

USM faculty hits the high notes with quartet

By CHRISTOPHER HYDE

Alexander Scriabin billed his massive tone poems as "mystical." Olivier Messiaen's "Quartet for the End of Time" is the real thing - a work that stands all by itself in the annals of music and, although conceived in terms of Catholic doctrine, is universal in its appeal.

It was written in a German concentration camp in 1941 and performed for 3,500 prisoners, with the composer at a broken-down piano. The cello, according to legend, had only three strings.

It was given another amazing performance Friday evening at the University of Southern Maine's Corthell Hall by School of Music faculty members, Thomas Parchman on clarinet, Jung Li on cello, Charles Dimmick on violin and Anastasia Antonacos on piano.

The quartet had so many high points it is hard to list them all in anything less than book length, but to me the most affecting

CONCERT REVIEW

WHO: University of Southern Maine Faculty Concert

WHERE: Corthell Hall, USM Gorham Campus

WHEN: Friday, Nov. 3

movements were those that reveal the composer's lifelong infatuation with the songs of birds, which he declared were the world's best musicians.

The calls are featured in the opening "Liturgie de crystal," and appear almost everywhere in the eight-movement work. Some of the themes are slowed-down versions of characteristically rapid songs, something that would not be done mechanically until years later.

The most remarkable section of the quartet was the "Abime des oiseaux" (Abyss of the Birds), portrayed as the opposite of tedious time. This clarinet solo performed by Parchman was literally hair-raising, as in

Robert Graves' description of the effect of good poetry. The rapid intervals of the passage work were spectacular enough, but the long, high crescendos on a single note were out of this world.

The quartet cannot be played without taking a lot of chances. Its ending, as Jesus ascends to heaven, is a violin solo that simply disappears into space, with an infinitely high and pianissimo note, accompanied by ethereal piano chords. The violinist has about a 50-50 chance of hitting it right, but Dimmick was right on. The result was a seemingly eternal pause before a unanimous standing ovation from a cheering capacity audience.

The other instrumentalists were of the same caliber. Li's cello solo in "Louange a l'Eternite de Jesus" was a long, majestic crescendo, and Antonacos played Messiaen's ineffable piano chords in "Vocalize" as if they were indeed blue-orange, as the composer experienced

them. They seemed to emanate from somewhere beyond the piano.

The least successful part of the quartet is the central "Danse de la fureur." It is a brilliant exploration of the power of both rhythm and unison playing, but infected with the jazz idioms that flooded France between the wars. No musician can entirely avoid his times.

The Messiaen overshadowed another fine work for the same combination of instruments, the world premiere of "Genesis," by Stephen Halloran, which follows the Biblical account from "without form and void" through "Let there be light." The rhythm of the King James verses was apparent in the highly evocative score. It was a good setting for what was to come, and the composer applauded the performance from the audience.

Christopher Hyde's Classical Beat column appears in the Maine Sunday Telegram.