

TIME TRANSFIXED

2:00 PM

SATURDAY 11 OCTOBER 2025

LECTURE HALL



Olivier MESSIAEN (1908 – 1992)

Louange à l'Éternité de Jésus (Praise to the Eternity of Jesus) from the *Quartet for the End of Time*

Maria GRENFELL (born 1969)

Time Transfixed

Francis POULENC (1899 – 1963)

Sonata for Cello and Piano

1. *Allegro. Tempo di marcia. Sans traîner*
2. *Cavatine. Très calme*
3. *Ballabile. Très animé et gai*
4. *Finale. Largo – Presto subito – Largo*

Jonathan Békés, *Cello*

Stefan Cassomenos, *Piano*

Olivier MESSIAEN (1908 – 1992)

Louange à l'Éternité de Jésus (Praise to the Eternity of Jesus) from the *Quartet for the End of Time*

Infiniment lent, extatique

Acclaimed for his deeply spiritual works, with their remarkable use of birdsong and innovative explorations of rhythm and harmony, Messiaen is a giant in 20th century music. Arguably his most famous piece of music is the *Quartet for the End of Time*, composed and first performed while he was interned at Stalag VIII-A, a Nazi prison camp in Lower Silesia (on the southern border of Germany and Poland). A devout Catholic, Messiaen wrote in the preface to the score that the quartet was inspired by the Book of Revelation, specifically the account of the angel who descends in glory from heaven to announce the end of time. The fifth movement is an ecstatic song of praise to the eternal word of Jesus, which “the years cannot consume”. Over pulsing chords in the piano, the cello spins a long, drawn-out melody, to be played “infinitely slowly”. Initially tender, it builds to several luminous climaxes, before finally vanishing into silence.

Maria GRENFELL (born 1969)
Time Transfixed

Born in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia and raised in Christchurch, New Zealand, Maria Grenfell is an acclaimed composer of chamber, orchestral, vocal/choral and film music. She currently serves as Associate Professor of Composition at the University of Tasmania Conservatorium of Music. Deeply influenced by poetic, literary, visual, and non-Western sources, her works have been commissioned, performed and recorded by major orchestras and chamber ensembles throughout Australia and New Zealand. The Australian Art Music Awards have recognised her twice with Work of the Year awards, for her septet *Ten Suns Ablaze* in 2013 and double concerto *Spirals* in 2017. She has also scored documentaries including *Quoll Farm* (2021) and *Living with Devils* (2023), recorded with the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra.

Originally commissioned for soprano saxophone and piano in 2000 by Australian saxophonist Barry Cockcroft, Grenfell subsequently arranged *Time Transfixed* for cello and piano in 2020, for TSO principal cellist Jonathan Békés. In the words of the composer, “*Time Transfixed* takes its title from a René Magritte 1938 surrealist painting of the same name. The painting shows the front engine of a train emerging out of a fireplace, as if suspended. On the mantelpiece is a black clock and two candlesticks in front of a large mirror. The painting struck me as depicting an eerie pause of time. Even though the train is suspended, the colour palette seems dated, and the clock gives the impression that time has stopped. Steam is coming out of the train’s boiler as if it were still moving forward. My piece aims to portray the sadness inherent in the painting, with suspended harmonies that have a slight but smooth and rocking rhythmic effect.”

Francis POULENC (1899 – 1963)
Sonata for Cello and Piano

1. *Allegro. Tempo di marcia. Sans traîner*
2. *Cavatine. Très calme*
3. *Ballabile. Très animé et gai*
4. *Finale. Largo – Presto subito – Largo*

Famously described in 1950 by the critic Claude Rostand as “half monk, half rascal”, Poulenc was the most well-known member of *Les Six*, a group of progressive French/Swiss composers who rebelled against German Romanticism and the Impressionism of their countrymen, pursuing instead a more unassuming, down-to-earth musical style. The Cello Sonata grew out of sketches Poulenc first made at Brive-la-Gaillarde during the summer of 1940, in the wake of France’s surrender to Germany and his subsequent demobilisation from the army.

Working in fits and starts over the following few years, he was finally pressed to complete the sonata in 1948 at the urging of the great cellist Pierre Fournier, who gave the first performance in Paris with the composer at the keyboard. Fournier’s technical advice was invaluable in the creation of the solo part. As Poulenc later wrote to a friend, “He is undoubtedly an admirable artist, the greatest cellist of our day. Only someone with Fournier’s sensational class could make me take to this new duo. It is very easy to play with him ... He never falters. I repeat that he is adorable...”

With its mix of irreverent playfulness and ardent lyricism, the Cello Sonata is a brilliant example of Poulenc’s neoclassical style, characterised by scholar Donald Gíslason as “Mozart meets Stravinsky – in a Paris cabaret”. The allegro first movement jolts into being with a terse, angular fanfare on the piano that is quickly echoed by the cello, before suddenly yielding to a gentle, flowing melody shared by both instruments. This clash of march-like rigour and breezy sentimentality runs throughout the movement, giving it a restless, searching quality.

At the heart of the sonata lies the introspective second movement, a strikingly beautiful cavatina (or aria) whose outward tenderness and tranquillity veil a burning, quasi-operatic passion. The third movement breaks the spell with a jaunty *ballabile* (a ballet/opera term literally meaning ‘danceable’). Here the duo prance and strut from the dance hall to the cabaret, and back again. Fiery, ecstatic declamations open and close the last movement, which swirls with a mercurial fusion of neo-Baroque jig, sardonic march and wistful song.