

The music

Kaija Saariaho	Mirrors (for flute and cello)
Richard Causton	Phoenix (for flute, clarinet, violin, cello, piano)
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INTERVAL

Olivier Messiaen	Quatuor pour la fin du temps
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Kaija Saariaho (1952-2023) *Mirrors (for flute and cello)* (1997)

Kaija Saariaho studied composition in Helsinki, Freiburg and, eventually, Paris, where she lived from 1982 to her death. Her studies and research at IRCAM, the Parisian centre for electroacoustic experimentation, had a major influence on her music, and led to a fondness for creating musical textures by combining live performance with electronics.

After her breakthrough piece *Lichtbogen* for ensemble and electronics in 1986, Saariaho gradually expanded her musical horizons to include chamber pieces and choral music, while more recently she’s been better-known for her operas: *L’Amour de loin* (2000), *Adriana Mater* (2006), *La Passion de Simone* (2006), *Émilie* (2010), *Only the Sound Remains* (2016) and *Innocence* (2020), the latter of which was termed Saariaho’s ‘masterpiece’ by *The New York Times*.

In her lifetime Saariaho won major composing awards including the Grawemeyer Award, the Nemmers Prize, the Sonning Prize and the Polar Music Prize and two of her recordings have received Grammy Awards. She was named ‘Greatest Living Composer’ in a survey of her peers conducted by the *BBC Music Magazine* in 2019.

The composer’s own note on *Mirrors* reads:
“*Mirrors* is a piece written originally for the CD-Rom Prisma dedicated to my music. In the context of the CD-Rom, the user can build and play his own versions of *Mirrors*, by combining pre-defined fragments. Because written for this purpose, the piece is built in such a manner that it can be reconstructed in multiple versions.

The existing score is my own versions of *Mirrors*, but musicians are welcome to construct their versions of it.

They should, anyway, try to follow the ideas I had about musical mirrors: there should be always a mirror in one or several of the following musical dimensions: rhythm, pitch, instrumental gesture or timbre.”

In live performance, the flautist and cellist have room to make artistic decisions about which mirrors they want to create and how they will go about making those effects.

Richard Causton (b1971) *Phoenix (for flute, clarinet, violin, cello and piano)* (2006)

Phoenix was commissioned by the London Sinfonietta with the generous support of Henry Greenfield, and was written in memory of his wife Joanna (1940-2005). It was premiered at Little Missenden during the 2006 Festival. The work’s a series of interlinked pieces – by turns elegiac, capricious, radiant and menacing, and all vaguely otherworldly.

Richard Causton’s own note on the piece reads:
“The music hinges on the relationship between the piano – the only instrument in the ensemble whose notes die away as soon as they are played – and the four other instruments. The piano’s only hope of sustaining a single note is through constant, rapid repetitions (just as a succession of points, if they are close enough to one another, looks like a line); whereas all the other instruments can not only sustain, but get louder as the note proceeds.

The title refers to the mythical bird which was said to rise from the ashes of its own funeral pyre every five hundred years – a bright image of rebirth which kept coming to mind as I worked on one of the final passages.”

Saariaho *Oi Kuu (for bass clarinet and cello)* (1990)

The composer again:
“*Oi kuu (Oh moon)* marks a small break between two large orchestral works, *Du Cristal* and ... *à la Fumée*. It consists of elements which came to my mind when searching for a common denominator for bass clarinet and cello; harmony based on multiphonies of the clarinet; the multiphonies and colour transformations of the cello; similar and different articulations; different colours in the same register.”

Christian Mason (b1984) *Figures in a landscape (awaiting eternity)* (2023/24) *UK premiere*

- I. *Flowing, veiled, mysterious - Suddenly still, naïve, distant and dreamy*
- II. *Flowing: like water, like light*

- III. *Timeless, delicate, without metrical emphasis*
- IV. *Ethereal, floating, misty - Like tear drops of ecstasy - Caught between hope and despair*

Christian describes his new work as follows:
“*Figures in a landscape (awaiting eternity)* was composed during a residency at Festival Musikdorf Ernen (Switzerland), when I had the fortune to live in that magical village during the autumn months of 2023. The close proximity there of the quotidian to the sublime is quite striking, with changing weather transforming views across the valley such that one experiences a frequent sense-shifting perspective, even without moving. It was this quality that I sought to capture in the **first movement** of this piece, as if painting different instances of the same view. After setting the scene with cycles of descending scales, the same melody is played in succession by each of the three melodic instruments (clarinet, cello, violin) in a different textural context, the metrical placement of accompanying ensemble figurations shifting against the fixed melody. Rather than completing the process, a new melody is introduced by the piano, a canon defined by an ascending scalar quality which presages one of the recurrent features of movement II.

Lyrical cantabile melodic figures also define the foreground in the **second movement**, now set against the irregular pulsing chords of a 5/8 metre. As in the first movement, the sustained tension between fixed and shifting elements creates the musical energy, without ever being resolved. By contrast, the **third movement** is predominantly calm and contemplative, focused on the fragile tone of the clarinet, within a halo of piano resonance; a nod to Olivier Messiaen, whose *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, was of course a source of inspiration. The homage to Messiaen remains palpable in the **fourth movement**, where the harmonies initially glow warmly with added sixths, and textural figurations – like birds – dance about us. Later the harmony thickens, the sky darkens, and descending streams of chords appear like a magnified slowed-down version of the filigree scales with which the whole piece began”.

INTERVAL

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (1941)

Messiaen wrote the work known in English as *Quartet for the End of Time* while a prisoner-of-war in Stalag VIII-A from June 1940 till early the following year. It had its premiere in the camp in January 1941 and the unusual nature of the quartet reflects the instruments the composer had to hand at the time. Also unusual is the fact that the full quartet plays in only four of the eight

movements – one is a solo, two are duets and one a trio – while the cello and clarinet play no part at all in the final 10 minutes of the piece.

The title is taken from the Book of Revelation:

“And I saw another mighty angel come down from heaven, clothed with a cloud: and a rainbow was upon his head, and his face was as it were the sun, and his feet as pillars of fire ... and he set his right foot upon the sea, and his left foot on the earth And the angel which I saw stand upon the sea and upon the earth lifted up his hand to heaven, and swore by him that liveth for ever and ever ... that there should be time no longer: But in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, the mystery of God should be finished...”

Messiaen was thinking of time here, not so much in a conventional sense or in reference to his own incarcerated conditions, but rather to musical time. He was no longer interested in time as embodied in traditional rhythm but in moving beyond that into rhythms outside of time and reflecting eternity.

Messiaen's own descriptions of the movements are as follows:

I. Liturgy of crystal (*quartet*)

Between the morning hours of three and four, the awakening of the birds: a thrush or a nightingale soloist improvises, amid notes of shining sound and a halo of trills that lose themselves high in the trees. Transpose this to the religious plane: you will have the harmonious silence of heaven.

II. Vocalise, for the angel who announces the End of Time (*quartet*)

The first and third parts (very short) evoke the power of that mighty angel, his hair a rainbow and his clothing mist, who places one foot on the sea and one foot on the earth. Between these sections are the ineffable harmonies of heaven. From the piano, soft cascades of blue-orange chords, encircling with their distant carillon the plainchant-like recitativo of the violin and cello.

III. Abyss of the birds (*clarinet solo*)

The abyss is Time, with its sadnesses and tediums. The birds are the opposite of Time; they are our desire for light, for stars, for rainbows and for jubilant outpourings of song!

IV. Interlude. Scherzo (*trio*)

Of a more outgoing character than the other movements but related to them, nonetheless, by various melodic references.

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Festival Patron: David Matthews

Grateful acknowledgements

We thank all those who have helped with the Festival or supported us financially and in other ways. Special thanks to the funding bodies, sponsors and supporters listed below, without whose generous help there would be no Festival.



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Next year's Festival

The 2025 Little Missenden Festival will run from Friday 3rd to Sunday 12th October.

Festival website little-missenden.org

- See the full **2024 Festival Programme**
- **Book Tickets** (or phone 0333 666 3366)
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Booking Information

- Email: tickets@little-missenden.org
- Phone: 01494 958148 between 11am and 8pm

General Information

- Email: contact@little-missenden.org

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Committee: Angela Bishop, Polly Buston, Martin Cunningham, John Glasson, Beth Neill, Liz Wager, Dick Wells, Rachel Wilcox

Programme Notes

OCTANDRE ENSEMBLE

Quartet for the End of Time



8pm, Wednesday October 9th, 2024
Little Missenden Church

64th Little Missenden Festival

V. Praise to the eternity of Jesus (*cello and piano*)

Jesus is here considered as one with the Word. A long phrase, infinitely slow, by the cello expatiates with love and reverence on the everlastingness of the Word, mighty and dulcet, “which the years can in no way exhaust.” Majestically the melody unfolds itself at a distance both intimate and awesome. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

VI. Dance of fury, for the seven trumpets (*quartet*)

Rhythmically the most idiosyncratic movement of the set. The four instruments in unison give the effect of gongs and trumpets (the first six trumpets of the Apocalypse attend various catastrophes, the trumpet of the seventh angel announces the consummation of the mystery of God). Use of extended note values, augmented or diminished rhythmic patterns, non-retrogradable rhythms – a systematic use of values which, read from left to right or from right to left, remain the same. Music of stone, formidable sonority; movement as irresistible as steel, as huge blocks of livid fury or ice-like frenzy. Listen particularly to the terrifying *fortissimo* of the theme in augmentation and with change of register of its different notes, toward the section's end.

VII. Cluster of rainbows, for the angel who announces the End of Time (*quartet*)

Here certain passages from the second movement return. The mighty angel appears, and in particular the rainbow that envelops him (the rainbow, symbol of peace, of wisdom, of every quiver of luminosity and sound). In my dreamings I hear and see ordered melodies and chords, familiar hues and forms; then, following this transitory stage, I pass into the unreal and submit ecstatically to a vortex, a dizzying interpenetration of superhuman sounds and colours. These fiery swords, these rivers of blue-orange lava, these sudden stars: Behold the cluster, behold the rainbow!

VIII. Praise to the immortality of Jesus (*violin and piano*)

Expansive violin solo balancing the cello solo of the fifth movement. Why this second glorification? It addresses itself more specifically to the second aspect of Jesus – to Jesus the man, to the Word made flesh, raised up immortal from the dead so as to communicate His life to us. It is total love. Its slow rising to a supreme point is the ascension of man toward his God, of the Son of God toward his Father, of the mortal newly made divine toward paradise.

And I repeat anew what I said above: All this is mere striving and childish stammering if one compares it to the overwhelming grandeur of the subject!

Notes compiled by Dick Ware

The artists

Francesca Barritt *violin* **Corentin Chassard** *cello*
Noemi Gyori *flute* **Adam Slater** *clarinet/bass clarinet*
Joseph Houston *piano*

The **Octandre Ensemble**, formed in 2011 by composer Christian Mason and conductor Jon Hargreaves, is a flexible collective dedicated to exploring music with an emphasis on timbre and ritual. Sound is an eternally fascinating phenomenon, and music can harness its power in ever original ways. Activity has focused on collaboration with living composers, and performances of neglected works for unusual instrumentations. In July 2023 they recorded *Time-Space-Sound-Light*, an album of spatial chamber music by Christian Mason, released on *Winter & Winter* in Spring 2024.

Recent recording and performance projects with Jack Sheen resulted in his debut album – *sub* – being recorded for *SN Variations* in 2021, and the premiere performance of *Each One Cancels the Last (Hector)* in January 2022 at Blackheath Halls. The group's ongoing relationship with Frank Denyer has led to world-premiere performances of *Five Views of the Path*, commissioned by the ensemble (LCMF 2022), his epic *The Fish that became the Sun* (HCMF, 2019; winner of RPS Prize for Large Ensemble Composition, 2020), and a Composer Portrait at The Coronet, Notting Hill (2018). The Way Out East Composer Portraits series (2017/18) also featured Nicola LeFanu and Rolf Hind.

Octandre gave the UK premiere of Claude Vivier's *Samarkand* at the Principal Sound Festival (2016); Sinan Savaskan's *Many Stares through semi-nocturnal Zeiss-blink* (Module 30), an Octandre commission, which won a BASCA British Composer Award in December 2015; and arranged an Anglo-French Composers Forum at LSO St Luke's, London, in association with LSO Soundhub (2012). Festival appearances have include LCMF (2022), York New Music Weekend (2021), HCMF (2019), Principal Sound (2016), Little Missenden (2014, 2016), and the York Spring Festival (2012).

Octandre's founding patron was Sir Harrison Birtwistle; as of 2024 Sir George Benjamin has become ensemble patron.

octandre.com

Visit www.little-missenden.org