# THE TRUTH ABOUT LOVE

## CD BOOKLET. TEXTS

by Iida Antola, translated by David Hackston

It is easy to take life for granted – that is, until we run into a crisis. Crises force us to examine our lives anew; they bring our most important values into focus.

Currently, our everyday lives are marked not only by the existential threat of climate change, but also by fear for our political freedom and the very continuance of our functioning democracies. At the time of recording this disc, the Covid19 pandemic was wreaking havoc across the world, closing down our societies for months at a time and leaving us in forced separation from our friends and family. The pandemic deepened the sense of global inequality and put extreme pressure on the sustainability of our societies. In February 2022 Russia invaded Ukraine, starting a war that has broken the bond of trust with the West and made the threat of nuclear conflict all too real.

This recording takes inspiration from three song cycles, all composed on the cusp of the Second World War: Benjamin Britten's *Cabaret Songs* (1937–1939), Olivier Messiaen's *Chants de terre et de ciel* (1938) and Viktor Ullmann's *Fünf Liebeslieder nach Ricarda Huch* (1939). Though these composers come from different countries and have different backgrounds, the Second World War overshadowed the lives of all three: Britten fled the war and travelled to the United States, where he spent several years, and upon return to the United Kingdom declared himself a pacifist. When war broke out in 1939, Messiaen was recruited to a medical auxiliary unit and became a prisoner of war at the Stalag VIII-A camp. Ullmann, who was of Jewish heritage, was arrested in Prague in 1941 and executed at Auschwitz in 1944.

Instead of succumbing to despair, these three composers used their art to defend our most important values. The crisis led these composers to turn to texts dealing with our shared sense of humanity, but above all with love and its omnipotence. For this reason, I have chosen to call this disc 'The Truth about Love'. Though the dark atmosphere of the era is present in the music, these works are first and foremost staunch defenders of the virtues of love and hope.

Particularly as we too find ourselves living through a crisis, we need music that reminds us of what is important in life. During the Second World War, composers latched on to hope; they wanted to create music that brought comfort and allowed people to feel a sense of belonging. How best can we act when faced with such an uncertain future?

## BRITTEN AND AUDEN

One of the most significant British composers of the 20th century, **Benjamin Britten** (1913–1976) was a pianist and conductor whose extensive output includes a lengthy list of operas, vocal music, orchestral, chamber and film music. Born into a middle-class family in the town of Lowestoft, Suffolk, Britten's musical talents were apparent from an early age: he composed his first piece at the age of five and took piano lessons from his mother, Edith Britten. Eventually, he secured a scholarship to the Royal College of Music in London, where he studied piano and composition, first in the class of John Ireland, then privately as a student of Frank Bridge. His international breakthrough came with his opera *Peter Grimes*, premiered in London in June 1945, only a month after the end of the Second World War.

In a discussion of Benjamin Britten, it is impossible not to mention **Wystan Hugh Auden** too. Known for his stylistically and technically advanced poetry, Auden was not only one of the most significant British poets of the century but crucially he was one of the most important early influences on Britten's life.

Auden and Britten first met in 1935 while they were working on documentaries for the GPO Film Unit. At the time, Britten was 22 years old and had only recently graduated from the Royal College of Music. Auden was six years older, and his career was considerably more established than Britten's: he was considered a leading figure in his generation of poets, a group later known variously as the 'MacSpaunday Poets' or the 'Auden Group' and which included, in addition to Auden himself, the poets Louis MacNeice, Stephen Spender and Cecil Day-Lewis.

This age difference was evident in Auden's self-assuredness: he was outspoken, cared little for social norms and lived a distinctly Bohemian lifestyle. Auden had already found his own artistic voice and was also openly homosexual, and thus he represented all the things that Britten still sought to emulate. Britten was still young, shy and uncertain of himself; he was not especially educated or well-read and not at all at home with himself or his sexuality.

Auden, who was in the habit of surrounding himself with bright young things, recognised Britten's exceptional musical talents, and given such potential he perhaps considered it a role of honour to serve as mentor to the younger man and to widen his perspectives. The friendship profoundly altered Britten's life: in Auden's company, hard work was often combined with fascinating and challenging political and philosophical discussions. Through Auden, Britten became acquainted with a great many of the leading artists of the day. Auden was scintillating and intelligent, and Britten assumed many of his influences and opinions, wrote them down and later considered them his own.

Though Britten experienced a degree of inferiority in Auden's company, the poet nonetheless encouraged the young composer, and it was thanks to Auden that Britten finally began to believe in his own capabilities. He knew that, like Auden, he too was exceptionally talented, perhaps a genius in his field, and Auden's influence gave him the confidence to stand by his own convictions and to distance himself from his teacher Frank Bridge. Furthermore, Auden's support was doubtless the reason why in the late 1930s the shy and introverted Britten plucked up the courage to leave England for America, a journey that was to have important ramifications for his artistic development.

## POLITICS, WAR AND PACIFISM

The leftist artists of the 1930s considered it incumbent upon themselves to take active part in the political events of the day both as individuals and as artists. At times, political statements created unfortunate tension and friction between private and public life, and this conflict impacted Britten throughout his life.

Auden represented a politically active generation of artists who all had first-hand experience of the First World War. Many young people had lost relatives in the war and wanted to avoid any similar conflict in the future: they were concerned about global economics, they admired Russia and considered the writings of Marx and Engels weapons in bringing about the fall of capitalism. Whilst living in Berlin (1928–1929), Auden had already seen signs of the rise of Nazism, so the advent of fascism in Italy and Germany did not surprise him, as it did Britten, who was rather less politically engaged.

Though Britten was not as political as many of his contemporaries, pacifism was one ideology with which he strongly identified: his humanitarian instincts were piqued at cruelty towards humans and animals. When he returned from America in 1942, Britten attested to his pacifism in court and was relieved of military service as a conscientious objector. Pacifism can be seen running through his musical output too: in 1936 he wrote the music for a short film entitled *Peace of Britain*, directed for Strand Films by Paul Rotha. Exploring the theme of animal rights, *For our Hunting Fathers* for soprano and orchestra (1936) was Britten's first large-scale collaboration with Auden. Dedicated to the victims of both world wars, the *War Requiem* (1968) remains one of Britten's most significant achievements.

## THE JOURNEY TO AMERICA

In January 1939, Auden decided to travel to the United States with his colleague Christopher Isherwood. He had had enough of his role as the unofficial 'poet laureate' of the left, and to him the political situation in Britain felt hopeless. A few months later, Britten decided to follow him – he felt unable to give as many concerts in his homeland as he would like. Moreover, his teacher Frank Bridge's recent success in the United States encouraged him to test the waters abroad.

In the United States, Britten and Auden continued their intense collaboration, but Britten did not enjoy his time in America and had no desire to remain rootless in a foreign country on a permanent basis. When war broke out in September 1939, Britten and Peter Pears decided, at the behest of the British Embassy, to stay in the United States, where they began serving as ambassadors of the arts. After a few years, their homesickness had grown so strong that in 1942 Britten and Pears decided to return to England. It is likely that a rift between Britten and Auden played a role in this decision: while their work had always brought them together, the two had started to grow apart. Composed on the sea voyage back to Britain, the *Hymn to St Cecilia* for mixed choir was to be Britten's last setting of Auden's poetry.

## CABARET SONGS (1937-1939)

Britten was an exceptionally talented, self-taught jazz pianist. Cole Porter was one of his idols, and of an evening he was known to improvise at the piano while relaxing with friends. The song cycle Cabaret Songs is perhaps the closest example of what such a jazz improvisation might have sounded like.

The four cabaret poems that make up this cycle were first published in Auden's collection *Another Time* (1940). Britten did not allow the songs to be published until after Auden's death; living in Auden's shadow had likely been very trying for Britten, and after their estrangement he was afraid of approaching the poet and asking permission to use his texts.

Britten and Auden wrote the songs for the phenomenally talented singer–actress **Hedli Anderson**, one of the leading stars at the Trocadero Grillroom cabaret in Piccadilly Circus. It is clear that these songs were written for an artist steeped in the musical and theatrical aesthetics of the revue and popular music: the exuberant redhead was renowned for her on-stage charisma and skills as a comedienne.

What is love? The first song in this cycle and, indeed, on this recording is **Tell me the Truth about Love** and thus poses the question that the entire disc seeks to answer. The poem begins by almost underlining the title, "Liebe, l'amour, amor, amoris" – perhaps the poet's way of referring to his childhood and schooling. That being said, Auden's attempt to define the notion of love in fact highlights the absurdity of love: in listing all the standard clichés, the poem at first seems imbued with a child-like humour, yet it explores the question of what falling in love must feel like and how vexed and mercurial love can be.

A setting of what is perhaps Auden's most famous poem, **Funeral Blues** was first heard in its original form in the 1936 play *The Ascent of F6*, which Auden wrote in collaboration with Christopher Isherwood. *Stop All the Clocks* was a satirical statement about the death of a politician. In its original form, the poem is distinctly sarcastic and humorous, and in the play it was presented by none other than Hedli Anderson.

Auden completely rewrote the final three stanzas of the poem for Britten's solo version. He often used the word 'blues' about his own poems of a banal and baleful character, for instance in *Roman Wall Blues*, published a few years later. Britten's harmonies and rhythms vaguely recall American blues: important elements in the piano accompaniment are a repeated octave figure in the left hand, which Britten uses to conjure up the "muffled drum" of the text, and the chords played in dotted rhythms in the right hand to accompany the voice part. Britten has chosen to underscore a number of ominous elements in the text: for instance, in the verse "Let the aeroplanes circle moaning overhead" he uses a buzzing triplet figuration to depict quite perfectly the sound of approaching aircraft. The rich piano textures and the dramatic rising tessitura of the vocal part in the last verse lend the song new, tragic dimensions.

**Johnny**, the third song in the cycle, is a depiction of a woman going to great lengths to impress the object of her affections, but despite her increasingly desperate attempts to woo him, her love remains unrequited. Britten underlines the woman's instability by shifting musical style in each verse, ranging from folk music to polka, opera, French chanson and the blues. In addition to a phenomenal ability to throw herself headlong into all manner of styles, Hedli Anderson must have had an extraordinary vocal range: the highest pitch in the opera verse is a high C while the lowest note in the blues verse is a low F.

**Calypso** is the last of the four poems set to music; Auden's text dates from May 1939. The song is true to its Afro-Caribbean roots, complete with political statements, and to heighten the Caribbean accent, Auden has placed the rhymes and words stresses at the end of each line: "For love's more important and powerful *than* / even a priest or politi-*cian*".

The challenging accompaniment takes its inspiration from the steam trains of old. As the singer implores "Driver, drive faster!", the train accelerates wildly, the tonality rising all the while. The song ends at breakneck speed, and on the final page the singer is required to whistle like a steam train – undoubtedly another of Hedli Anderson's many skills.

# SCHOENBERG'S INNER CIRCLE

Like so many Jewish artists murdered during the Holocaust, **Viktor Ullmann's** (1898–1944) output remains little known, save for the opera *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* (1943/1944), which he wrote in a concentration camp. Born in Silesia, Ullmann was an Austrian composer, conductor and pianist who spent the greater part of his adult life in Prague before being deported to the Theresienstadt concentration camp in 1941. He eventually died in the gas chambers of Auschwitz in 1944.

Ullmann spent his childhood in Vienna. His father Maximilian Ullmann was a professional soldier who converted from Judaism to Christianity in order to further his military career, and Viktor was brought up in the Catholic faith. His mother Malwine née Billitzer was the daughter of a Viennese solicitor, and Viktor read law alongside studies in composition.

Ullmann attended the military academy, and after graduating from high school he served as a volunteer in the First World War between 1916 and 1918. After this, he began studying composition at Arnold Schoenberg's seminars. It is unsurprising that Ullmann eventually became one of Schoenberg's students: his childhood piano teacher Edward Steuermann and his theory teacher Joseph Polnauser were both among Schoenberg's many acolytes.

Though Ullmann spent only a year in Schoenberg's seminar (1918–1919), this period of study was to have far-reaching implications. The friendships he established at the seminar continued throughout his life: the composers in the class all belonged to the musical establishment and together formed an important network.

Schoenberg had a great deal of influence, and this he used to help his students in their professional lives. With Schoenberg's recommendation, Ullmann began a career as a conductor at the Deutsche Landestheater in Prague under Alexander Zemlinsky. Ullmann relocated to Czechoslovakia with his wife Martha Koref, whom he had recently met at Schoenberg's seminar, and at the theatre he followed in the footsteps of two of Schoenberg's other students: Anton Webern, from whom he took over as choir master and repetiteur from 1922 onwards, and Heinrich Jalowetz, whom he replaced as conductor until 1927. During the 1927–1928 season he worked as a conductor in Aussig, where he had more freedom when it came to artistic programming.

The most important of Ullmann's early compositions is his Schoenberg Variations (1925), an obvious show of respect for his mentor. The work was performed in Geneva in 1929 and received rave reviews, drawing comparisons with Berg and Webern. Ullmann considered this his international breakthrough.

# SPIRITUAL AWAKENING AND ANTHROPOSOPHY

When Ullmann was around 30 years old, his burgeoning career was briefly interrupted. In a letter to the poet Albert Steffen, he explains that he experienced a spiritual awakening upon visiting Goetheanum in Switzerland, the centre of the anthroposophy movement, in 1929. He became so enthused by anthroposophy that he abandoned composition for several years in order to concentrate on developing his spiritual life. Between 1931 and 1933, he temporarily gave up music altogether so he could run an anthroposophy bookshop in Stuttgart.

Anthroposophy refers to human (anthropo-) wisdom (sophia). It is a spiritualist belief system developed by the Austrian philosopher, scientist, artist and educator Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) which asserts that the human mind has the ability to communicate with the spiritual world.

It is unclear precisely what made Ullmann develop such a keen interest in anthroposophy. He was in the process of divorcing his first wife Martha Koref, a matter that would undoubtedly have caused a crisis in his private life. But perhaps more important was Ullmann's need to detach himself from the dodecaphonic doctrines of Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School; despite the international success of his Schoenberg Variations, Ullmann felt that such a radical departure from tonality was not the solution to his compositional impasse. In this sense, Ullmann's spiritual crisis manifested his desire to find a faith upon which to base his life and work.

This hiatus can be compared to Schoenberg's own seven-year creative pause (1916–1923), during which he did not compose a single work and which led to the birth of the dodecaphonic compositional technique. Without this distance, Ullmann would likely never have found his unique, mature compositional style in which he freely combined tonality and atonality. In fact, one might go as far as to assume that Ullmann adapted the duality of anthroposophical thought and applied it to his treatment of tonality and atonality as two distinct yet related entities. Only a period of profound reflection can have led to the creation of this unique and significant mode of expression.

# AT THE CONCENTRATION CAMP 1942-1944

However, the political upheaval of 1933 forced Ullmann into action: after Hitler rose to power in Germany, Ullmann found himself a member of a persecuted minority and eventually had to leave Stuttgart. He reached Prague, where he continued his career as an artist: he taught, gave lectures, wrote reviews for the German magazine *Der Auftakt*, worked as a conductor and took part in the activities of numerous musical associations. At the same time, he resumed composition lessons at the Prague Conservatory in the class of Alois Hába, who specialised in microtonality. Ullmann's opera *Der Sturz des Antichrist* ('The Fall of the Antichrist') was written during this period. Stylistically, the

opera marked a departure from his earlier works in that it integrated more tonal elements into the musical language, thus representing a move away from the free tonality he had previously espoused.

As Hitler's grip on power strengthened in the late 1930s, Ullmann considered leaving Czechoslovakia, but he underestimated how quickly the situation was to escalate. Schoenberg's inner circle had gradually diminished: Schoenberg had himself already left for the United States in late October 1933, and Zemlinsky and Jalowetz followed him in 1938, as did Steuermann. When the Germans occupied Prague in March 1939, Ullmann's fate was sealed. The systematic persecution of the Jews began in earnest, and Ullmann was eventually sent to the concentration camp at Theresienstadt on 8th September 1942.

Of all the Nazi concentration camps, Theresienstadt had a special role in that only the Jewish elite were sent there: among those transported to the camp were high-ranking war veterans, Jews in significant societal positions, acclaimed artists, musicians, writers and academics. The conditions, however, were deliberately created to expedite the prisoners' demise: contagious diseases were rife, and people died of malnutrition and overpopulation. Furthermore, prisoners were regularly transferred to Auschwitz and other extermination camps further to the east.

Despite the dire conditions, artists were encouraged to continue their artistic endeavours. Though all cultural activities, such as lectures, concerts, theatre and cabaret were forbidden, by 1942 the SS command realised that allowing cultural events would not only enhance the overall atmosphere in the camp but also reduce the problems caused by the prisoners. Moreover, they were able to use Theresienstadt's cultural programme in their own propaganda and thus show to the outside world that life at the camps was not so bad after all. Therefore, acclaimed musicians and artists were to some extent able to retain the roles and positions they had enjoyed before the war. Theresienstadt became something of Jewish cultural mecca where, in addition to many world premieres, the musicians were able to perform works by Jewish composers, which would have been forbidden anywhere else.

Because Ullmann had served in the Austrian army, he was treated more favourably and was spared immediate deportation to the gas chambers. He ran cultural events at the camp, was a music critic for the Freizeitgestaltung, and organised rehearsals. And because he had been relieved of physical labour, he was able to dedicate his time fully to music and writing. In fact, Ullmann was more productive at Theresienstadt than during the period before the war: he composed three piano sonatas (1943–1944), the chamber opera *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* ('The Emperor of Atlantis', 1943), a string quartet (No. 3, 1943), the melodrama *Die Weise von Liebe und Tod des Cornets Christoph Rilke* ('The Manner of Love and Death of Cornet Christoph Rilke', 1944) for speaker and orchestra, the Don Quixote overture, and a great many art songs and choral works.

Before arriving at Theresienstadt, Ullmann's Jewish identity had not been especially strong, despite the fact that he had been married to three Jewish women and his parents were Jewish. However, from his compositional output we can conclude that Ullmann's interest in his Jewish roots grew much stronger while at the concentration camp: among the works composed at the camp are vocal pieces written in Hebrew and Yiddish.

Moreover, at the camp he was exposed to much Jewish music that he had never heard before: liturgical music, Yiddish folk music, Zionist hymns and new music from Palestine.

Curiously, Ullmann never had a publisher at any point in his life, and this may well be one of the reasons that his music is so poorly known today. He only began self-publishing his music in the late 1930s, once it became clear that the war would make the possibility of publication in the future all the more difficult. He prioritised the publication of newer works, which suggests that he considered his later works a better representation of his artistic identity. It is a great shame that so many of Ullmann's early works were lost when the Nazis occupied Prague.

Though scores have not survived, Ullmann's music was regularly performed during his lifetime. If contemporary reviews are to be trusted, it is clear that not only did he, like his teachers, have a mastery of the craft of composition – the technique, structure, and formal logic – but the passion, clarity and plasticity of his music greatly affected audiences too. It would be wrong to consider Ullmann's later works the culmination of his life's work or, indeed, to call them his 'late' works at all. Nobody knows what plans he had for the future. His surviving works, however, reveal an artist who strove throughout his life to create music that truly meant something.

## LOVE SONGS TO POEMS BY RICARDA HUCH

Viktor Ullmann's choice of text often reflects the prevailing political climate and the anthroposophy that so informed his worldview. It is noteworthy that in 1939, once the persecution of the Jews had begun and three years before he was sent to the concentration camp, Ullmann had chosen to set texts by Ricarda Huch in his *Fünf Liebeslieder nach Ricarda Huch*.

When the Nazis rose to power in Germany, **Ricarda Huch** (1864–1947) was one of the foremost proponents of free speech, a fact that eventually led her to resign her position at the Prussian Academy of Arts in 1933 when she refused to support the Nazi cause. Originally from Braunschweig, Huch studied and received a PhD at the University of Zurich because, at the time, women were not allowed to study at universities in Germany. Later on, she established herself as a significant cultural historian, writer and poet, and she was nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature no fewer than seven times.

The poems that Ullmann chose to set to music are taken from the collection *Neue Gedichte (Liebesgedichte)* ('New Poems (Love Poems)'), which Huch wrote while still a student. The poems were not especially popular when they were released, partly because they are hard to read, partly because of women's subservient role in society. Huch's poems are philosophical musings on the fundamental nature of love, and her texts often compare the sensation of love to other sensory experiences. Ullmann's musical language grasps the texts' sensuality and mysticism, and what makes these songs particularly impressive are their long and dramatic piano postludes, notably in the third and fifth movements.

The opening song in the cycle, **Wo hast du all die Schönheit hergenommen**, considers the omnipotence of love. The vocal part joins the diminished chords of the piano accompaniment, creating a harmonic framework perfectly suited to the philosophical nature of the poem. The melodic phrase in the voice part begins with the smallest intervals, growing to ever greater leaps and louder dynamics. Following the contours of the text, the song culminates in a great fortissimo chord to the words “weil du der Himmel bist”, before suddenly disappearing into emptiness: “gibt’s keinen dort”.

Ullmann begins the second movement, **Am Klavier**, with a simple waltz-like phrase consisting of only two notes. The memory of a bygone love, its melancholy and nostalgia are depicted with harmonic passages at the end of each phrase that are left almost hanging in the air. As a painful memory burns all the more bitterly, the piano texture becomes more intense as Ullmann brings the song to a handsome, chromatic ending. There is something very organic about the rhythms and dynamics in this movement, as though it had taken inspiration directly from the nature depicted in the poem: the silver sea, the humming heathers, and finally the bright shining light of the moon.

The third movement in the cycle, **Sturmlied**, is a dramatic ode to love and life with all their challenges. In the text, life is compared to a lashing storm, and the whirls of Ullmann’s piano accompaniment create an air of foreboding. The mood of this song is almost heroic: the large leaps of the voice part distantly evoke the exhilarating ride of Wagner’s Valkyries. The piano accompaniment sounds almost militaristic when the text explains that the richness and happiness of our lives resides in our ability to look adversity bravely in the eye; perhaps this is Ullmann’s statement about the approach of war. The impressive and virtuosic postlude could be taken straight from one of his piano sonatas.

In the fourth movement, **Wenn je ein schönes mir zu bilden glückte**, surrendering to love is compared to experiences of happiness and fulfilment. The gently swirling phrases are drawn from the small harmonic details used to stress important words. Ullmann’s music glides seamlessly from one mood to the next, precisely following the fluctuations of the text.

The fifth movement, **O schöne Hand**, begins with a delicate piano accompaniment above which the voice floats a chromatic melody. The song beautifully depicts the sense of surrendering to one’s senses, which it describes as crossing all the boundaries of humanity. The tension bubbling beneath the surface starts to boil over at the words “Dämonische, berühre diesen Leib”. Rounding off the cycle, Ullmann’s extraordinary postlude develops a theme heard at the end of the previous movement.

# COMPOSER IN A FAMILY OF WRITERS

**Olivier Messiaen** (1908–1992) was not only a pianist, organist and composer but an ornithologist and synesthetic too. He is considered one of the most significant composers of the 20th century, having developed his own technique and musical language based on harmonic modes.

Messiaen was born in Avignon into a family of writers: his mother Cécile Sauvage was a poet and his father Pierre Messiaen an English teacher who had translated the works of Shakespeare into French. His brother Alain Messiaen too went on to become a poet and a writer.

From an early age, Olivier Messiaen had an interest in poetry, and he particularly liked Shakespeare, whose numerous plays he performed in a puppet theatre he had built himself. In his own words, he was a lonely child who devoted a lot of his time to reading, and at Christmas he always asked for musical scores that he could study. At around the age of seven, he taught himself how to play the piano, and it was around this time that he composed his first pieces. The family realised that this was a child with exceptional musical talent, and when Messiaen was ten years old, the family relocated to Paris where he was able to receive the best possible instruction at the Paris Conservatoire.

Messiaen was particularly multi-talented, and he studied not only the piano but also accompaniment, improvisation, composition and music history. Before beginning his studies, he had never even seen an organ, but in Paris he entered the class of Marcel Dupré after making an impression on the teacher with his improvisational skills. At only 22 years of age, Messiaen secured a permanent position as organist at Saint Trinité church in 1931, a post which he kept until his death in 1992.

Even as a young man, Messiaen gained a reputation as a particularly productive composer with a unique and idiosyncratic style. Alongside his job at Saint Trinité, he composed, taught at the École Normale de Musique, and was an active member of the Société National de Musique, an association that organised performances of works by contemporary composers. It was here that he became acquainted with many of the composers of the age, and over time he solidified his position in Parisian musical circles.

# LOVE STORY OF THE CENTURY

On 22nd June 1932, Messiaen married Claire Delbos, who was both a talented violinist and a remarkable composer in her own right. Claire (affectionately known as ‘Mi’) was not only Messiaen’s soul mate, colleague and supporter but also his muse: Messiaen’s three song cycles *Poèmes pour Mi* (1936), *Chants de terre et de ciel* (1938) and *Harawi* (1945) were all inspired by Claire and their love for each other.

After several miscarriages, the couple's only son, Pascal, was born in 1937. Their marriage was at its happiest during the early years, but problems began to arise when war broke out. When France mobilised its army in September 1939, Messiaen was forced to leave his family and enrol as a soldier, just as his own father had done 25 years earlier. He was devastated at not being able to watch his young son grow; after all, he too had suffered during childhood when his father was forced to spend several years in the military.

When Messiaen returned home in March 1941, Claire was beginning to show the first symptoms of early-onset dementia. Outwardly, Messiaen's career seemed to be flourishing: he was a respected teacher and composer, but at the same time Claire's illness made life at home all the more challenging, and Messiaen was having increasing difficulty taking care of his family. In 1946, he finally arranged for Claire to go into a care facility in Lourdes, and he became a single parent to Pascal.

In January 1949, Claire had a hysterectomy, which worsened her condition further. She completely lost her memory and, after this, her sight, mobility and her ability to recognise people. She spent the rest of her life in a facility and died in April 1959. In his music, Messiaen often referred to Claire as an angel and spoke of her as a saint who had suffered a long, slow martyrdom. Their marriage lasted 27 years, of which Claire's illness had taken 15 years.

## WAR IN MESSIAEN'S LIFE

It is hard to understate how devastating an impact the First World War had on an entire generation. At the outbreak of the First World War, Cécile and her sons moved to Grenoble, where Olivier spent his early childhood. Pierre Messiaen survived the war because he worked as an interpreter, but both his brothers were killed in action.

In September 1939 France declared war on Germany, and with that Messiaen too was conscripted into the army. Due to his bad eyesight, he could not be sent into battle and he was not suited to physical labour either. When Germany suddenly attacked in May 1940, Messiaen was working as a medical auxiliary in Verdun, where his commander happened to be the cellist Étienne Pasquier and one of his fellow soldiers the clarinettist Henri Akoka. As the men tried to the flee to the south, a group of German soldiers surrounded them and held them prisoner at the camp Stalag VIII-A.

Messiaen was afraid of the impact the war might have on his career and abilities as a musician, and for this reason he always carried with him a large collection of study scores. The lack of food at the camp combined with the cold made Messiaen have very colourful dreams that reminded him of apocalyptical imagery in which angels surrounded by rainbows declared that the end of days had come. Inspired by these apparitions, Messiaen composed one of his most iconic works, *Quatuor pour la fin du temps,* whose title refers to the Book of Revelations. The work was first performed at the camp to an audience of other prisoners on 15th January 1941, an event that to this day is considered one of the most striking occasions in the history of music.

# CHANTS DE TERRE ET DE CIEL

For Messiaen, composing was an important way of expressing his faith, and the majority of his works are steeped in Catholic mysticism. Messiaen often wrote his own texts too, as is the case in his song cycle *Chants de terre et de ciel*, thus manifesting himself as an artist and philosopher on every level of the work. Messiaen wrote the six songs in this cycle during the summer of 1938, a year after the birth of his only son. The cycle depicts Messiaen's experience of sacred devotion and of how God's love is present both in his marriage and his family life.

Messiaen premiered the songs in early 1939 with the soprano **Marcelle Bunlet**, for whom he also wrote the cycles Poèmes pour Mi and Harawi. Bunlet had an illustrious career as a dramatic soprano, and she performed many of the great soprano roles including Brünnhilde, Isolde, Kundry, Elektra and Aida. Her voice has been described as steely, resplendent and flexible, and due to her exceptional vocal abilities and musical acumen Bunlet was able to learn complex new works often at short notice. Messiaen held Bunlet in very high regard as a musician, and the two regularly performed together until the 1950s.

The present cycle is Messiaen's way of depicting the unity of heaven and earth, and its six movements can be divided into three diptychs, each with one sacred text and one profane. The first diptych discusses the figure of the mother, the second diptych is about his son Pascal, and the third explores the themes of perdition and redemption.

The cycle begins with the song **Bail avec Mi** ('Agreement with Mi') in which Messiaen affectionately depicts his young wife and their shared love. The song refers to the sacrament of marriage and how God's love is manifested in marriage, in the union of two people. The poem contains many secular details ("your eyes, your hands, your lips") alongside many cosmic similes: Messiaen depicts his wife as the star of his earthly heart's silence ("étoile de silence à mon coeur de terre") and compares her to the sun that fulfils his world ("Petite boule de soleil complémentaire à ma terre"). The intimate, almost meditative atmosphere in this song arises from very simple elements, slowly moving harmonies and quiet dynamics. The star figurations in the upper register of the piano refer to the celestial bodies of the poem.

In the introduction to his Quatuor pour la fin du temps, Messiaen notes that for him silence represents the harmony of the heavens ("le silence harmonieux du ciel"). Silence is a particularly important element in the second song, **Antienne du silence** ('Antiphon of Silence'). In the poem, the first-person narrator asks a silent angel ("ange silencieux") to help her become one with silence or, in this context, with the harmony of the heavens. We can imagine that the angel of silence is a heavenly embodiment of the secular woman of the first song. The piano accompaniment, now operating on three different strata, creates an ethereal foundation for the incantation-like melody of the voice part.

The second diptych in the cycle depicts the joy of parenthood and the wonder of a newly born child. In his book *Technique de mon langage musical*, Messiaen explains that he wanted to create **Danse du bébé-pilule** in the style of a folk song. Pilule was Pascal's nickname, and this spirited song aptly conjures up the young parents and their child coming together in play, the parents' attempts to understand the child's inner world and imagination. At times, the text even imitates the sounds of children's speech.

The child's natural innocence is further explored in the fourth song **Arc-en-ciel d'Innocence** ('Rainbow of Innocence'). In Messiaen's religious works, the rainbow represents God's presence in human life: perhaps for Messiaen, the birth of this long-awaited child was God's way of blessing their marriage. The song expresses the parents' gratitude at the birth of the child and beautifully depicts the bond of love between parent and child.

The last diptych in the cycle explores the fear associated with perdition and redemption. The sense of anxiety no doubt depicts Messiaen's own spiritual life and the fears that becoming a father had awoken within him. The fifth movement, **Minuit pile et face** ('Midnight's Heads and Tails') is full of apocalyptic visions of a hell on earth. The song seems to sense the approach of war and the horrors that were about to unfold. This movement's long, rhythmical development section, which represents man's terror in the face of his sins, erupts into a cry for help and the comfort of God's presence.

It is only natural that the cycle should conclude with the song **Résurrection**, sharing the joyous news of Easter morning, as in the Catholic faith Christ's crucifixion and resurrection are considered the only way to liberate oneself from worldly sin. The song's references to church music can be heard both in the piano part in sequences of chords over a pedal note and in the long quasi-Gregorian litanies of the voice part. The fortissimo chords of the piano part, imitating the sound of church bells, and the singer's phrases in the upper octave give the movement an air of rapturous ecstasy.