

**The Cleveland Orchestra presents
Claude Vivier's *Lonely Child*:
a conversation with Aphrodite Patoulidou**

by Mike Telin



Canadian composer Claude Vivier was born in 1948 in Montreal. That same day he was placed in an orphanage by his mother where he would live until age two and a half, when he was adopted by the Vivier family. The composer spent his entire life in hopes of finding his birth parents — but to no avail. His ongoing search for his identity inspired many

of his compositions including his 1980 work for soprano and orchestra, *Lonely Child*.

On Thursday, November 9 at 7:30 pm, soprano Aphrodite Patoulidou will sing Vivier's haunting work with The Cleveland Orchestra. The Severance Music Center program, under the direction of Barbara Hannigan, also includes Joseph Haydn's *Symphony No. 44* ("Trauersinfonie") and Richard Strauss's *Death and Transfiguration*. The program will be repeated on Friday at 11:00 (no Vivier) and Saturday at 8:00. Tickets are available [online](#).

Born in Thessaloniki, Greece, Aphrodite Patoulidou exemplifies the 21st-century creative. Now based in Berlin, the soprano is also a songwriter, photographer, painter, and poet. She was also the lead singer with the heavy metal band Igorrr.

I caught up with Patoulidou via Zoom.

Mike Telin: Thank you so much for taking the time to talk. I have to ask, are the paintings on the wall behind you yours?

Aphrodite Patoulidou: Yes. The house is full of them. Let me show you what I'm working on right now. I'll be very quick. (She holds up a painting) I'm going to be singing Sibelius' *Luonnotar*, and I wanted to paint her — it's my most ambitious yet.

MT: That's beautiful. You also have a beautiful voice. I enjoyed listening to the performance of Lonely Child that you did with Barbara at Ojai.

AP: That was my very first performance of it — I was terrified.

MT: Really? I'm curious. I know a first performance is always a little more nerve-wracking, but what about it terrified you?

AP: I could not read my score, follow Barbara, and be with the orchestra at the same time. Right after that performance I made the decision to learn the score by heart. Because only then can you really sing the long phrases.

MT: Did you know Vivier's music before you learned this piece?

AP: No, Barbara introduced me to his music. She sent me a recording of her singing the piece — that was another reason I was terrified. But when I gave it a listen, I told her, "Barbara, I need to sing this." You feel enchanted after listening to it — it's a very special piece.

I feel very lucky, because for me, the most magical moments are during the rehearsal. Barbara always asks me to be at every rehearsal and I do it with pleasure, because I can just listen to the orchestra and hear what they play without me singing. It's transcendental.

MT: The story, which they think is based on his own life, is quite sad. How do you bring that sadness to the interpretation?

AP: I decided that I would be the fairy godmother that Vivier longed to see. When she says, "Beautiful child, go to sleep," that's how I become her. But there are places where I think, 'I am the child.' And then in the end, the lonely child is playing every part. It's so cruel and so beautiful at the same time. The libretto goes from an invented language that means nothing, to "mon enfant," my child. Amidst the invented language he throws in French, so it keeps you on your toes.

MT: Does the vocal writing allow you to project easily over the orchestra?

AP: It's incredible to sing this piece with the orchestra, because everybody has different rhythmic patterns, so it takes a good conductor and sensitive players to achieve balance. And there does come a moment when the piece explodes. But it's exploding in slow motion. So, it needs to be paced in a way that the colors that Vivier chose come through.

MT: How many times have you performed the work?

AP: I think five or six times. I remember a very special concert we did at the Elbphilharmonie. Because the stage is in the round, Barbara asked me to rotate in the really crazy part. So I started rotating and of course it changes the acoustics for everybody in the house. After the performance my friends asked me, "How did you see Barbara?" So we create little challenges for ourselves every time.

MT: If you don't mind I'd like to switch topics. You have so many artistic endeavors — how did you come to embrace all of them equally? Do you embrace them all equally?

AP: Well, you can't so easily just say, 'This week I'm going to be a painter,' but I know that I want art in my life. I have become aware of the fact that what I have to do is to keep the fire alive. Life can be hard sometimes and people will try to put out your fire.

But I still consider what happened with painting to be a sleepwalking experience — I just woke up one morning and I started painting. I'm not saying this to brag — it only happened because I was supposed to be on tour in the USA and it got canceled at the last minute. I was frustrated and didn't even want to sing. I just wanted to do something else.

MT: Is it true that you were once the lead singer of a heavy metal band?

AP: I was. I left now, but I lived that teenage dream. And I mean, I was a metalhead before I even started listening to classical music.

MT: You were also part of Barbara's Equilibrium Young Artists Initiative.

AP: Although I am now a graduate, it is still a very big part of my life. And of course, the people I met there — we still have what I like to call a tribe because we've been through the same training and we understand each other. We have the same vocabulary.

MT: Do you still write your own songs?

AP: I do, but you can't find them because they are not published, because I'm slow. Right now I have invited friends to work with me on my songs because I realized that the only way to actually give birth to them is to collaborate. I'm at the stage now that I have opened my dark castle and invited my friends in to make music with me.

MT: Thank you so much for talking — is there anything else you would like to tell me?

AP: For the people who come to listen to this, just sit back and absorb yourself in the music, because for me it feels like an interstellar journey. *Lonely Child* is one of the works that I don't think I will ever paint — it is a painting already. It's very hard to put it into words, but I think if you come with an open heart and open ears, it will take you someplace you've never been before.

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