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The Music Behind World War Two

When the outbreak of World War Two occurred, time stood still for all that was affected. Many lives were put on hold, so that others could rebuild theirs. When Hitler invaded Poland in 1939, it began the spark that most of the world could not look away no longer. Two men, fighting on the allied side had to put up their sheet music and strap on their war gear. These men were the French composer, Olivier Messiaen and Dimitri Shostakovich, a Russian composer. From their involvement in the war, they had new inspiration for their next compositions. However, two men from two different sections of the war, had different experiences and stories to base their music off of. Although both Olivier Messiaen and Dimitri Shostakovich were inspired by World War Two, the works Quatuor pour la fin du temps (Quartet for the End of Time), I. “Liturgie de cristal” by Messiaen and Symphony no. 7 in C major, “Leningrad,” op. 60, I. Allegretto by Shostakovich are different in comparison due to the historical background of the composer, their experiences with the war, and the composition of the pieces themselves.

Born on December 10th, 1908, Olivier was born to Pierre Messiaen, an english literature scholar, and Cécile Sauvage, a poet (Britanica). He was especially gifted. He started composing at age seven and entered the Paris Conservatory at age eleven to shadow an organist named Marcel Dupré and another French composer named Paul Dukas (Britannica). Olivier was fascinated with bird songs and dedicated a few of his compositions to his studies of the birds. One of these compositions is called *Catalogue d’oiseaux* or Catalog of Birds. It states in *The Rest is Noise* by Alex Ross, “‘Birds are my first and greatest masters,’ he announced. He then exhibited notebooks where he had transcribed birdsong heard on expeditions to different parts of France… ‘Birds always sing in a given mode,’ he said. ‘They do know the interval of the octave.” (Ross). He referring to Messiaen, has exclaimed his interest in these birdsongs and explains his interest in them due to their lack of musical understanding, yet still producing music.

In between his time at the Paris Conservatory and his birdsong expeditions of France, Olivier served in the French army during World War Two. In 1940, The German army took over the city of Verdun in France. Olivier was one among many captured by the Germans during this pursuit and was taken to a makeshift camp located in a large field. It was there that he met a clarinettist, a cellist, and later a violinist in Stalag Villa (“Blast”). From his experiences within his time with these instrumentalist that he created *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (Quartet for the End of Time) during his stay at the camp. This quartet was a change for Messiaen. Prior to 1940, Messiaen had not composed a lot of chamber music, making this quartet a new approach to his composing abilities. Although new, it still kept his style of a multi-movement cycle expressing a common theme (“Blast”). The first of his composition was I. “Liturgie de cristal”. To describe the piece, it has two instruments, clarinet and piano, with the violin and cello acting in the background. It states in the *Blasts from the Past: Olivier Messiaen - Quatuor Pour La Fin Du Temps* article a descriptive definition of the piece. “Although featuring all the quartet, is essentially for clarinet and piano, the former imitating the song of a blackbird, the latter occupied with isorhythmic material, matching a 17-duration *talea* with a 29-chord *color*. The other two instruments, acting somewhat at the sidelines, are behaviourally linked to the clarinet and piano: the violin imitates a nightingale while the cello meanders around a smaller-scale isorhythm, comprising five pitches and 15 durations (one being a factor of the other, and thereby introducing repetitions)” (“Blast”). Even in his time of being confined, his interest in the birds still takes part in his early compositions, especially in this piece with the violin acting as a nightingale. In 1941, Messiaen and his instrumentalist preformed this piece along with others to the residence of the prisoner of war camp. Although having inadequate instruments, they made it work and perform in front of not only prisoners, but the guards as well (“Blast”). Many performances were done afterwards by Messiaen and his crew in the camp, giving a sense of home and entertainment to wait for liberation.

On the other side of Europe was a man by the name of Dimitri Shostakovich. Born on December ninth, of 1906 in Saint Petersburg, Russia. He was a son of an engineer and just like Olivier Messiaen, Entered a Conservatory to study music ( Taruskin). From 1919, he studied piano with Leonid Nikolayev and composition until 1925 with Aleksandr Glazunov and Maksimilian Steinberg as his mentors (Taruskin). He had a lot of success being a composer and drawing inspiration from many other composers. Just like Olivier Messiaen, they both drew inspiration from Alban Berg, an Austrian composer. Shostakovich drew a lot of inspiration from avant-garde pieces and later composed a few of his own like his satiric opera *The Nose* that was composed around 1927-28. It states in Taruskin’s article a description of Shostakovich’s piece. It states, “Based on Nikolay Gogol’s story “Nos,” displayed a [comprehensive](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/comprehensive) awareness of what was new in Western music, although already it seems as if the satire is extended to the styles themselves, for the avant-garde sounds are contorted with wry humour.” (Taruskin). Shostakovich wanted to use his avant-garde piece to coincide with Western culture and create something that fit what was popular at the time. Being radical at the time in the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin declared that avant-garde music was not acceptable any longer. “From 1928, when Joseph Stalin inaugurated his First Five-Year Plan, an iron hand fastened on Soviet [culture](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture), and in music a direct and popular style was demanded.” (Taruskin). From this decree, Shostakovich along with many other Russian avant-garde composers suffered and declined in popularity, affecting their careers. Although he was struggling with getting his music out there, he formed a new style that fit his requirements along with the government’s. Just like Messiaen, Shostakovich joined his local Conservatory in Leningrad and composed before and after his involvement with World War Two (Taruskin). After the war, he created a series of works revolving around his second conflict with the law, making his work less appreciated and dismissable with the public. He suffered a severe rise and fall when producing his music. After his time of the war, he produced a series of more symphonies reflecting his love for the style of atonality After Stalin’s death, he was able to come out of his shell and express his new found style without repercussions. Although his music was brooding, he was known for his outgoingness and was the man to know regarding Russian music (Taruskin).

In 1941, Shostakovich lived in Leningrad when it was surrounded by the German troops. Due to his musical successes, he was escorted out of Leningrad by order of Stalin to ensure his safety (Loverde). Shostakovich wanted to support his country and enlisted in the army, however, due to injury, he did not get the position he was expecting. From his personal struggles with the war, he created Symphony no. 7 to show represent what his home and himself had experienced. He began to create his seventh symphony when the siege occured and chose to base it on his time in Leningrad. The piece is composed into four movements. It begins with war, memories, beauty of life, and ends with victory (Loverde). Each movement takes place in the progress of the war. In 1942, Shostakovich presented his piece and played it for everyone to reinstate music back into people’s lives after dedicating the radio to the political needs from the war. Experimenting with tonality, his pieces defy the tonal structure and create a piece of their own. Shostakovich loved the concept of atonal music, but did not find inspiration within those also contributing to the atonal music movement (Loverde). In the first movement, Loverde explains the format of the piece and discusses Shostakovich’s purpose for forming the piece this way. It states, “[It] appears to be structured in typical sonata form, but further musical analysis reveals that the development section, which usually introduces modulations and chromatic harmonies, seems to be nonexistent… In place of a development, he introduces a new theme that is repeated twelve times, each time with different instrumentation.” Shostakovich uses this method to symbolize war within his piece, while being able to compose freely and not confined to a certain standard when creating his piece. Shostakovich used an opera, called *The Merry Meadow*, as inspiration in his piece to create a march-like beat to represent the war. Ironically, it was one of Hitler's favorite operas (Loverde). Many of Shostakovich’s musical choice in his piece regarded around a happier and lighter time in life in Leningrad. He wanted his audience to remember the good days before the chaos and not focus on the brutality of war, probably as a reminder to cherish the memories made in the happier times. His piece is the continuous notion of realizing the war, remembering the good times, fighting for the good times, and succeeding in the end, having it done over a long period of time, his piece reflects that as well. Having been surrounded by hardship before the war with the first World War and after with the Cold War, Shostakovich wants his piece to reflect the past before the continuous need for war and later became the war song that represented the allies during the war (Loverde). As one could say, a war cry towards victory.

From two different sides of the war, both men are similar, yet their music reflects differently. Messiaen and Shostakovich both fought in the war on the allied side to fight against the reign of Hitler. They rose to their civic duty and had completely different experiences. Unlike Messiaen, Shostakovich was not able to join the official army due to illness, but chose to join a league of volunteer firefighters to assist his country (Hall). Both men held a personal need to assist their country and fight for the right to be free. One was captured in a prisoner of war camp and the other was hidden for his protection. Yet both played a huge role in expanding music and creating new styles to form the music we have today. Starting with Quatuor pour la fin du temps, he uses his love for birdsong in I. “Liturgie de cristal”, going back and forth with the nightingale and the blackbird. It sounds of desperation with its minor pitch of the clarinet and the violin acting as the birds with the contrasting melody of the cello and the piano. Messiaen uses the sonata form of “A-B-A” to compose his piece by, but also leaves room for development beyond the “A-B-A” structure. The first movement is to represent the struggle between time, reflecting on Messiaen’s time being a prisoner of war. He wanted the musical time to be a question to make it feel neverending and longing. He uses steady rhythms similar to jazz to create a continuous motion in his piece (Gutmann). Unlike Shostakovich, Messiaen did not want his piece to sound like a battle. He wanted to use delicate tones to muster the feeling without the bashing and dark tones that is commonly used to represent war (Gutmann). By having the instruments on different musical beats, he used naturistic tones to tell his story along with making it a continuous notion as the first part of his piece.

Shostakovich had a different sound when it comes to his pieces. While trying to focus on the happier parts before the war, he still uses dark pitches and the marching beat in the background to give the elements of war. From escaping from the war countless times, it makes sense why he wanted to remind his audience of the happier times. Being surrounded by war for a couple of years can cause the good memories to be forgotten. It was then that his piece was used for triumph of the Soviet Union as a motivation boost for the Allied powers to continue their fight against Nazism. Like Messiaen, his piece was presented in 1942 in front of a crowd in Kuibyshev and was presented all across the Soviet Union to rally up the morale of the people. In this account from a viewer who witnessed this production stated, “Some people cried because that was the only way they could show their joy; others because they had lived through what the music was expressing with such force; others cried from grief for the people they had lost, or just because they were overcome with the emotion of being still alive” (Hall). In his piece, I. Allegretto, “Leningrad”, you can hear the woodwinds representing the motivating factor for the brass instruments. It consists of a major tone with the dark tones interfering in between the positive notions. It then decrescendos into a soft woodwind melody to lead as the good times being remembered and appreciated and rises into person conflict towards the end of the piece. It uses the inconsistent count of beats in the piece to represent the unexpectedness that war brings upon people. There is no repeated time count when it comes to war, it takes a person by surprise every time. Marking at 25 minutes long, the whole collection consisting of 85 minutes long, this collection is the longest composition created in Shostakovich’s career of composing (Taruskin).

From being a prisoner of war and a prisoner of their country, both men took a different spin on what the war had created for them, yet both encompassed a new style of composing that gave them the edge in the music world. From atonality to conveying progression without progression in the composition. From representing the good times and the bad, although similar, they created something on opposite spectrums. It shows that composers can draw inspiration from the same event, but produce something completely different. These pieces have inspiration from the upbringing of each composer. From Messiaen fighting in the army and becoming a prisoner of war, to Shostakovich who was a volunteer firefighter that was hidden away due to his musical talents. Messiaen used his time locked away to create the masterpiece we know as of today, the *Quatuor pour la fin de temps,* the delicate piece of birds singing in a repetitive fashion. Shostakovich used his city of Leningrad to represent the good and the bad times surrounding war in Symphony no. 7, “Leningrad” by producing the marching theme of inconsistent note patterns accompanied by dark tones of atonality to boost the morale of the country that he loves. Persay that Shostakovich and Messiaen switched places in time. Would these pieces still exist today? Probably not. From the experiences of the composers and their time in the war, the pieces are different in composition, even with being inspired by the same event in history.

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