

# HEBRIDES ENSEMBLE

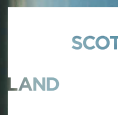
## Music for Time

Past and present meet,  
time stands still

**1 – 7 February 2026**

Cumnock | Edinburgh  
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# Music for Time

Past and present meet, time stands still

Arthur Keegan

*Coalesce: Quartet for the Start of Life* (2025)

Commissioned by the Royal Philharmonic Society, premiere performances

Olivier Messiaen

*Quartet for the End of Time*

*(Quatuor pour la fin du Temps)* (1941)

- I. *Liturgy of crystal (Liturgie de cristal)*
- II. *Vocalise, for the angel who announces the end of Time (Vocalise, pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin du temps)*
- III. *Abyss of the birds (Abîme des oiseaux)*
- IV. *Interlude (Intermède)*
- V. *Praise to the eternity of Jesus (Louange à l'Éternité de Jésus)*
- VI. *Dance of the fury, for the seven trumpets (Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes)*
- VII. *Cluster of rainbows, for the angel who announces the end of Time (Fouillis d'arcs-en-ciel, pour l'Ange qui annonce la fin du temps)*
- VIII. *Praise to the immortality of Jesus (Louange à l'Immortalité de Jésus)*

Musicians performing tonight:

**Yann Ghiro** clarinet

**David Alberman** violin

**William Conway** cello

**James Willshire** piano

During the performance in Edinburgh, Michael Symmons Roberts, poet and author of *Quartet for the End of Time: On Music, Grief and Birdsong*, will be sharing his personal reflections on Messiaen's work as part of the evening, and will be available to sign copies of his book.

# Programme Notes by Arthur Keegan

Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time* is an iconic masterpiece of 20th-century music. Its extraordinary combination of radical musical language, blazing imagery and beguiling instrumental sonorities means it occupies a unique space in the chamber repertoire. Being asked to create a companion piece for it has been intense and deeply rewarding... and not a little intimidating!

The story of the *Quartet's* origin is essential context in the achievement of the piece. It was composed in 1940 amid deprivation and existential dread in a prisoner-of-war camp using manuscript provided by a prison guard. The *Quartet* was then premiered to an audience of both inmates and guards on a freezing January night. This is surely one of the most poignant examples of art transcending, and elevating, human experience against all odds.

That creation story is inseparable from the musical and spiritual world of the *Quartet* itself. Across eight movements, Messiaen draws on the Book of Revelation to create searingly beautiful and at times terrifyingly vivid musical images, culminating in the apocalyptic angelic announcement that "there should be time no longer". The work traces a journey in which earthly, human conceptions of time are gradually dissolved and transcended by a spiritual sense of eternity. This trajectory finds completion in the final movement, 'In Praise of the Immortality of Jesus', which Messiaen positions beyond time altogether: outside temporal experience. It's a bold and dramatic conception, made all the more powerful by the circumstances of its composition and first performance.

Messiaen's rhythmic and harmonic invention in the *Quartet* is profound and tangibly shapes the piece's imagery. He creates stasis in movement, continually plays with the listener's perception of time, and drenches the music in shimmering, entrancing chords. The soundworld is unmistakably Messiaen, deeply influenced by his synaesthesia and incorporating his trademark transcriptions of birdsong: nightingales and blackbirds appear in the very first moments of the piece. Any opportunity to hear the *Quartet for the End of Time* is truly precious.

My piece, *Coalesce*, is concerned not with the end but the beginning of time, both biblical and biological. The opening responds to the first lines of the Book of Genesis, depicting Earth “without form, and void,” with “darkness upon the face of the deep”. I also drew inspiration from Rachel Carson’s book ‘The Sea Around Us’, with its poetic account of unrelenting, awe-inspiring processes unfolding over unimaginable spans of time that led to the emergence of life on earth. Key to both beginnings is an arc of order emerging from tempestuous chaos.

Musically, *Coalesce* begins where Messiaen’s piece ends. It atomizes the soundworld of Messiaen’s eighth movement across the quartet. Each instrument begins independently, contributing to a “soup” of musical material that gradually coagulates toward cohesive ensemble playing. The coming together of individual, independent lines to form an ensemble musically mirrors the magical threshold where biology is created from chemistry and life begins.

From this point, musical gestures are extended and transformed in a process akin to a sped-up, kaleidoscopic evolution toward complex life and humanity. Ideas quickly morph and flit by. Ensemble interactions grow more complex: dance rhythms appear, solos and duets emerge and, occasionally, Messiaen’s birdsong pops through the texture.

The short closing section is reflective. Whilst writing, I kept returning to a thought from Brian Cox, extending words by Carl Sagan about the miracle of life on Earth... ‘If Earth is the only planet in our galaxy that hosts intelligent life, we are the only island of meaning in a sea of 400 billion stars’. The story of life on Earth is now intertwined with humanity’s responsibility for our home, and a moment of reflection – even a prayer – seemed the only appropriate response.

The process of writing this piece has been particularly reflective and exploratory. The inspiring embrace of Messiaen’s music has stretched me and encouraged a fresh approach for which I am grateful. The members of Hebrides Ensemble, led by Will, have been ideal collaborators in this – I’d like to thank them all, as well as the Royal Philharmonic Society which commissioned the work.

# About Arthur Keegan

Arthur Keegan is a British composer whose work often draws inspiration from poetry and literature. He became a Royal Philharmonic Society Composer in 2025, and in 2026 will embark on a year-long fellowship with the Young Classical Artist Trust.

His debut album, *The Past & I: 100 Years of Thomas Hardy*, was released on Delphian Records in 2024 and was nominated for Presto Music's World Premiere Recording of the Year. Developed in close collaboration with Australian mezzo Lotte Betts-Dean, the music explores Thomas Hardy's poetry receiving excellent reviews and reaching number five in the classical chart.

Further work on Hardy is emerging soon: new string quartet arrangements of Finzi's cycle *A Young Man's Exhortation* commissioned by tenor Matthew Plenk (premiering 2026); and a music-drama about Hardy and his wives, with poet and playwright Mark Ford.

In 2023, the Philharmonia Orchestra commissioned a piece responding to the comic poetry of Tim Key (including a live recording released on NMC Records). In 2022 Keegan composed a suite based on *The Picture of Dorian Gray* for the LSO Soundhub Series, which is currently being expanded into a staged dance work scheduled to premiere in 2027.

[www.arthurkeegan.co.uk](http://www.arthurkeegan.co.uk) | [@arthur\\_keegan\\_music](https://www.instagram.com/arthur_keegan_music)



# About Hebrides Ensemble

Hebrides Ensemble is one of the foremost chamber music collectives in the UK. Co-founded and led by Artistic Director William Conway, we are renowned for our fresh approach to programming with a focus on music of the 20th and 21st centuries, including performing almost 100 world premieres. We are an international ensemble with our roots in Scottish culture, regularly performing in venues and festivals throughout the UK and Europe.

Hebrides Ensemble supports the next generation of performers and composers through its partnerships and programme. At a time of great change culturally, socially, environmentally and economically, we give performances and make recordings of music of this time and place that have meaning for audiences now, and in the future.

We recently released our recording celebrating the chamber music of Helen Grime. This was the sixth volume in the Scotland's Composers series on Delphian Records, following previous award-winning releases of music by Stuart MacRae, Judith Weir, Nigel Osborne, Peter Maxwell Davies and James MacMillan.

## Coming soon...



Sun 22 February, 3pm

### **Walton's Façade with RCS conductors**

Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

Students from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland's conducting department lead Hebrides Ensemble in a performance of Walton's Façade.



Wed 25 March, 7.30pm

### **Shifting Baselines**

Joan Knight Studio, Perth

A performance bringing together bold contemporary voices exploring nature, memory and sound, including a new work by Dave Maric.