

MESSIAEN: *Quartet for the End of Time;*
Theme & Variations; Fantasy

Christine Pryn, v; Oystein Sonstad, vc; Viktor Wennesz, cl; Kristoffer Hyldig, p

Danacord 756—66 minutes

Founded in 1997 in Copenhagen, the Ensemble Nordlys (The Northern Lights Ensemble) has cultivated a niche in Danish music circles with the combination of piano trio and clarinet. Here, they dedicate an entire concert to the early music of Olivier Messiaen (1908-92).

Violinist Christine Pryn and pianist Kristoffer Hyldig begin with two works that the young Messiaen wrote for violinist and composer Claire Delbos, whom he married in 1932. First is the *Fantasy* (1933), first performed by Delbos and Messiaen in March 1935 and lost among his papers until found and published in 2007. Next is the highly personal and vivid *Theme and Variations* (1932), which Olivier gave to Claire as a wedding present and whose 1943 performance inspired an 18-year-old Pierre Boulez to study with Messiaen and explore the possible post-romantic pathways of French music.

The capstone, of course, is the justly famous *Quartet for the End of Time*, completed in January 1941 in a German prisoner-of-war camp for himself and three fellow French musicians. It is probably the best and most important work written for piano trio and clarinet, but it would never have been conceived for the instruments in question if Messiaen had been presented with different options and circumstances. Cellist Oystein Sonstad and clarinetist Viktor Wennesz join Pryn and Hyldig for this eight-movement 48-minute meditation on faith, nature, and the afterlife.

The concert is thoroughly professional and emotionally powerful. Pryn and Hyldig paint a stunning picture of a young and fiery visionary at work, and the Ensemble Nordlys completes the portrait of the composer's early period with a tight and breathtaking *Quartet for the End of Time*, easily one of the best ever recorded.

Hyldig leads the group with an alluring fanaticism, one moment calm and reposed with a gorgeous touch, the next moment delivering thunder and lightning in bold and sonorous percussive chords. Pryn and Sonstad are a strong team all through, and both of their soliloquies with Hyldig are highly moving spiritual utterances that leave a profound impression.

Wennesz boasts a fine mellow sound that blends perfectly with the ensemble, and he manipulates it over a astonishingly large dynamic range. His 'Abyss of the Birds' is mystical and terrifying as he moves with facility through three and a half octaves, effortlessly scales all technical obstacles, and fills every note and gesture with soul.

Readers who are searching for a great recording of Messiaen's youthful masterpieces need not look any further—this is the one to have.