

## Messiaen's music reunites quartet

**Music review - A Chamber Music Northwest concert with Tashi marks a number of milestones**

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**JAMES McQUILLEN**

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First, a confession: I approached the Carter-Messiaen Project at Reed College over the weekend with a mix of excitement and dread. Critics are never supposed to admit that some music is challenging for their seasoned ears, but even specialists concede the difficulties of 20th-century high-modernist art music.

Picking out those loose strands that allow you to untangle dense harmonic and conceptual knots can be a gratifying intellectual exercise, but it's not exactly pleasure on the same level as, say, last Thursday's Schubert recital by Ian Bostridge. I also worried for the presenters, Chamber Music Northwest and Reed, fearing audiences of literally tens of people, nervously coughing and politely clapping.

Oh, I of little faith. The minifestival of concerts and lectures was a great success -- exhilarating, milestone-making and rapturously received.

The project began as centennial commemoration of the births of Olivier Messiaen and Elliott Carter -- two titans of modern music who were born a day apart in December 1908 -- by Reed's annual ROMP! (Reediana Omnibus Musica Philosophica) symposium on music and the liberal arts. At the same time that Reed's David Schiff -- a former student of Carter and the author of the definitive book on his work -- came up with the idea, the legendary new-music ensemble Tashi, which first got together to perform Messiaen's "Quartet for the End of Time" in 1973, decided to reunite to perform the work. Connecting the two was a natural for CMNW, which has close ties to both Reed and Tashi, and an event was born.

Beyond the double centenary, the major milestone was the reunion of Tashi's founding members in Friday and Saturday night's concerts, their first in 30 years.

As a cellist friend told me at Saturday night's concert, for musicians and other devotees of modernism in the '70s, the quartet -- violinist Ida Kavafian, cellist Fred Sherry, clarinetist Richard Stoltzman and pianist Peter Serkin -- was on the level of Jimi Hendrix in the classical music counterculture. They were brilliant musicians on the cutting edge of contemporary composition; they had long hair and concert dress that hinted of flower-child fashion; they named their ensemble with the Tibetan word for "good fortune."

Like Rush, Van Halen and other iconic groups of the 1970s, they've gotten the old band back together. Their hair has gone various shades of gray, and their wardrobe is more conventional, but their ensemble is still razor-sharp and their enthusiasm is infectious.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of their engagement in this music: Especially in the absence of any other toehold, listeners have only the players' passionate dedication and sterling musicianship to connect to a piece. Carter, especially, is a hard sell, with his spasms of dissonance and intellectual heavy lifting; The New Yorker's Alex Ross has called him the "action painter among composers," and Schiff acknowledged that he has a reputation as "box-office poison."

But in appreciative hands, the music was frequently captivating. Stoltzman tripped through "Gra" for solo clarinet lightly and with mesmerizing technique, including amazing breath and embouchure control in a microtonal central passage. Kavafian poured full-throated warmth into "Rhapsodic Musings for Solo Violin." Sherry deftly flew through "Figment II for Solo Cello," -- a remembrance of Carter's early mentor Charles Ives, peppered with intimations of Americana -- with fleet slides, double stops and an utter sense of ease. Serkin was similarly lucid in the "Intermittences for Solo Piano," a work of terse outbursts and placid pedal tones; even in a furious scrum of crossed hands, every note was clear.

A person needn't like it -- I heard the word "pretentious" whispered behind me after the "Intermittences" -- but the unmistakable conviction behind the performance was what it takes to get a listener to listen again and eventually to get a grasp on the music.

Also on the program were adaptations of Renaissance polyphony by Charles Wuorinen and Toru Takemitsu's "Quatrain II," in part an homage to Messiaen. But the main event was Saturday's finale, the "Quartet for the End of Time."

Written for a set of battered instruments in a German prisoner-of-war camp in 1941, it drew on the Book of Revelation, Messiaen's Catholic faith and his fascination with birdsong to create music of kaleidoscopic colors, arresting rhythms and transcendent beauty. Tashi's recording is widely regarded as definitive, and to have them play it again live for the first time in decades was a thrill. It's about time.