Since childhood I've been irresistibly and powerfully drawn to a musical vocation.¹

A boy sits reading on a stone bench in the town park of Grenoble. Far to the north, the battles on the western front of the First World War are at their most attritional, but the only hint here of the cruelty that humanity can inflict upon itself is the brooding presence of the town's ‘bastille’. The sight of the old battlements glowering down from their high rocky vantage point on the other side of the River Isère is itself dwarfed by the mountains that dominate the surrounding skyline. To the east is the Romanche valley, with its dramatic gorges eventually leading to the dazzling glaciers of the Meije, on some of the highest peaks of the Rhône Alps. To the south the Route Napoléon rises resolutely for more than a thousand metres before reaching the sedate plateau of the Serre, marked by a series of four lakes and flanked by mountains that are distinctly genteel in comparison to the spectacular scenes along the Romanche river. This countryside of the Isère region, along the Romanche and around the lakes of the Serre, will provide a strong source of inspiration for the seven-and-a-half-year-old boy, who will become one of the creative giants of the twentieth century and one of the greatest religious artists of any era. Until this point he might have seemed destined, despite a remarkable facility at the piano, for a literary career. His beloved mother, Cécile Sauvage, is a poet,
whilst his father is a teacher of English, and the boy has already developed a passion not just for fairy stories but also for poetry and Shakespeare. Now, though, he is not reading *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or *Hamlet*, but the vocal score of an opera whose message of love overcoming death, and conviction in the power of music, will later find resonances in his own scores: Gluck’s *Orphée*. As Olivier Messiaen later recalled: ‘I noticed an extraordinary thing. I was reading, sitting there and I could hear what I was reading in my head. So, I *was* a musician.’

From the outset, Messiaen’s life was dominated by the creative influence of women. Where Berlioz, his fellow Dauphinois, starts his memoirs by commenting wryly on his mother’s lack of premonitions of the artistic greatness of her unborn child, Messiaen’s arrival into this world was greeted by *L’Âme en bourgeon*, a garland of twenty poems by Cécile Sauvage. Lest there be any doubt, he was absolutely unequivocal about the importance of this collection, going so far as to say that ‘There has been only one influence in my life, and it happened before I was born… thus before my birth there was [in *L’Âme en bourgeon*] this exchange between mother and child, and I believe it was that which influenced my entire destiny.’ In later life Messiaen drew attention to lines such as ‘I suffer from an unknown, distant music’, ‘All the Orient is singing here within me, with its blue birds, with its butterflies’ and ‘The anguish of art’s mysteries will be dispersed’, as evidence of his mother’s visionary abilities, foretelling not only that he would be a composer, but also that he would be interested in birdsong, have a love for Japan and be a great teacher. Messiaen might have taken all sorts of different career paths and still found prophetic intimations in his mother’s poetry. Nonetheless, leafing through *L’Âme en bourgeon* aged eight and being told by Cécile that ‘it is for you’, he could scarcely remain indifferent to the poetic chaplet that greeted him into the world: ‘I didn’t understand it, I did not realise it was about a mother expecting a child, I knew nothing. All the same, it certainly influenced me, not only my destiny, but also my way of thinking. It gave me a sense of wonder.’
Olivier was born in the Provençal town of Avignon at midnight on Thursday 10 December 1908, prompting the overjoyed new Grandpère Sauvage to start singing the old French carol ‘Il est né le divin enfant’. On Christmas Day the baby was duly baptized Olivier Eugène Prosper Charles Messiaen. Pierre and Cécile had married the previous year, on 10 September 1907, much to the chagrin of Pierre’s parents, Charles

and Marie, who disapproved of their son choosing a bride who never went to church. He had grown up on the Bois-Franc farm, close to the Belgian border on the outskirts of Le Blaton, a hamlet between the villages of Linselles and Wervicq. He had been working in Saint-Étienne on the editorial staff of the literary journal *Revue Forézienne* when, one morning in May, the manuscript of *Les Trois Muses* by Cécile Sauvage arrived. The daughter of a history teacher at the lycée in Digne, she was born on 20 July 1883 in La-Roche-sur-Yon in the Vendée, and, aside from a few trips to Avignon and Marseilles, she had spent her formative years in the small Provençal town. About a month after their marriage in the little church of Sieyes in Digne, the Sauvage family moved to Avignon and Pierre entered the barracks of the 58th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Battalion, 9th Company to fulfil his National Service.

In February 1909, Pierre was appointed to a secondary school teaching post at Ambert in the Puy-de-Dôme region of the Auvergne, though Cécile and Olivier did not join him until the Easter holidays. It was in Ambert, the birthplace of Chabrier, that Olivier first began to experience ‘the revelation of nature’, and it was here also that he started learning to read, soon developing a voracious appetite for the stories of Perrault and Madame d’Aulnoy. At the same time, Pierre was studying for the highest teaching diploma, *agrégation*, not helped by the disturbed nights that followed the arrival of a second son, Alain, on 30 August 1912. Following his new qualification, Pierre was appointed to the lycée in Nantes, and Olivier began school where he was ‘the best pupil in his class’. The family’s first stay in this western Loire city was either forgotten or overlooked in later life by Messiaen. It was only brief, for in the summer of 1914 France mobilized in response to the threat of German invasion.

With the onset of war in 1914, Cécile took her two sons to Grenoble to live with their grandmother, Marie Sauvage, at 2 cours Berriat, the house of her brother André, who, like Pierre, had been sent to the front. Any influence that his Flemish roots, his Provençal beginnings or the years spent in Ambert and Nantes might have had on Olivier was firmly supplanted by a lifelong attachment to the Dauphiné region,
nurtured during these formative years in Grenoble. As he put it in a self-authored biographical entry published in the Dictionnaire de musique of 1970, ‘The mountains of the Dauphiné . . . are his true home’. The family had already spent an idyllic summer at André’s house during 1911, going on trips by car to Grande-Chartreuse and Lake Bourget to the north, and Bourg d’Oisans to the East. At other times they went and
sat in the public gardens: ‘Cécile and her sister [Germaine] took
needlework, Olivier made heaps of sand where he planted sticks, I
read the novels of Dostoyevsky to grandfather Sauvage, who pretended
not to like them’.\(^\text{13}\) The happy family life evoked by this brief vignette
was not to last. Cécile’s physical health was rarely strong, and, pessi-
mistic by nature, she also suffered from what both Pierre and Olivier
Messiaen describe as a profound melancholy and which today would
probably be diagnosed as depression. In Ambert she worked each
morning between nine o’clock and half-past eleven in the bedroom
on the first floor.\(^\text{14}\) She told Pierre ‘It is necessary to collect pollen to
make honey’ and would feel that the day had been wasted if she had
not spent time alone, in quiet solitude, to work on her poetry,\(^\text{15}\) a work
ethic that Olivier would inherit. Nevertheless, there was more to her
isolation than a desire for peace and quiet to work. According to Pierre,
Cécile went into town barely ten times during the years in Ambert.\(^\text{16}\)
The war acted as a catalyst for a decline in her spirits and she rarely
wanted to go out with the children, often locking herself in her bed-
room so that she could not hear their games or hear them running
about the house. This is certainly not to suggest that Cécile did not love
her children. She noted their progress and foibles with delight, think-
ing of herself with pride as mother hen as she walked with them to
school in Grenoble, and recalling that the other children had at first
thought that Olivier was English or Russian on account of his blonde
hair.\(^\text{17}\) At the age of eight, Messiaen was already the same height as his
mother and he had appointed himself her ‘chevalier rose’. L’Âme en
bourgeon sent him into raptures of adoration, telling Cécile that she was
‘as poetic as Shakespeare’.\(^\text{18}\)

Messiaen was, by his own admission, a solitary child with few
friends apart from Jean Licou, ‘who I liked very much, but he died
when he was seven, so I was alone’.\(^\text{19}\) Olivier devoted his time instead
to his books and his new love, music. There being no musicians in the
family, he taught himself to play the broken-down old piano that had
been gathering dust in his uncle’s house. Cécile and Marie Sauvage
cannot have taken long to realize that they had a precocious talent on
their hands. Rather than toys or books, Father Christmas began to receive requests for operatic vocal scores. Olivier’s treble voice could subsequently be heard singing complete performances of each work. Within little more than three years, his repertoire included Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* and *The Magic Flute*, Berlioz’s *The Damnation of Faust*, Wagner’s *Die Walküre* and *Siegfried*, and Gluck’s *Alceste* had joined the score that first made Olivier aware of his musical vocation, *Orphée*. He made frequent trips to Deshairs, the big music shop in Grenoble, to look at the scores, and friends and family also fed his appetite for music with gifts of piano works. Recent pieces, such as Debussy’s *Estampes* and Ravel’s *Gaspard de la nuit*, figure prominently in Messiaen’s recollections, but he also devoured the works of Bach and Beethoven, even if they left fewer obvious imprints on his own music. An important discovery at Deshairs was Grieg’s *Peer Gynt* with its ‘beautiful Norwegian melodic lines with the taste of folk song… They gave me a love of melody’.

Olivier had begun to compose almost as soon as he started to play the piano, creating simple two-part canons. Only one piece of his juvenilia survives, a piano piece inspired by Tennyson’s poem *The Lady of Shalott*. Never published, *La Dame de Shalott* is nonetheless instructive, as is clear from Messiaen’s note to the sole recording made of the work, for his belief in the ability of music to portray, for the notes to convey meaning:

> In this *Lady of Shalott* a child’s imagination runs unleashed. Nothing is missing: the castles, the inflection of the spoken word, the song of Lady Shalott (weaving!), Sir Lancelot on horseback, the broken mirror, the tapestry which flies out the window, the falling willow leaves, and the death of the lady who lies in a boat drifting down the river (barcarole!). Despite its extraordinary naivety, this work is nonetheless my op. 1.

Furthermore, the way the music jumps from one passage to the next in following the narrative in *La Dame de Shalott* is prophetic of the sectional formats of Messiaen’s mature works, not least the quasi-dramatic unfolding of events in some pieces of *Catalogue d’oiseaux*.
Although music was now his métier, Messiaen’s love of literature was also flourishing, inspiring him to construct a toy theatre. Taking the cellophane from sweet boxes and patisserie bags and painting it with Indian ink or watercolours, Messiaen placed it in front of a windowpane. The simple coloured lighting effects produced by the sun shining through the cellophane foreshadowed his subsequent enduring interest in colour and, specifically, stained-glass windows. Thus equipped with his own personal equivalent of the Globe Theatre, in function if not design, Olivier performed the plays of Shakespeare using cardboard figures, and with Alain acting as assistant or audience as appropriate. On at least one occasion he also tried his hand as a dramatist, for the manuscript still exists of Anymoné, a play written in a school exercise-book at about the age of ten. Fifty-eight lines of text are squeezed on to the solitary surviving page of this short drama based on a passage in the Greek legend of the Danaïdes.

Messiaen claimed to have performed all the plays of Shakespeare in his theatre, but Macbeth, A Midsummer Night’s Dream and The Tempest were given significantly longer runs. He later recalled that it was the magical and the mysterious aspects of Shakespeare that attracted him, though he put it more colourfully at the time, declaring to Cécile that ‘I prefer everything that frightens’.

It was the phantasmagorical that enthralled the young Messiaen rather than ‘certain disillusioned comments on love and death, such as can be found in Hamlet, comments that a child of eight obviously couldn’t understand’, and the same can be inferred from his choice of operatic repertoire, preferring Don Giovanni and The Magic Flute to Così fan tutte or Die Walküre, and Siegfried to Tristan und Isolde. This affection for legends and the miraculous never left Messiaen. Rather, when he was old enough to understand love and death, they were also interpreted as falling within the dominion of the supernatural.

Given his predilection for the theatrical arts, Messiaen might have seemed destined for a career as an opera composer. In fact, he had reached an age by which most people would have retired before finally embarking, in 1975, upon his sole work of music theatre. The reasons
for his reluctance are complex, but it is worth remembering that his formative dramatic experiences were essentially private, even internal, affairs, with their greatest resource being his imagination.

Following the Armistice in November 1918, Pierre was soon reunited with his wife and children. He had spent the War with the British forces as an interpreter, a posting that, if it did not keep him out of the frontline trenches, contributed to his survival. His two brothers were not so lucky. The eldest, Paul, fought with the 237th infantry regiment at Lorraine, Argonne and Artois, before being hit in the head by shrapnel in the attack on Craonne. He died in hospital in Troyes. Léon, who was eighteen months younger than Pierre, was a sculptor, who had spent time in the workshops of Gréber, Rodin and Bourdelle before entering the École des Beaux-Arts. Assigned to the 279th infantry regiment, he was injured three times, at Lorraine, Souchez and Verdun, before being killed outright by a shell on 15 September 1918, less than two months before the Armistice. It is difficult to comprehend the devastating effect that the First World War had on an entire generation. Reading the early chapters of Pierre Messiaen’s book of autobiographical reflections, Images, it is disquieting how the vast majority of his portraits of friends and acquaintances of a similar age end with recording that they died during one or other battle of the war.

The family now returned to Nantes and it was here, far from his beloved mountains, that Messiaen’s formal musical education began in earnest. He later recalled several local teachers, such as Gontran Arcouët and the Véron sisters, who gave him free piano lessons on account of his exceptional talent. The most momentous contribution, however, came from Jean de Gibon, who gave Messiaen his first harmony lessons. Gibon, who despite being poor, also declined to charge for his services, dutifully made Messiaen work from the standard textbook of the day, Reber and Dubois’s Traité d’harmonie. However, Gibon also gave his ten-year-old protégé a score of Debussy’s Pelléas et Mélisande, itself less than twenty years old. In a composer with as rich a language and as broad a range of influences as Messiaen, it would be
misleading to name one work as decisive, but, by his own admission, the gift of Pelléas et Mélisande was a defining moment: ‘Debussy’s music is like water – water is still, unmoving, but immediately you throw a pebble in there is a shock wave around the pebble and the water is set in motion. Debussy’s music is like that – there are stops and all of a sudden it moves. It was those stops that seized my imagination.’

The ten-year-old Messiaen immediately fell in love with the understated colours and dappled light of Debussy’s setting of Maeterlinck’s symbolist drama, spending many hours repeatedly playing and singing through the score until he knew the entire opera from memory; ‘a provincial teacher had placed a veritable bomb in the hands of a mere child’. The ten-year-old Messiaen immediately fell in love with the understated colours and dappled light of Debussy’s setting of Maeterlinck’s symbolist drama, spending many hours repeatedly playing and singing through the score until he knew the entire opera from memory; ‘a provincial teacher had placed a veritable bomb in the hands of a mere child’.

Messiaen spent just six months in Nantes before he had to bid farewell to his ‘provincial teacher’ (although they stayed in contact until Gibon’s death in 1952). In 1919, Pierre took up a new job in Paris at the Lycée Charlemagne and, after a brief stay on the quai de Bourbon on the Île Saint-Louis, the family moved to 65 rue Rambuteau. It is not known whether he specifically requested this post so that his son could receive the training that his remarkable talents deserved, but Olivier now entered the Paris Conservatoire aged just ten. The Messiaen apartment was above a café on the corner of rue Quincampoix, in the Marais district, right in the heart of the city. Freezing cold in winter and baking in summer, there was always noise from lorries, trams and cars. Encountering the teeming cultural riches of Paris must have been as thrilling in the 1920s as it had been for Berlioz a century earlier.

Olivier was taken by his parents on educational trips to the city’s cultural jewels, such as the Louvre, the Opéra and the Comédie Française. The ‘shining revelation’ of being dazzled by the coloured light of the extraordinary stained-glass windows at the Sainte-Chapelle remained with Messiaen throughout his life, inspiring a particularly succinct exegesis of his music:

Stained glass is one of the most wonderful creations of man. You are overwhelmed. And I think this is the beginning of Paradise, because...