

**BARBARA HANNIGAN, soprano**  
**BERTRAND CHAMAYOU, piano**

**OLIVIER MESSIAEN (1908-1992)**

Barbara Hannigan &

**Chants de Terre et de Ciel**

Bertrand Chamayou

Bail avec Mi (pour ma femme)

Antienne du silence (pour le jour des Anges gardiens)

Danse du bébé-Pilule (pour mon petit Pascal)

Arc-en-ciel d'innocence (pour mon petit Pascal)

Minuit pile et face (pour la Mort)

Résurrection (pour le jour de Pâques)

(approx. 28 minutes)

**ALEXANDER SCRIBIN (1872-1915)**

Bertrand Chamayou

**Poème-nocturne Op. 61**

(approx. 8 minutes)

**ALEXANDER SCRIBIN (1872-1915)**

Bertrand Chamayou

**Vers la Flamme Op. 72**

(approx. 6 minutes)

**JOHN ZORN (b. 1953)**

Barbara Hannigan &

**Jumalattaret**

Bertrand Chamayou

(approx. 25 minutes)

## Olivier Messiaen

### Chants de Terre et de Ciel

Messiaen's song cycle *Songs of Heaven and Earth* was written in 1938 to celebrate the birth of the composer's son Pascal the previous year, an event which he sets in the context of his deep love for his wife and his profound commitment to the Christian faith.

The deliriously poetic texts, by Messiaen himself, are dramatic and intensely personal. They are set to music of almost Wagnerian emotional intensity that seeks to express the link between earthly sexual love here on Earth (*Terre*) and celestial divine love emanating from on high (*Ciel*).

The music is written without a time signature. The voice floats freely in rhythm with the text while the piano's saturated chords, replete with tone clusters, provide a colourfully bright tonal backdrop to the singer's often ecstatic outpourings of emotion.

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The first song in the cycle, *Bail avec Mi*, might be translated as "Lease with Mi," referring to the composer's marriage "contract" with his wife Claire Delbos (nicknamed "Mi") and the love that binds him to her. The implication is that she is only on "loan" to him from God.

Un peu lent *p*

Un peu lent *pp*

*p*

Ton œil de terre, mon œil de terre,

Their "earthly" love is communicated in the opening line: "Your eye of earth, my eye of earth." The opening flourish in the piano part offers a glimpse of the heavenly implications of this love.

\* \* \*

*Antienne du silence* (Antiphon of silence) has the subtitle "For the feast day of the Guardian Angels," a reference to the Catholic belief in celestial beings that guard over the faithful on Earth.

Messiaen's wife is transformed into one of these angels, silently standing watch to protect the new life in her arms. She is the *Ange silencieux* (silent angel) of the opening line.

The religious associations of this “antiphon” are extended in the extremely melismatic vocal writing, especially for the word *Alleluia* in the text, while the piano’s continuously wandering line in 16ths seems to be breathing this *Alleluia* in shorter note values for the entire length of the song.

\* \* \*

*Danse du bébé-Pilule* (pour mon petit Pascal) evokes the infantile world of the “little pill” of a child that is Messiaen’s son Pascal. It might even be that *Pilule* is the closest that the young baby could get to pronouncing his own name, *Pascal*.

And this is a song filled with more baby-talk, such as the nonsense word *Malonlanlaine*, and descriptions of the birds, fish and pebbles that make up the miraculous world that the child sees. The mood varies between playful and outright laughter.

\* \* \*

*Arc-en-ciel d’innocence* (Rainbow of innocence), also subtitled “for my little Pascal,” is the second of two songs devoted to Messiaen’s son. As the song begins, we see the baby, “Pilule,” stretching out its limbs “like the big capital letter in an old Mass book.”

*Tu t’étires comme une majuscule de vieux missel*

**Modéré** *mf* Pi.lu.le, tu té.ti - res

The image shows a musical score for a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked 'Modéré' and the dynamics are 'mf'. The vocal line consists of two phrases: 'Pi.lu.le,' and 'tu té.ti - res'. The piano accompaniment features a complex, rhythmic pattern in the right hand, marked with 'mf' and '11', and a simpler bass line in the left hand, marked with '3' and '3'.

The rainbow, vividly painted by washes of colour from the piano, is both a symbol of God’s wondrous presence in the world and a representation of the baby’s kaleidoscopic view of that world. In this song we hear of the father smiling at his progeny and experience the “Whee!” as he lifts him high in the air to catch rainbows with his tiny fists.

\* \* \*

**Minuit pile et face** (The two sides of midnight), subtitled “for Death” strikes a more sombre tone as the composer imagines the world of sin and temptation that his son has been born into.

**Bien modéré** *mf* Vil - le, œil puant,

The image shows a musical score for a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked 'Bien modéré' and the dynamics are 'mf'. The vocal line consists of two phrases: 'Vil - le,' and 'œil puant,'. The piano accompaniment features a complex, rhythmic pattern in the right hand, marked with 'p' and 'sf', and a simpler bass line in the left hand, marked with 'sf'.

Messiaen spares us none of the dread he feels in evoking the perils of this world, imagined as a city with a “stinking eye” (*oeil puant*). To complete the picture, he gives the eternal threat of sin a gleeful dance-like rhythm in the middle section of this song.

After plaintive calls to God and Christ for salvation, the song ends with the image of a young child falling asleep in its father’s arms.

\* \* \*

*Résurrection* (pour le jour de Pâques), the last song in the cycle, rebounds from all this dread with a great whoop of Easter-inspired exultation.

The image shows a musical score for the piece 'Al-le-lu-ia' from Maurice Ravel's 'Résurrection'. It consists of four staves. The top staff is for the voice, marked 'Vif' and 'f', with the lyrics 'Al - le - lu - ia,'. The second staff is for the right hand of the piano, marked 'Vif' and 'ff'. The third and fourth staves are for the left hand of the piano, with the left hand marked 'sf'. The music is in a key with three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a 4/4 time signature. The vocal line features a melodic line with a long note on 'ia,'. The piano accompaniment has a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in the right hand and a more complex pattern in the left hand.

The “paschal” celebration of Easter, from which the name of Messiaen’s son “Pascal” is derived, is related with numerous references to the New Testament narrative of the saving event at the centre of the Christian story: the angel at the empty tomb, the perfumed scent of the Eternal City with its pearly gates, etc.

The vocal writing is showy in the extreme, patterned after the wailing style of Gregorian chant but raised to an ecstatic level of expressive force and vigour. The work ends with a last line that pleads you to “wash yourself in the Truth” (*lavez-vous dans la Vérité*).

## Alexander Scriabin

### Poème-nocturne Op. 61

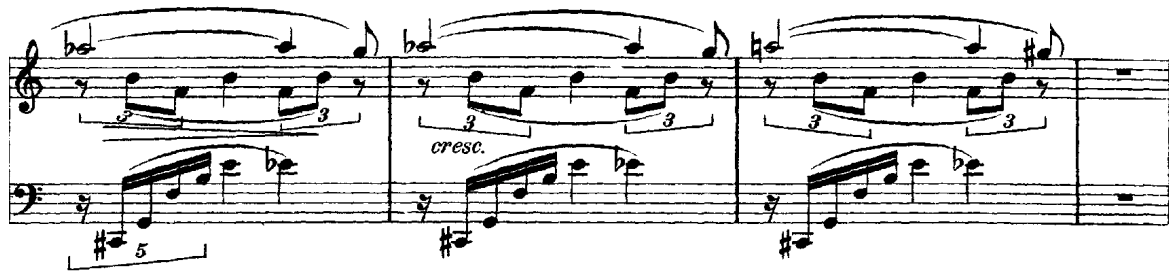
Alexander Scriabin was known as “the Russian Chopin,” since he wrote almost exclusively for the piano and began his career by composing mazurkas, waltzes, nocturnes, preludes and études, just like his Polish musical forebear.

But as his musical language evolved, he gradually moved away from the simple, soulful expressiveness of Chopin towards a less directly assertive and more psychologically suggestive kind of keyboard writing, one projected in the sort of “wispy” keyboard textures created by Debussy.

These tendencies are on full display in Scriabin’s *Poème-nocturne*, Op. 61 (1911), with its softly whispered short phrases enveloped in gently yearning harmonies that float in the air like the scent of a French perfume on a warm summer evening.



The nocturne-ish “feel” of this work resides in the veiled atmosphere produced by the overtones of its widely spaced chord structures and its hypnotic repetition of musical motives murmuring obsessively in a multi-layered texture – all of which evokes the feeling of being in a dreamscape where much is happening but little is certain.



Guiding the performer in creating just the right “lava lamp” mood of wide-eyed wonder and focused reverie are performance indications in French such as *comme en un rêve* (like in a dream), *avec une soudaine langueur* (with sudden languor) and *comme une ombre mouvante* (like a moving shadow).

## Alexander Scriabin Vers la Flamme Op. 72

The aesthetic aims of Scriabin at the end of his career were so expansive as to be hardly containable within the scope of the piano keyboard. As he advanced in years his mystical inclinations narrowed the gap between solo sonata and sonic séance, with his very last works showing him at his most grandiose.

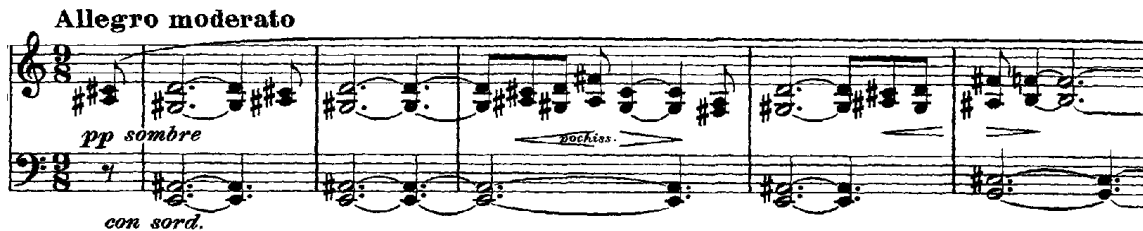
Left unfinished at his death in 1915, for example, is a work called *Mysterium* for mixed chorus and orchestra, intended to be enacted over the course of a week in the foothills of the Himalayas with the aid of dancers, a light show and the release of appropriately apocalyptic scents into the air, after which the world was roundly expected to dissolve into a state of perpetual bliss.

Meanwhile, back home at the keyboard, pianists attempting to sustain the legacy of his piano music – without the aid of sherpas – have had their hands



full dealing with the equally ambitious textures of his late works, with their flamboyant arpeggiations down to the nether regions, eddying swirls of finger fodder in the mid-range and luminous echoes up in the gods of the upper register.

His “piano poem” *Vers la flamme* (Toward the flame), composed in 1914, is precisely of this stamp. What constitutes “melody” in the piece is virtually limited to the obsessively repeated semitone motif announced at the opening and present throughout at the top of the texture.



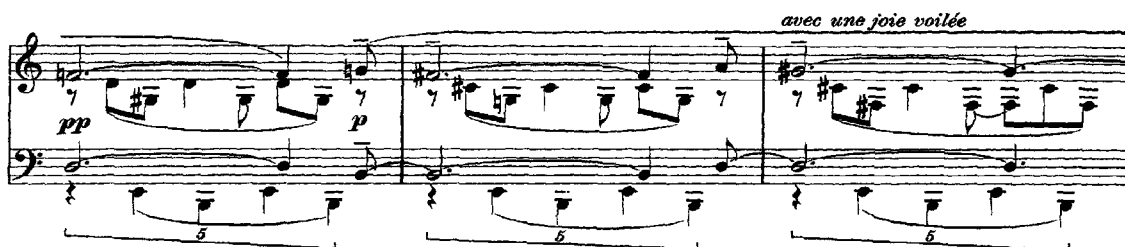
The composer’s unique harmonic vocabulary of altered dominant 9th, 11th and 13th chords, spaced in 4ths for maximum resonance, ensures such an abundance of tritones (there seems to be one in virtually every chord) that in the end they all begin to sound like consonances.

According to Vladimir Horowitz, one of the major twentieth-century proponents of Scriabin’s music, the title of the work relates to the composer’s conviction that the world was edging “towards the flame” and would gradually heat up until it erupted into a fiery cosmic conflagration.

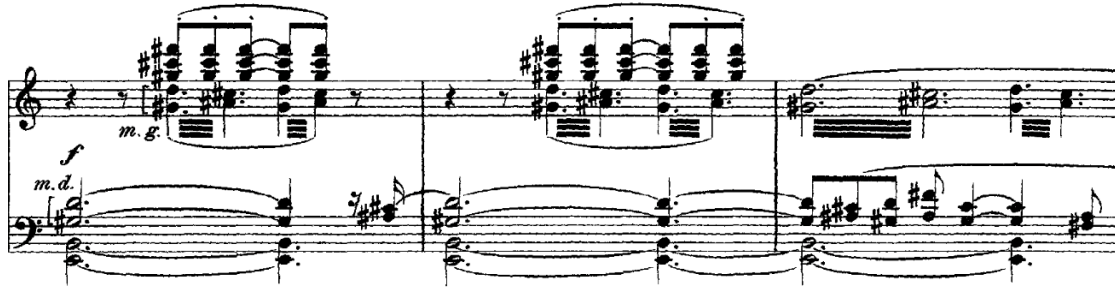
“He voss kray-see, you know,” the famous pianist added dryly.

Prescient intimations of global warming aside, Scriabin’s incendiary vision is communicated in this piece through a gradual increase in the complexity and animation of the keyboard texture.

At its opening, time seems suspended as long-held chords interspersed with rhythmically uncertain phrase fragments remove any sense of regular pulse. Soon the mid-range begins to oscillate with conspiratorial murmurings as an ominous five-against-nine rhythm rumbles in the bass.



A third and final stage is reached when tongues of flame, in the form of blurry double tremolos, begin to lick the sonic spaces in the octave above middle C,



leading to a final burst of bright light at the extreme upper end of the keyboard.

## John Zorn

### Jumalattaret

John Zorn is a New-York-based saxophonist, arranger, producer and avant-garde composer who has written for an extraordinarily wide range of instrumental ensembles, including rock bands, jazz groups, string quartets, orchestras and chamber ensembles, as well as for solo instruments and for voice.

Long recognized as a giant of the new music scene centred in Manhattan's Lower East Side, he received a MacArthur Foundation "Genius Grant" in 2006, and his sixtieth birthday in 2013 was celebrated with performances at the Guggenheim Museum, Lincoln Center and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

He has been described by the online journal *Classical Music Geek* as a composer who "treads the line between experimental classical and experimental jazz," a musician whose music is "the most organized chaos you've ever heard."

Zorn is a composer who likes to push boundaries. "Most of my work," he says, "involves pushing the envelope of technical mastery."

And the search for technical mastery is indeed pushed, poked and pummelled in his song cycle *Jumalattaret*, which was premiered by Barbara Hannigan and pianist Stephen Gosling at the 2018 "Jazz in August" festival in Lisbon with the composer sitting in the front row.



As senior staff editor for the *New York Times* Joshua Barone wrote in 2019:

*On paper, John Zorn's "Jumalattaret" ... looks impossible: breathless vocalise; abrupt transitions from head-spinning complexity to folk-song simplicity; and, within the span of a single measure, whispering, squeaking and throat-singing like a winter storm. It's the kind of piece that leaves you asking, repeatedly, over the course of its 25 minutes: Can a voice even do this?*<sup>1</sup>

Based on the Finnish national epic *Kalevala* first published in 1835, the work is in nine sections, with an opening invocation and a postlude. In each principal section the singer channels a different Sami goddess, whispering the text or delivering it in a wordless vocalise.

The *New York Times*' chief classical music critic Anthony Tommasini describes what comes next:

*The lines are thick with rapid-fire leaps to high and low extremes; sustained tones delivered in wobbling vibrato; explosions of skittish notes that sound like crazed bird calls; cackling that morphs into manic laughter. Not to mention moments when the singer must also play percussion or clap.*<sup>2</sup>

And for added measure there are ensemble difficulties piled on to the pyrotechnics expected of the singer, especially in polyrhythmic passages in the first and second sections in which the voice and piano are in two different time signatures.

Having given nearly 100 premieres of new compositions in her career, Barbara Hannigan is known for her work ethic and her gritty resolve to fulfill each composer's wishes and expectations in performance. But this work, and the months-long process of preparing it for performance, was of an order of magnitude she was not prepared for.

"It has changed everything," she said in her interview with Joshua Barone. "It's one of those pieces that was life changing."

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John Zorn's *Jumalattaret* and Barbara Hannigan's rehearsal process with pianist Stephen Gosling are the subject of *Zorn III*, the third of director Mathieu Amalric's documentary films on the works of John Zorn.

Donald G. Gíslason 2024

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua Barone, "The unsingable music that stumped a diva," *New York Times* (October 10, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Tommasini, "Review: A fearless soprano shows what's possible," *New York Times* (October 18, 2019).