

# La mer bleue



Messiaen

Catalogue d'oiseaux, Book 1

Gorton

Online

Szymanowski

Sonata No. 3

Roderick Chadwick  
piano

# La Mer Bleue

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## Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992)

### Catalogue d'oiseaux, Book 1:

1	No. 1 Le Chocard des Alpes	10:06
2	No. 2 Le Lorient	8:08
3	[Interlude: Song Thrush and Thekla Larks]	2:41
4	No. 3 Le Merle bleu	13:51
5	[Interlude: Golden Oriole and Garden Warbler]	1:56

## David Gorton (b.1978)

6	Ondine	8:14
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## Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937)

### Piano Sonata No. 3, Op. 36

		19:12
7	I. <i>Presto</i> –	7:22
8	II. <i>Adagio, mesto</i> –	4:21
9	III. <i>Assai vivace, scherzando</i> –	1:07
10	IV. <i>Fuga: Allegro moderato, scherzando e buffo</i>	6:21
11	[Postlude]	1:17

Total playing time:	65:27
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Roderick Chadwick    piano

Interludes & Postlude: Peter Sheppard Skærved and Shir Victoria Levy (violins)

## La Mer Bleue

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'Music needs to be Mediterraneanised' – Friedrich Nietzsche *The Case of Wagner*

The first book of **Olivier Messiaen's** *Catalogue d'oiseaux* (1958) begins with an Alpine chough's 'tragic solitary cry' and ends with a Mediterranean women's chorus. It is a journey towards sunlight, colour and company, from mountain to coastline, from rhythmic machinations to nostalgic added sixth harmonies – and, it is tempting to say, from masculine to feminine. There is evidence to support this last notion: four times in 'Le Merle bleu' a memorable progression of rising, arpeggiated chords evokes, according to the score, 'La mer bleue': a pun on the titular bird, a nod towards Debussy, and perhaps a Marian presence too – if so, a rare acknowledgement of Messiaen's faith in an outwardly secular work.

Though a repetitious feature, these four refrains also steer us subtly through the piece, the longest and structurally most complex of the three. They take the music on a tonal journey (A to F sharp and back again), with the third refrain rising to a heartfelt culmination; the fourth breaks off prematurely into the sternest music in the piece, depicting cliffs and suggesting that, for Messiaen, nature – even in regions such as the Côte Vermeille – is no idealized environment, but an unsentimental realm of contrasts.

'Le Lorient' reconciles the polarities of Book 1. There is no doubt that this piece is a loving homage to the *Catalogue's* dedicatee, the pianist Yvonne Loriod, who would become Messiaen's second wife two years after the cycle's premiere. Messiaen had the punning association in mind not long after they first met in 1941, playfully misspelling her name as 'Mlle Lorient' in his notebooks. Various

commentators have pointed out that the glowing chords which underpin the piece's climactic passage – the 'memory of gold and of the rainbow' (track 2, 5.39) – are a quotation from his earlier *Cinq Rechants* for a cappella chorus: 'Tous les philtres sont bus ce soir encor' ('All the potions have been drunk this evening once more' – 'encor' is a significant word here, because Messiaen saw momentous significance in daily events; the *Catalogue* is a glorification of the quotidian). But this is not the only cipher, and Messiaen was not forgetting his first wife, Claire Delbos, living in care in Paris having suffered with dementia for many years; his nickname for her, Mi, is present throughout in the underpinning hues of E major, through which the sun becomes 'a golden emanation of the song of the oriole'.

Messiaen's characterisation of this song as 'flowing, gilded like the laugh of a foreign prince, evoking Africa and Asia, or some unknown planet, full of light and rainbows and da Vincian smiles' shows the expressive confidence he had regained after nearly a decade of refining his *style oiseau*. The ensemble works *Réveil des oiseaux* (1953) and *Oiseaux exotiques* (1956) enabled him to create choruses real and fictional (their voices crossing continents) respectively. In *Catalogue d'oiseaux* vivid characterisation becomes the music's motive force; the birds sing successively, apart from three intricate garden warbler duets in 'Le Lorient' (track 2, 2.23) and two cadenzas in 'Le Merle bleu' (track 4, 5.04 and 7.52) where a pair of Thekla larks 'sizzle' melodically and dart like butterflies over the cliff edges.

The lead-up to the duets in 'Le Lorient' is a dawn chorus featuring some of the most familiar and melodious European birds: redstart, wren, robin, blackbird and song thrush. Punctuating these are chords that recall the fluctuating passions of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, and even Wagner's forest murmurs. It is the first of many pieces in the *Catalogue* to chart the hours of the day – climaxing on a *cuivré* (brassy) E major chord that evokes the midday sun, with a chiffchaff patiently

intoning over the stasis (track 2, 4.38). This sets in greater relief the timelessness and isolation which pervades 'Le Chocard des Alpes', a stark Alpine postcard that focuses on the permanence of the landscape over and above the sharp cries of its inhabitants (choughs and ravens) and skittish depictions of their acrobatics. It is also existential self-interrogation: Messiaen evaluating the musical avant garde, which he played a part in mobilizing, before embarking on depictions of friends and family (avian and human) throughout the rest of the cycle by returning to his colourful harmonic devices of the 30s and 40s, newly enriched. Four times in 'Le Chocard' the chough is heard emitting a frozen 'tragic cry' (first at track 1, 1.24): expressionist, polytonal, a bridge between the permanent and transitory, mountain and bird, a piano attempting to be an organ.

The last sounds heard in Book 1 are another memory (*souvenir*). This time the pentatonic melodies of the blue rock thrush align to become harmonies – a sound 'like a chorus of womens' voices in the distance', Messiaen's response perhaps to Debussy's 'comme une lointaine sonnerie de cors' at the end of the latter's Baudelarian fourth Prélude.

## **Messiaen's dedication and prefaces**

"The composition of *Catalogue d'oiseaux* began in October 1956 and was completed in September 1958. The travelling and repeated visits necessary for recording the songs of each bird often took place well in advance of the composition of each piece. The precision of my notation meant that memories dating back several hours or several years were easily awakened. The work is twice dedicated: to my winged models, and to the pianist Yvonne Loriod."

## BOOK 1

### I Le Chocard des Alpes (alpine chough)

Strophe: The Alps of the Dauphiné, l'Oisans. Rising towards the Meije and its three glaciers.

First couplet: near the chancel hut: the Puy-Vacher Lake, marvellous mountain vistas, chasms and precipices. An alpine chough, separated from its flock, cries as it flies over the precipice. The veiled flight, silent and majestic, of the golden eagle, borne on currents of air. Raucous and ferocious cawings and grunts of the raven, lord of the high mountain. Different cries of the choughs and their acrobatic flight (glides, swoops and loopings) above the abysses.

Antistrophe: In front of Saint-Christophe-en-Oisans, the Clapier Saint-Christophe: chaos of crumbled blocks, Dante-esque rocks, put in disorderly piles by the mountain giants.

Second couplet: an alpine chough circles the landscapes and flies over the precipices. The same cries and flights as in the first couplet.

Epode: Les Écrins: the Cirque de Bonne-Pierre, with its immense rocks, aligned like giant phantoms, or like the towers of a supernatural fortress!

### II Le Lorient (golden oriole)

The end of June. Branderiaie de Gardépée (Charente), towards half past five in the morning. – Orgeval, approaching six o'clock. Les Maremberts (Loire-et-Cher), in the full midday sun. The golden oriole, the beautiful golden bird with black wings, whistles amongst the oak trees. Its song, flowing, gilded like the laugh of a foreign prince, evokes Africa and Asia, or some unknown planet, full of light and rainbows and da Vincian smiles. In the gardens, in the woods, other birds: the rapid and determined strophe of the wren, the confiding caress of the

robin, the blackbird's brilliance, the amphinacer of the redstart with white front and black throat, the repetitive incantations of the song thrush. Tirelessly, and at length, the garden warblers pour out their soft virtuosity. The chiffchaff adds its leaping drops of water. A nonchalant reminder, a reminiscence of gold and rainbow: the sun seems like a golden emanation of the oriole's song...

### III Le Merle bleu (blue rock thrush)

June. Le Roussillon, the Côte Vermeille. Near Banyuls: Cap L'Abeille, Cap Rederis. Overhanging cliffs above a Prussian, sapphire-blue sea. Cries of black swifts, splashing of water.

The capes stretch into the sea like crocodiles. The blue rock thrush sings in echoing rocky crevices. Its blue is different to the sea: purple blue, blue-grey, satin, blue-black. Almost exotic, recalling Balinese music, its song merges with the sound of the waves. We also hear the Thekla lark, fluttering in the sky above the rosemary and vines. Herring gulls howl distantly over the sea. The cliffs are fearsome. The water comes to die at their feet, a memory of the blue rock thrush.

In the *interludes* (tracks 3, 5 and 11) we hear further memories of some of the main characters, revived by two violins. The song thrush: 'once you hear this voice, you can never forget it' (Olivier Messiaen). Thekla larks, singing material that seems to mimic the blue rock thrush. The golden oriole, its triadic smile perhaps that of Leonardo's Saint John the Baptist; a garden warbler, its melodious outpourings 'seeming to arrest time' (Messiaen again).

Roderick Chadwick's association with **David Gorton's** music dates back to the composer's first Métier portrait CD "Trajectories": an account of the piano trio Melting Forms with Peter Sheppard Skærved and Neil Heyde. In 2015 he premiered Gorton's Burgh Castle for piano and ensemble with CHROMA at Camden Forge and the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival. Now he returns to an early work, Ondine, the original programme note for which reads:

*The sixteenth-century alchemist Paracelsus described four imaginary creatures that inhabited the elements of earth, fire, air, and water. An Ondine (or Undine) was one of a group of female water spirits.*

*"Listen! Listen! It is me down here, Ondine, splashing all these droplets against your casement windowpanes, to make them echo, here in the dim, regretful moonlight ..."*

*... she pouted, as if vexed; then shed a teardrop or two – but finally burst out into laughter, to dissolve then like radiant raindrops, streaming down the length of my blue-black windows....*

*from Aloysius Bertrand: Ondine, in: Gaspard de la Nuit  
translated by Michael Benedikt*

*...He did not hear  
The liquid trickle of her laughter when  
She broke alone into the air, or fear  
The sudden depth where he encountered death.*

*from Dick Davis: Undine, in: Devices and Desires*

After several revisions *Ondine* was first performed in its final version by Jan Karl Rautio at the Royal Academy of Music, London, on the 28th of June 2004. It is published by Verlag Neue Musik, Berlin.



**Karol Szymanowski's** trips to Italy and North Africa in the years before the First World War changed his music irrevocably. Previous obsessions with Richard Strauss and Wagner (and to a lesser extent Gustav Mahler; he was in Vienna at the time of Mahler's death, and deeply saddened) made way for a more limpid, sensual language to which the highest complement was perhaps paid by Kaikhosru Sorabji, who wrote about the Third Symphony ('Song of the Night'):

"Around this poem [from Rumi's *Divan*, translated by Tadeusz Miciński], Szymanowski has written music of a radiant purity of spirit, of an elevated ecstasy of expression, music so permeated with the very essence of the choicest and rarest specimens of Iranian art – the whole score glows with gorgeous colour, rich, yet never garish nor crude, like a Persian painting or silk rug – that such a feat is unparalleled in Western music. Here is no European in Eastern fancy-dress, but one who, by a penetrating clairvoyant insight and sympathy, an astonishing kinship of spirit, succeeds in giving us in musical terms what we instinctively know and recognise as the essence of Persian art. And that wonderful blend of ecstasy and languor of which only the great Iranian poets have the secret, to find it expressed with this degree of intensity, this authentic accent, by a Western musician is something of the like of which we are not likely to see again."

The Third Piano Sonata followed, in the fateful year 1917, which was to finish with the razing of the Szymanowski family estate at Tymoszwówka (in modern-day Ukraine) during the October Revolution, the composer's two grand pianos being cruelly deposited in the lake. By now his musical language had hardened again slightly, the Sonata's mercurial opening theme foreshadowing frequent changes of mood in a first movement whose episodic design is of considerable originality. The second theme, *leggiero e grazioso* in a lilting 7/8 (track 7, 2.27), aims higher with each of its three appearances, reaching peak intensity at the movement's final climax (track 7, 5.42) – before it settles into a coda of

shimmering, heat-haze major 7<sup>th</sup> chords, the most identifiable *souvenir* of the composer's travels.

Though entirely continuous, the Sonata is in four clear movements. The *Adagio mesto* second movement is as drawn out as the scherzo third is brief – both, though, build up considerable momentum. The finale, a fugue (following the practice of some of Szymanowski's earlier large-scale works such as the Second Piano Sonata and Second Symphony) could be thought of as a return to north European polyphonic practice, although this would be to ignore the puckish, *buffa* aspect of the theme, the two heady interludes (track 10, 1.01 and 2.29), and a slow wind-down which precedes the final outburst and confirms E as the tonic of this work, completing a harmonic circle back to the opening tonal shifts of 'Le Lorient'.

If the Third Sonata shows Szymanowski tracing a mental journey from his grand tour back to the troubled homeland (facing a transformed future of conservatoire leadership, financial hardship and health problems), he never stops dreaming of the South.



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<http://galerie-aude-guirauden-toulouse-fr>

Programme notes: Roderick Chadwick

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## The musicians

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**Roderick Chadwick** is a pianist, teacher and writer on music. He has performed some of the most challenging works for the instrument, including Lachenmann's *Serynade* at the inaugural London Contemporary Music Festival, and the first complete performance of Jeremy Dale Roberts's *Tombeau* since its 1969 premiere at the hands of Stephen Kovacevich. He collaborates with some of the UK's most adventurous musicians, with previous recordings for Divine Art/Métier including music by Michael Finnissy and David Gorton with members of the Kreutzer Quartet, and Mihailo Trandafilovski, Mozart and Ole Bull with violinist Peter Sheppard Skaerved. Other recordings to date include Stockhausen's *Mantra* with Mark Knop and Newton Armstrong – which was described as 'a real contender' by Gramophone magazine – and works by Gloria Coates, Sadie Harrison and Alex Hills.

Roderick is a member of ensembles CHROMA and Plus-Minus, performing with them at festivals such as Huddersfield, Ultima (Oslo) and the 2019 Warsaw Autumn Festival. His first performance on BBC Radio 3 was at the age of 14 (the Britten *Gemini Variations* live from the Aldeburgh Festival), and broadcasts since have included solo works by Laurence Crane, Richard Barrett and Will Gregory.

In 2018 Roderick published *Messiaen's 'Catalogue d'oiseaux', From Conception to Performance*, co-authored with Peter Hill. He is a regular performer of Messiaen's works, including the entire *Catalogue d'oiseaux* and *La Fauvette des jardins* in a single concert event. In 2008 he was artistic advisor to the Royal Academy of Music for their part in the Southbank Centre's Messiaen centenary festival.

He attended Chetham's School in Manchester in the 1980s, studying with Heather Slade-Lipkin, and later moved to London to learn with Hamish Milne. He lives in South London and is Reader in Music at the Royal Academy of Music.

*"The redoubtable Roderick Chadwick"* (The Strad)

*"Possessor of devastating musicality and technique"* (Sunday Times)

**Shir Victoria Levy** is a violinist born in New York City who thrives on crossing modalities in performance art, marrying dance, acting, music and live action painting. She commissioned three composers to write works for solo violin and actor, and three works for solo violin and painter, all of which she performed in October 2018 at The Cockpit Theatre in London. Shir has premiered many new solo violin works, including *Endurance*, a 2 to 9 hour performance art contest piece between herself and a contemporary dancer, composed by Richard Hames and performed at London's Open Senses Festival 2017. She also enjoys an invigorating performance art duo partnership with live action painter James John Jolly. She performed Bach Sonata No. 2 on Luca Alessandrini's Spider-Silk Violin at the Victoria and Albert Museum as part of London Design Festival, and at ExCel London as part of New Scientist Live.

Shir is an award-winning musician – her many prizes include the Lincoln Center Chamber Music Society competition (1st Prize) and the “American Protégé International Piano and Strings” Competition (1st Prize and Judges Award). She has performed at Merkin Concert Hall, Steinway Hall, New Jersey PAC, Tel-Aviv Opera House in Israel and had her Carnegie Hall debut with violinist Ida Haendel. In 2019 she graduated with a Masters degree in music from the Royal Academy of Music. Shir also greatly enjoys Alexander Technique, drawing, painting and meditation.

**Peter Sheppard Skærved** is known for his pioneering approach to the music of our own time and the past. Over 400 works have been written for him, by composers Laurie Bamon, Judith Bingham, Nigel Clarke, Robert Saxton, Edward Cowie, Jeremy Dale Roberts, Peter Dickinson, Michael Finnissy, Elena Firsova, David Gorton, Naji Hakim, Sadie Harrison, Hans Werner Henze, Sídika Őzdl, Rosalind Page, George Rochberg, Michael Alec Rose, Poul Ruders,

Volodmyr Runchak, Evis Sammouris, Elliott Schwartz, Peter Sculthorpe, Howard Skempton, Dmitri Smirnov, Jeremy Thurlow, Mihailo Trandafilovski, Judith Weir, Jörg Widmann, Ian Wilson, John Woolrich and Douglas Young.

Peter's pioneering work on music for violin alone has resulted in research, performances and recordings of cycles by Bach, de Bériot, Tartini, Telemann, and, most recently, his project, 'Preludes and Vollerteries', which brings together 200 unknown works from the seventeenth century, from composers including Colombi, Lonati, Marini and Matteis, with the Wren and Hawksmoor churches in London's Square Mile.

His work with museums has resulted in long-term projects at institutions including the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, the Metropolitan Museum, New York City, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Museum, Galeria Rufino Tamayo in Mexico City, and the exhibition 'Only Connect', which he curated at the National Portrait Gallery, London. Most recently his 'Tegner' commissioned by the Bergen International Festival, is a close collaboration with the major Norwegian abstract artist, Jan Groth, resulting in a set of solo Caprices, premiering at Kunsthallen, Bergen, and travelling to galleries in Denmark, the UK and even Svalbard/Spitzbergen.

Peter is the only living violinist to have performed on the violins of Ole Bull, Joachim, Paganini and Viotti. As a writer, Peter has published a monograph on the Victorian artist/musician John Orlando Parry, many articles in journals worldwide, and most recently, *Practice: Walk*, for Routledge.

Peter is the founder and leader of the Kreutzer Quartet and the artistic director of the ensemble Longbow. Viotti Lecturer at the Royal Academy of Music, he was elected Fellow there in 2013. He is married to the Danish writer Malene Skærved and they live in Wapping.

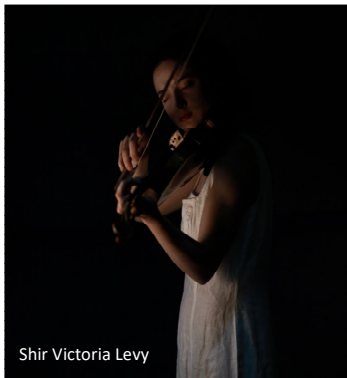
Roderick Chadwick



Peter Sheppard Skærved



Shir Victoria Levy



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Roderick Chadwick on more Divine Art Recordings

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