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BY LAWRENCE A. JOHNSON
lajohnson@MiamiHerald.com

On Jan. 15, 1941 one of the most unusual music premieres of the 20th century took place in sub-zero weather at Stalag VIII-A in Gorlitz, Germany. A young French composer and three fellow prisoners gave the first performance of a work he had written in the Nazi camp, for the only instruments at his disposal: a violin, cello, clarinet and damaged piano.

The composer was Olivier Messiaen, and the work was his Quartet for the End of Time, which was performed Tuesday night by the Paris Trio and clarinetist Alexander Fiterstein to open the season for Friends of Chamber Music of Miami.

The dual inspirations that would motivate Messiaen's art for the rest of his long life are strongly manifest in the Quartet: a fascination with birds, both in their avian calls and as spiritual metaphor, and Messiaen's deep and mystical Roman Catholicism.

The compelling performance presented at Gusman Concert Hall -- a co-presentation with Festival Miami -- possessed additional insight and authority due to its close connection with the work. Regis Pasquier, violinist of the Paris Trio, is the nephew of Etienne Pasquier, the cellist who participated in the premiere that cold night 66 years ago.

The circumstances of the work's creation are certainly palpable in the angular, unsentimental spirituality that dominates the 53-minute span. There's also a sense of

forceful, aggressive defiance, which was powerfully conveyed by the Paris Trio and Fiterstein, anchored by commanding playing from pianist Jean-Claude Penneretier.

Most striking was the intensity of Messiaen's long, introspective movements. Fiterstein rendered his solo in Abyss of the Birds with a remarkable unearthly calm, conjuring a vast array of tonal hues and dynamics that often verged on inaudibility.

In the devotional Praise to the Eternity of Jesus and Praise to the Immortality of Jesus, Pasquier and cellist Roland Pidoux brought comparable hushed and dedicated playing to their rarefied solos.

The all-French program began with Saint-Saens and Faure. Written the year before his death, Faure's Piano Trio in D minor offers an extended meditative slow movement between two shorter, stately outer sections.

The Paris Trio members deftly judged the rhapsodic ebb and flow of the Andantino -- one of Faure's most memorable themes. But the performance appeared somewhat under-rehearsed and out of sync in the outer movements with less-than-airtight intonation from Pidoux.

By contrast, Saint-Saens' Piano Trio No. 1 was richly inspired. With warmly lyrical string tone and buoyant elegant work from Penneretier, the players were fully in the spirit of the music, bringing jaunty swagger to the scherzo and teasing out the wit of the finale delightfully.