

Q2 Music Album of the Week

Gloria Cheng and Calder Quartet Bring Messiaen and Saariaho to Light

Q2 Music Album of the Week for February 25, 2013

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By [Daniel Stephen Johnson](#)



'The Edge of Light': Messiaen/Saariaho
(Harmonia Mundi)

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On their new CD, "The Edge of Light," the wildly adventurous West Coast keyboard virtuoso [Gloria Cheng](#) and the even wilder **Calder Quartet** help to contextualize Olivier **Messiaen's** titanic legacy by pairing a 1929 piano suite and a 1991 quintet with 21st-century pieces by Kaija **Saariaho**, Messiaen's heir apparent in the present day.

Olivier Messiaen was not just an important composer; he was a giant of modern music whose career straddled the 20th century. His influence was as irresistibly seductive to the mind as to the ear, both meticulously constructed and vibrantly colored, and it connects the innovations of composers like Debussy and Ravel to those of the severe midcentury high-modernists, and arguably to the present-day experiments of the "spectralist" composers, with their scientific approach to timbre and harmony.

Messiaen's lovely *Préludes* for piano, especially in Cheng's assured and sensitive hands, easily make the case for the composer's aural appeal – it's hard to imagine a listener who could be intimidated by its rich, elegant harmonies. At only three minutes, the more bracing *Pièce pour piano et quatuor à cordes* makes up in density what it lacks in duration, and the Calders give their part the percussive bite it needs to let Cheng's luminous lyrical solos sing by contrast.

The liner notes by opera director **Peter Sellars**, an accomplished interpreter of both composers, tell us that the material from Kaija Saariaho's piano quintet, *Je sens un deuxième cœur*, comes from her opera *Adriana Mater*, but the Finnish composer's music responds so eloquently to the legacy of Messiaen that she might as well have written it for this album. Her musical voice, influenced by the spectralist blurring of distinctions between tone, pitch and harmony, is decidedly her own, but it achieves Messiaenic heights of beauty and intensity.

The sheer sensual pleasure of this repertoire would be enough to recommend this disc. But Saariaho's previously unrecorded *Prelude* and *Ballade* for solo piano, works of Chopin-like beauty and virtuosity, fill out the running time in luxuriant interpretations that seal the proverbial deal.

This audio is no longer available.

TAGS: [calder quartet](#), [gloria cheng](#), [kaija saariaho](#), [oliver messiaen](#)

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DANIEL STEPHEN JOHNSON

Daniel Stephen Johnson was born in the desert and learned to play the violin. After studying viola and English at the University of Southern California, he wrote fiction at Columbia University. Then he moved to Connecticut, where he worked at a record shop and wrote about music, literature and comedy for the *New Haven Advocate* and the *Believer*. Now he lives in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, and works as a sheet music salesman in Queens. Follow Daniel on Twitter at [@linenotesdanny](#).

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