Cage's early pieces were all about dismantling the distinction between the music of instruments and the sounds of everyday life.

The breakup of Cage's marriage motivated a religious search. He began attending lectures by D. T. Suzuki, one of the outstanding spokesmen for Zen Buddhism. Cage soon became convinced that the goal of music is to prompt audiences to reconcile themselves to life just as it is. He took inspiration from the Indian philosopher Ananda Coomaraswamy's statement that art should "imitate nature *in her manner of operation.*"¹⁰ Cage's music had to forsake self-expression—which he wasn't good at, anyway—and cause people "to wake up to the very life" they were living. Cage believed that the artist was to imitate nature in what he believed to be its random character.

From that time on, Cage's activity involved inventing ways to defeat anything he might bring to composing—any thoughts, any feelings, anything. As critic Calvin Tomkins, music and religion editor for *Newsweek*, writes, "All of his efforts are directed to the difficult process of getting rid of his own tastes, imagination, memory, and ideas, so that he will then be able to 'let sounds be sounds.'"¹¹ The sculptor Richard Lippold similarly noted, "John has the most brilliant intellect of any man I've ever met, and for years he's been trying to do away with it. Once he said to me, 'Richard, you have a beautiful mind, but it's time you threw it away.'"¹²

Cage thought he had found the perfect method for accomplishing his purposes when he discovered the *I Ching*—the ancient Chinese "book of changes." Throwing yarrow sticks according to the *I Ching*'s charts and hexagrams seemingly provided a method of composing without being in control of the result. Cage's *Music of Changes* and other such chance compositions followed.¹³ Cage found that composing music in imitation of what he conceived of as nature's random manner was a greater problem than he had imagined. He could find no way to do it, in fact, except not to compose at all, which led, of course, to 4'33"—to silence. In 4'33" the music became whatever background noises occurred.

As music, Cage's work is worthless. As philosophic invention, it's interesting, if profoundly wrong. It is the sudden gesture of a Zen master ("What is the sound of one hand clapping?") meant to teach the disciple Zen's point of view. Cage's adopted view of life, Zen Buddhism, is an invitation to reconcile ourselves to the world just as it is—to discard our habits of hoping and wishing, to give up our illusion of freedom and our desire for justice. It is an attempt to perceive the world as entirely alien to the longings of the human heart. Cage became, in his own words, like a "fundamentalist Protestant preacher" in proclaiming these Buddhist teachings.¹⁴

The question is, Are the longings of the heart mere illusions? Are ½ the constructs of the imagination and the use of reason illusions as well?¹ Must we reconcile ourselves to a random world?

Psychoanalyst Adam Phillips tells the following story about Cage; The musician attended the concert of another composer, who said in the program notes that he hoped his music would diminish the suffering in the world. Afterward, Cage told his friend that he loved the music but hated the notes. He didn't think there was too much suffering in the world. He believed there was just the "right amount."¹⁵

However much Cage's remarks may sound cruel and insensitive, they are consistent with Cage's Buddhist and postmodernist position. If the world comes out of and returns to an inexplicable chaos, then there is not too much or too little suffering: Suffering simply *is*.

Imagine, though, if Cage were to have said this to the prisoners of war in Stalag VIIIA. Was there the "right amount" of suffering in Messiaen's Stalag?

What made Messiaen's work so different from Cage's? Olivier Messiaen claimed that he had practically been born a Christian believer. From the time he was a young boy, his mother, a poet, and his father, a teacher of English and a translator of Shakespeare, read him the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen and the plays of Shakespeare. Gradually Messiaen began to find how the hopes and dreams that all fairy tales express—their longing for justice and freedom—were taken up and made real by faith. While Shakespeare offered him "super fairy tales," Messiaen found Christianity far more mysterious and wonderful.¹⁶ Later in his life, he told interviewers that he found one simple difference between the stories he loved as a child and the Christian faith: Christianity is true.

Messiaen said, "The first idea that I wanted to express... is the existence of the truths of the Catholic faith.... That is the first aspect of my work, the most noble, doubtless the most useful, the most valuable, the only one, perhaps, that I will not regret at the hour of my death."¹⁷

We can see in *Quartet for the End of Time* so many of the themes that we've discovered in our own search for truth. The first is the presence of the natural order. The blackbird that sings in Messiaen's music and the sun that rises are intimately connected—in tune, one might say—with one another. It's nature's design that produces a universe in which the lives of small creatures are made possible by the astronomical relationship of the earth to the sun. Behind this natural order lies God Himself, who does not dwell in time but is time's master. The eternal and time ultimately meet in God's "emptying of Himself" to come among us as a child—the man who dies to live again.

What Messiaen captures so wonderfully is the interdependence of time and eternity, which is the secret of beauty—for beauty is God's glory shining in creation. Can we not see and experience this?

I've told the stories of these two world premieres, Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time* and Cage's 4 '33", because they so perfectly reflect the opposing belief systems of the world we live in today. For Cage, enlightenment consists in reconciling ourselves to a random universe. In stark contrast, Olivier Messiaen's music reflects a profound understanding of the natural order and how this order ultimately derives from its Creator. He embraced the world's beauty. Even in a Nazi prison camp, he could see how God's glory shines in creation.

Very few people today understand beauty as an extension of the creation. Many people say that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" or "beauty is a matter of taste." To declare something is beautiful means only that it pleases them. Such value judgments are always merely one person's opinion.

To the Christian and the classical mind, however, beauty is not a subjective value judgment, and art is not merely the expression of an artist's inner world. Beauty, like goodness and truth, is part of reality; beauty is essential to the created order, part and parcel of the world in which we live.

*Beauty is
not a
subjective
judgment*

The reason one person judges one thing to be beautiful while another disagrees is that different people are more or less able to perceive beauty. Some people's judgments about beauty are more accurate. This may be an idea that many people in our culture find intolerable; nevertheless, it's true.

The Christian view of beauty has its basis in its theory of origins - how the world came to be. God made a world that reflects His identity, not only His unimaginable genius but also His majesty - His beauty. The ancient Greeks understood from the order and beauty of creation alone that truth, beauty, and goodness were interconnected absolutely. This understanding was captured powerfully by theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar: "Beauty demands for itself at least as much courage and decision as do truth and goodness, and she will not allow herself to be separated... from her two sisters."¹⁸

God made a world that reflects His identity, not only His unimaginable genius but also His majesty - His beauty.

The beauty of the world communicates God's love for us. He designed a universe in which the sun's rising and setting, the pale moon hanging in the sky, and the power of rushing clouds would inspire us each day. He made a world in which we can delight in a field of daffodils, be haunted by a loon's call, and find amazement in the chameleon's powers of camouflage. In his poem "The Tiger," poet William Blake recognized God's hand behind the beauty of His creation.

Tiger! Tiger! burning bright,
In the forest of the night
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?¹⁹

God's ways are far beyond ours, yet the beauty of His creation shows us His love.²⁰

Because Olivier Messiaen believed that beauty is a sign of God's care, he paid tribute in his music to a loving Creator. Messiaen's audience was far less tutored than Cage's in musical theory, and yet Messiaen's music communicated to his fellow prisoners that the world was ultimately God's, not the Nazis', and that every human hope has a legitimate basis in God's rule. He wasn't selling cheap comfort or expressing himself." Who among his fellow prisoners could possibly have cared about that? He was translating truth that they needed to hear— truth essential to the good life—into music.

All of us intuitively understand the connection between beauty and truth. Ask teenagers and even younger children whether they can tell the difference between good art and bad art. Most groups, as I noted before, are not sure whether they believe in absolute truths. Often I'll ask them to imagine a painting that catches their eye, that they can't stop looking at—perhaps J. M. W. Turner's famous marine painting showing a sailboat, keeling under the wind, plowing through the seas. It's so lifelike that you can almost feel the boat's driving motion. The colors are at once watery yet startling.

I ask my young audience, "If you saw a painting like that, wouldn't you say it's cool?" They all nod approvingly.

I then ask them, "If you went to Germany today and saw an exhibit of body parts, a huge mural on a wall with pieces of flesh hanging from it, would you say that's cool?" Most of them instantly look revolted. I confirm what they are thinking: "No, you would say it's yuck, right?" They all nod.

The beauty of the world communicates God's love for us.

They get it. There is a difference between cool and yuck. And there are absolutes.

Something in us resonates with beauty. It inspires us. It lifts us, exactly as Messiaen's music lifted the prisoners of war in Stalag VIIIA during World War II.

The arts are so powerful because they communicate directly to our emotions as well as our intellect—to the heart and its superior reasons. The students I've talked with would immediately understand the difference between Cage and Messiaen—Cage, the emperor without clothes, and Messiaen, the maestro of creation, whose work captures a history of time from the perspective of eternity.

While the arts capture our thoughts and penetrate our imaginations, they awaken us to the world's wonder and touch our emotions. At their best, the arts reflect the truth of the human experience in its heartfelt wholeness.

The arts point to what lies beyond the merely human because the source of beauty, I believe, is beyond the merely human, as we shall see in the next chapter.