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Apocalyptic Klezmer and “The End of Time” – David Krakauer at Joe’s Pub

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By Evan Burke

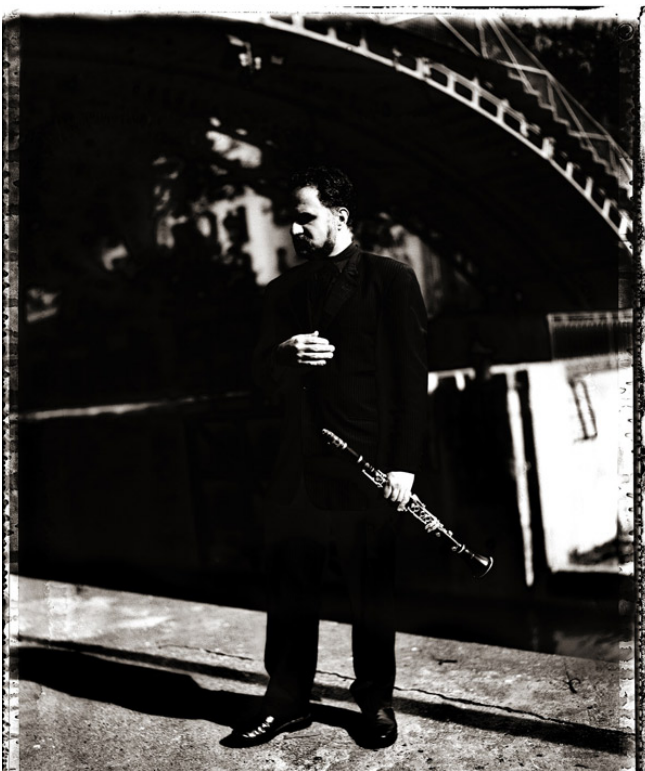
More than seventy years since its composition, Messiaen’s “Quartet for the End of Time” swells with relevancy in the modern era. Those of us alive today have a more fractured and complex sense of the passage of time than any previous generation of humanity, living simultaneously in lightspeed cyberspace and glacial reality, keeping in touch with friends, family and associates across all possible timezones and sleep schedules. Messiaen’s most famous piece is a kaleidoscope of time-perception and apocalyptic paranoia, chronicling his fear for humanity in the throes of World War II, and also his daily struggle to maintain sanity as a prisoner of war. But is a simple reading of the piece enough to capture the same spirit, decades after its birth? It’s doubtful that Messiaen would’ve wanted musicians to take a museum-mentality approach to his work. Enter clarinetist David Krakauer and his like-minded cohorts: cellist Matt Haimovitz, pianist Geoffrey Bursleson, violinist Maria Bachmann, and DJ/MC Socalled. The evening was billed as “Akoka: The End of Time”, and featured three separate-but-connected works: “Akoka”, a structured improvisation organized by Krakauer, an unaltered presentation of Messiaen’s Quartet, and finally “Meanwhile” a composition by Socalled.

Krakauer is a world-renowned classical musician whose work in the last twenty years has increasingly tilted towards klezmer and the avant-garde. He’s worked with musicians as diverse as John Zorn (on the viscerally powerful *Kristallnacht*) and ex-James Brown trombonist Fred Wesley (in the klezmer-funk project *Abraham Inc.*). Bursleson, Haimovitz and Bachmann share his passion for boundary-stretching

music, blurring the lines between interpretation and improvisation, while Socalled is a musical chameleon, equally at home crafting dense musique concrete soundscapes and spitting rhymes about the merits of big booty.

Taking the stage at Joe’s Pub, a venue unmatched in intimacy and acoustic quality (although I’d always rather see music somewhere that doesn’t serve food), the group launched into “Akoka” with ferocity. The audience, roughly split between students and older fans, shared in a palpable reverence from Krakauer’s first wails, which were soaked in his klezmer background. Bursleson pounded a relentless rhythm of prepared piano, while Haimovitz and Bachmann screeched in stuttered glissandos, and I wondered if this introduction was perhaps inspired by Messiaen’s poetic introduction to the original score.

“Akoka” was brief, perhaps a short love letter from



the musicians before the main event. In general, what absolutely captivated me about this performance was how this group so perfectly captured the narrative undertones of the piece. To me, the Quartet has always been primarily about one character's shifting perception of time, switching back and forth between group sections of flowing rhythm and solo sections of solitary reflection. One could also think of these contrasting textures as two perspectives on time itself: when the group is playing, time moves quickly, the melodies approach an almost songlike quality (albeit a surreal and unsettling song), and one imagines these perhaps reference Messiaen's interactions with other musicians while imprisoned, or even just stolen moments during group meals that alleviated the crushing loneliness. There is a sense of release, and even joy (well, as much joy as one could summon while still in a prison camp during a brutal war).



Matt Haimovitz, Maria Bachmann, and Geoffrey Bursleson

The solos, however, tell a different part of the same story: the clarinet solo, wandering and lost, perhaps visualizes Messiaen's early days of incarceration. Krakauer struck the perfect balance between the frustrated incoherence and somber melody of this section, tapering into a whisper before the next movement's storm. Haimovitz's treatment of the cello solo that sits in the center emphasized the cleave which divides the piece: keeping the wandering dissonance of earlier sections, he gradually, gracefully exposed the melody and coherence seeded in this solo that blossoms in later movements. Bachmann's closing violin solo was a crowning achievement of the night. It's by far the most emotionally complex part of the Quartet, emphasizing all the negativity and hopelessness that came before it while managing to transcend it as well, ascending into a glimmering plane beyond the mortal brutality of the previous movements. But, it never quite sheds the past; blips of sour reservations remain until the closing seconds, as if to say one can rise above suffering, but never truly forget that it's there. Bachmann's handling of this multifaceted ending was faithful, nuanced, and sublime. Behind it all lay Bursleson's shape-shifting piano; his ability to transmute notes into clouds of emotional density is unmatched.

Following thunderous applause, Socalled's heartbeat sample pulsed through the room, beginning "Meanwhile". A thick mix of hip-hop beats, found-sound samples and snippets of the Quartet, it was a radical (but not illogical) change of mood. I noticed a split in the audience, between those nodding their heads in rhythm and others shaking theirs confusedly, that only became wider when Socalled dropped a verse about, in his words, "fat ladies" (which I enjoyed, but could see how someone else might think it blasphemy). The other musicians joined in after a few minutes, shrieking and pounding away in a free-ish improvisation that brought the evening to a swaggeringly chaotic climax. Like "Akoka" before it, "Meanwhile" wasn't long, maybe seven minutes. Enough to convey a spirit in kinship with Messiaen, while not so long as to distract from the Quartet itself.



Socalled - Source scene1425.com

It's always impossible to say what a piece of music is really "about". Even the opinion of the composer must be taken with a grain of salt, as that space where the listener interprets the piece for themselves is where the real emotional impact of music lies. One can argue that the goal of a great musician, when interpreting a composer's work, is not to translate and communicate specifics to the audience, but instead to help the audience discern what the piece means to themselves. My narrative interpretation of the Quartet may be wildly off the mark, but Krakauer and co.'s performance at Joe's Pub helped me understand what Messiaen's work means to me personally. Something I think Messiaen himself would have approved of.

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