



 CHAMPS HILL
RECORDS

Messiaen: Poèmes pour mi

Stephen De Pledge - piano
Gwenneth-Ann Jeffers - soprano
Matthew Trusler - violin
Daniel Pailthorpe - flute



Poèmes pour mi
Theme and Variations
Vingt Regards sur l'enfant Jésus
Le merle noir
Six Petites esquisses d'oiseaux

Born in Avignon, of partly Flemish and partly Provençal descent, his mother a poet, his father a translator of Shakespeare, Olivier Messiaen had emerged by the 1940s as the most original personality in French music, a position he maintained until his death. The sources of his inspiration – Catholic mysticism, Hindu philosophy, plainchant and latterly and increasingly the whole vast research field of birdsong, on which he was an acknowledged authority – infused his music with an extraordinary spiritual ardour, and impelled him to develop unique harmonic, rhythmic and melodic idioms which reflect, among other things, his acute sense of colour in sound. The works included on this disc span most of his career and illustrate his range and versatility in song, piano and instrumental music.

Messiaen wrote comparatively few 'abstract' works without programme or symbolic content, and to that extent the fairly early *Thème et Variations* for violin and piano, published in 1934 but composed in 1932 for the violinist and composer Claire Delbos (who became his wife in that year), is uncharacteristic of him. The serene spiritual calm of the Theme, announced by the violin above a gentle chordal accompaniment, nevertheless anticipates the rapt sections of his later, defining chamber work *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*. There are five variations, the first four presenting greater textural and melodic elaboration while quickening in tempo (the third variation is actually in waltz-time). The fourth and fastest variation rises to the passionate and intensified restatement of the Theme which constitutes variation 5, as both ecstatic climax and coda.

Whereas the rhythmic profile of *Thème et Variations* is quite orthodox, the song-cycle *Poèmes pour Mi* uses patterns from Classical Greek metrics and the rhythmic structures of Hindu music, which at first caused difficulties in its reception in early

performances, though nowadays they seem no impediment to the cycle's lucid lyricism. Written for voice and piano in 1936 (Messiaen made an orchestral version the following year), this cycle too is dedicated to Claire Delbos: 'Mi' was the composer's pet name for her. The poems are Messiaen's own, their phrasing and imagery influenced by the Gospels and Psalms as well as the Dauphinoise countryside in which he always preferred to compose. There are nine of them (Messiaen knew well that nine is the number of symbolic maternity), divided into two Books of four and five songs respectively, and they are at once love-poems and mystic religious texts, almost a kind of modern *Song of Songs*.

An initial love-song, thanking God who has made the Beloved, is followed by an (implied) meditation on suffering in a beautiful landscape, on leaving the earthly house of life, and a terrifying vision of the gates of Hell. The fifth and sixth poems are theological advice to the Beloved, the wife, to help her join the choir of angels; the seventh, a kind of war-song, views husband and wife as comrades in the battle between good and evil. A vision of fulfilment in earthly love, in the eighth song, gives way to the joyous bell-sounds of the final one, where the poet finally leaves the human plane for the glory of resurrection in Christ. Messiaen once commented that the first and last songs reflected his preoccupation with Plainchant, with a rapid delivery of the text like an intoned psalm, the most significant words decorated by long melismas, while the most important element in the work was its harmonic colour, secured by combining streams of chords in the various 'modes of limited transposition' he had established in developing his musical language.

One of Messiaen's most important compositions, and one of the outstanding piano works of the 20th century, the vast cycle *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* was

composed between March and September 1944 in Paris, where Messiaen experienced the Liberation of the city from the Germans. It was dedicated to his pupil Yvonne Loriod, later to be his second wife, who gave the world premiere, and her remarkable pianism inspired Messiaen to produce a work requiring dizzying virtuosity, immense stamina and the utmost sensitivity and tenderness of touch and phrasing. The inspiration and ostensible subject of the cycle are the various ways in which the Shepherds, Wise Men, Angels, Blessed Virgin and Holy Father – and also Time, the Heights, Silence, the Star, the Cross – gazed upon and contemplated the Christ Child at his birth in the manger. Three salient themes (The Theme of God, of the Cross and The Star, and a Theme of Chords) are permuted throughout the cycle, appearing and reappearing in different transpositions and settings, either in full or in fragments.

The 14th and 15th pieces, 'Regards des Anges' and 'Le basier de L'Enfant Jésus', could be considered as constituting the double climax of the entire cycle, the first dynamic, the second hushed and ecstatic. 'Regard des Anges' is a kind of brilliant toccata in five 'strophes', combining several themes, including a powerful bass theme evoking trombones, the Theme of Chords, jagged rhythms, streams of rapid figuration, and figures suggesting birdsong, which assume prime importance in the fourth strophe before an awesome coda intended to suggest the Angels' wonder at God uniting himself with the human race. By contrast 'Le basier de L'Enfant Jésus' is a kind of cosmic lullaby presenting the Theme of God in its warmest guise. Messiaen was inspired in this piece by an engraving showing Christ leaving his mother's arms to embrace St Teresa of Lisieux; his kiss is a symbol of Communion. The composer said his music 'wished no more than to be as tender as the heart of heaven itself'. The result is a tranced *Adagio* in the rich colouring of F sharp major, perhaps the summit of Messiaen's piano music in terms of sheer lyric simplicity.

The stylised birdsong in 'Regard des Anges' was becoming a constant element in Messiaen's compositions, until in the 1950s he began to produce a series of major works wholly derived from his own transcriptions (simultaneously scientific in their accuracy and creative in their adaptation to instrumental media) of the songs of birds, both in France and eventually from around the world. This was his response to the injunction of his teacher Paul Dukas, who had told Messiaen: 'Listen to the birds! They are the real musicians.' *Le Merle Noir* ('The Blackbird'), for flute and piano, written in 1951, was among the first of these 'ornithological' compositions and has become one of the modern classics of French flute music. It falls into a number of distinct sections differentiated by character and mood. The piano plays a decidedly subordinate role in this piece, sketching in the harmonic/topographic background, as it were, against which the blackbird sings its various songs, culminating in a joyous fusillade of notes.

The largest of all Messiaen's bird-inspired works was his gigantic piano cycle *Catalogue des Oiseaux* ('Catalogue of Birds', 1956-8), essentially 13 keyboard tone-poems presenting the songs and activities of many bird species in many different French regional landscapes. In 1970 he published one other such work, *La Fauvette des Jardins* ('The Garden Warbler') and finally, in 1986, the *Six Petites Esquisses d'Oiseaux* (Six Little Bird-Sketches). As its title suggests, these are modest, quickly-drawn portraits, further rendering homage to the Robin (*Rouge-gorge*), the Blackbird, the Song Thrush (*Grive musicienne*) and the Skylark (*L'Alouette des champs*) and by extension all the avian tribe which has so enraptured the composer throughout his life.

Malcolm MacDonald

GWENETH-ANN JEFFERS

A music graduate of the University of Exeter and Goldsmith's College, and of the postgraduate Diploma in Vocal Training at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, London, Gweneth-Ann Jeffers is noted for her commanding voice and vivid



personality. As well as receiving prizes including the 1999 Maggie Teyte, Ian Fleming and Sybil Tutton Awards, she represented England in the 2001 Cardiff Singer of the World Competition and was a member of the Royal Opera House Young Artist Programme.

She has been heard in an exceptionally wide range of repertoire including leading roles for Welsh National Opera (*Il Trovatore*), Opera Holland Park (*Gioconda*), Orchestre de Picardie (*Ariadne auf Naxos*), Basel Chamber Orchestra (*Porgy and Bess*) and Oper Köln (*La Forza del Destino*) as well as concert engagements in Britain, Europe, Australia and Japan. She has appeared regularly at the BBC Proms, at the

Wigmore Hall as well as at the Aldeburgh, Cheltenham, Three Choirs, Perth, Chelsea, Henley and Edinburgh Festivals.

DANIEL PAILTHORPE

At the age of 24, Daniel Pailthorpe was appointed Principal Flute of the English National Opera Orchestra, a position he held for ten years. He is currently Co-Principal



photo: Robert Biagio

Flute with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and enjoys a busy freelance career appearing frequently as guest principal with many orchestras, notably the London Symphony Orchestra and the Chamber Orchestra of Europe. He is a founder member of the chamber ensemble The London Conchord Ensemble, with which he has recorded solo and chamber works by Thuille, Messiaen, Poulenc, Bach and George Crumb on the Black Box, ASV and Champs Hill Records labels.

A choral scholar at Clare College, Cambridge, he went on to pursue postgraduate flute studies at the Royal Academy of Music with William Bennett and was subsequently awarded the Leonard Bernstein Fellowship at the Tanglewood Music Center, USA. He continued his flute studies with Geoffrey Gilbert and made his London solo debut in the Park Lane Group Young Artists' Series. Daniel is a Professor at the Royal College of Music and a keen advocate of the modern wood flute.

STEPHEN DE PLEDGE

New Zealand pianist Stephen De Pledge studied at the University of Auckland, and then with Joan Havill at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London. His career was launched after winning the Gold Medal from the Guildhall, and the NFMS Young Concert Artists' Award, and he has since maintained a diverse and wide-

ranging performing schedule, as soloist, chamber musician and song accompanist.

Stephen's solo performances have taken him throughout the UK, including five solo recitals in the Wigmore Hall in London, where he made an acclaimed debut in 1999. He has also given solo performances in Hong Kong, Italy, France, Singapore, Japan, Australia and the USA. Concerto appearances include the Philharmonia, Bournemouth Symphony and New Zealand Symphony Orchestras, and he has recorded solo works of Bliss, Arvo Pärt, and Gorecki.

As a chamber musician, Stephen has collaborated with groups such as Chamber Domaine, the Berlin Philharmonic Wind Quintet, the English Chamber Orchestra Ensemble and the Scottish Ensemble, and he has performed at many International Festivals in the UK and abroad.

Stephen's repertoire is far-reaching, from the music of the 17th to the 21st centuries. He has always been an advocate for contemporary music, giving the world premiere performances of many works, and he has become particularly associated with the music of Messiaen, which he studied in Paris with the composer's widow, Yvonne Loriod.

Alongside his performing commitments, Stephen De Pledge holds the position of Senior Lecturer in piano at the University of Auckland.



MATTHEW TRUSLER

On graduating from Philadelphia's Curtis Institute in 1998, the *Times* declared of Matthew Trusler that "we might just have an authentic, though British, virtuoso."

Since then Trusler has developed a reputation as one of Britain's leading violinists, performing with many of the world's great orchestras, and receiving huge critical acclaim for his diverse recordings. In 2005 he founded Orchid Classics, for which he is Director of Artists & Repertoire, and in 2008 he founded the Lenny Trusler Children's Foundation, which raises money for desperately ill babies.

Performing on a bow once owned by Heifetz, given to him by Herbert Axelrod (who himself received it from Heifetz), Trusler has received particular acclaim for his performances of works from the 20th century, including concertos by Walton, Berg and Britten.

Alongside his concerto work Matthew Trusler is an accomplished recitalist and an avid chamber musician. Trusler has performed frequently with Wayne Marshall, and the duo's first CD *Blues* was released to huge critical acclaim, including CD of the week in the *Telegraph*, on Classic FM, and Recital CD of the month in *Strad*

Magazine. Collaborations with other eminent musicians have included Piotr Anderszewski, Martin Roscoe, Peter Donohoe, Imogen Cooper, Leonidas Kavakos, Lynn Harrell, and Joseph Silverstein. Trusler has performed recitals in leading venues around the world including the Wigmore Hall in London, the Auditorium du Louvre in Paris, and the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels.

Matthew Trusler holds a teaching post at the Malmö Academy in Sweden, and lives in Paris with his wife and young daughter. He plays a 1711 Stradivarius.



photo: Shiela Rock