

JANE SHELDON & ALEX RAINERI

SONGS OF LOVE AND DEATH



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Program Notes

Jane Sheldon / Soprano

Alex Raineri / Piano

Ophelia

Music by Jane Sheldon + Julian Curwin
Poem by Arthur Rimbaud (translated by Sheldon)

Ophelia is one of many songs born from a collaboration between soprano Jane Sheldon and guitarist Julian Curwin. Famously from Shakespeare's drama *Hamlet*, the character of Ophelia is guided by her intended's actions (she was to be married to Prince Hamlet), spiralling her mental state into madness, ultimately leading to her drowning.

The Ophelia character has inspired many artistic tributes through the ages whether it be directly or abstractly. In literature these include Dostoyevsky, Rimbaud, T. S. Eliot and Agatha Christie. In film the character has been portrayed by Helena Bonham Carter, Kate Winslet, Marianne Faithfull, Kirsten Dunst and Samantha Morton, among many others. Musical tributes have included works by Shostakovich, Berlioz, Tori Amos, Bob Dylan, Nick Cave, and by Jane Sheldon + Julian Curwin in this stunning song.

Chansons de Bilitis (Songs of Bilitis)

Music by Claude Debussy

Poems by Pierre Louÿs

1. La flûte de Pan (The flute of Pan)
2. La chevelure (The tresses of hair)
3. Le tombeau des Naiades (The tomb of the Naiads)

In 1894, the French writer Pierre Louÿs wrote a set of poems in the manner of Sappho, an archaic Greek poet best known for her depictions of sensuality, lust, and desire between females. Louÿs' poems follow in this line of suggestive embodiment, though rendered in a highly poetic and perfumed manner. They claim to be re-renderings of texts authored by Bilitis, a contemporary of Sappho in ancient Greece. This latter fact has since been proven to have been a fabrication, intended in jest, though Louÿs' undisputedly concocted these fabrications as a means to place his work within a certain time and place. Debussy set three of Louÿs poems in 1897.

La flûte de Pan depicts Bilitis being taught to play the syrinx (or pan flute), an instrument associated with harmonious innocence that is paired with an undercurrent of adolescent sexuality. Mythologically speaking, the nymph Syrinx was transformed into reeds to escape the god Pan, who cut reeds and crafted them into the flute with which he became associated. Thus,

through making music he literally has Syrinx on his lips, a connection that establishes undeniable sexual tension. Musically, this song paints a pastoral picture, imbued with the impressionistic haziness and subtle charm that Debussy's music is so celebrated for. The music floats, following a temporal trajectory informed by impulse and desire.

The poem of *La chevelure* is almost entirely quotation. Bilitis recounts a dream that her lover Lykas has described to her. The tone is intensely personal, in no way abstract in its suggestion of intimate relations. Initially, Debussy's music follows in the same vein as the first song of the cycle, though swiftly establishes a journey towards climax with a greater arc of tension and release.

Le tombeau des Naiades departs from the pastorality and sexual tone of the preceding songs and depicts instead an icy setting. The passion between the two lovers has dissipated, the languor of their youthful connection giving way to feelings of loss. Debussy's setting musically reflects this poetic framework, though still very much embodies the lyrical and deeply expressive musical discourse that has been a feature of the song cycle thus far.

Harawi

Composed by Olivier Messiaen

Poems by Olivier Messiaen

1. La ville qui dormait, toi (The village that slept, you)
2. Bonjour toi, colombe verte (Hello there, you green dove)
3. Montagnes (Mountains)
4. Doundou Tchil (Doundou Tchil)
5. L'amour de Piroutcha (Piroutcha's Love)
6. Répétition planétaire (Planetary Repetition)

7. Adieu (Farewell)
8. Syllabes (Syllables)
9. L'escalier redit, gestes du soleil (The Staircase Retold, Gestures of the Sun)
10. Amour oiseau d'étoile (Love – Star – Bird)
11. Katchikatchi les étoiles (Katchikatchi the stars)
12. Dans le noir (In the dark)

Composed in 1945 by French composer Olivier Messiaen, the song cycle *Harawi* belongs to two of the composer's so-called trilogies. It is the last of his three song cycles for soprano and piano, having been written shortly after *Poèmes pour Mi* and *Chants de terre et de ciel*. More importantly, it forms the first of what Messiaen himself referred to as his 'Tristan trilogy', being followed by the immense and awe-inspiring *Turangalila Symphony* and the glorious *Cinq Rechants* (for twelve unaccompanied voices).

The 'Tristan trilogy' pertains to the obsession in the *Harawi* poems with the love-death theme, which is central to Wagner's seminal opera *Tristan und Isolde*. The word '*Harawi*' is borrowed from a genre of Andean music, that of the love-song. While Messiaen's music pays only abstract homage to South American musical idioms (or those specifically pertaining to the Andes and Peruvian folk-music), using this genre as initial impetus was a vehicle for Messiaen to approach this subject matter both poetically and musically (the fundamental premise of the *Harawi* being a commentary on love, temporality, and death) in his own extremely individual and striking manner.

The notion of love-death had a particular significance for Messiaen at the time of *Harawi*'s composition. His then wife, Claire Delbos (muse for the earlier song cycle *Poèmes pour Mi*), had begun to suffer from a debilitating mental illness and it is impossible to imagine that this did not have a profound impact on Messiaen's creative persuasions at this time.

Harawi's texts are Messiaen's own. The poems are highly surrealist and feature recurring references to poetic symbols or ecstatic images. This is reflected musically with repeating melodies or patterns to represent each obsessively recurring narrative motif (akin to Wagner's use of the leitmotif). The text sometimes departs from a logical narrative discourse in preference for timbral effect, emancipating itself from traditional syntax for a greater musical effect. Despite this journey into strangeness, the resulting effect elevates the emotional power of the music to a transcendental plane in these powerful moments.

Harawi is essentially a love story, though not always a happy one. The cycle starts with references to nightingales, and paints a picture of love in its fullest bloom. The poetry by the third song quickly transitions to vertiginous depictions of landscape and cosmic destinations with the two lovers taking a more literal role within the narrative, emerging as clear characters.

At the half-way point of the cycle the famous love-potion tears apart the lovers and kills our heroine as per the *Tristan und Isolde* narrative (itself, a tip of the hat to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*), though Messiaen interrogates the narrative much farther than this juncture.

In the later songs of *Harawi*, the lovers are reunited within the realms of death and the poetry takes on a particularly incorporeal and fantastical quality. Paradise prevails. Though, Messiaen ultimately chooses to drift to a dark place to end the cycle, the erotic ecstasy of the lovers reunion fading away into the darkness.

This music is sensuous, passionate, heartbreakingly tender in moments, aggressive and highly percussive at its dramatic peaks, and ultimately a profoundly awe-inspiring commentary on the human condition through the magical genre of art song.

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