

CHANSON



A TRIBUTE TO FRANCE'S MOST ROMANTIC AND
POETIC MUSICAL TRADITION

Olaf Salié

 PRESTEL



CHANSON

A TRIBUTE TO FRANCE'S MOST ROMANTIC
AND POETIC MUSICAL TRADITION

Olaf Salié

PRESTEL

Munich • London • New York

INTRODUCTION





most revered among the people, this establishment would undoubtedly sit at Number One. Not only is the Académie revered; it also has a long and illustrious history. Founded in 1635, during the baroque heyday of the absolute monarchy on the initiative of Cardinal Richelieu, its purpose, right from the start, was to foster and standardise the French language. Nothing has changed in this respect. Language is the cornerstone of French culture. The French do not sit in front of their 'computer', a word many other European languages have keenly adopted, but rather in front of their *ordinateur* or *ordinateur portable* (laptop). Similarly, they do not write 'emails', but rather *courriels*. The Académie Française also supports charity work, and awards some 60 literature prizes and numerous scholarships. Anyone who gains membership can rightly claim to have reached the peak of at least their intellectual career. There are 40 positions, known as *fauteuil* (literally 'armchairs') to which members are appointed for life. This honour is primarily bestowed upon writers, poets and philosophers, though actors, scientists, military officers and politicians can also join the illustrious circle if they have contributed particularly outstanding services to French culture. But places among the immortels, as the members are known, only become available, paradoxically, when their holders die. So, to a certain extent, once you are in, there's no getting out again. If a member abdicates, which does happen, the *fauteuil* is left vacant. Being inducted to the Académie Française is a state occasion in style; an extremely festive event in which gold-embroidered robes are accessorised with elaborate ceremonial swords and other regalia. The appointment ritual as a whole also expresses the dignity, self-image and integrity of the French state.

French intellectuals constantly criticise the steadfast, traditionalist way in which the Académie stands firm in the world and its centuries-old history. It was

OPPOSITE THE FRENCH CELEBRATED THE 200TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE STORMING OF THE BASTILLE ON THE PLACE DE LA CONCORDE IN 1989, WITH A SPECTACULAR PERFORMANCE BY JESSYE NORMAN.



ABOVE A SESSION OF THE IMMORTELS AT THE ACADEMIE FRANÇAISE IN 1962. JEAN COCTEAU CAN BE SEEN IN THE MIDDLE.

not until 1980, for example, that Marguerite Yourcenar became the first woman to be admitted into its prestigious ranks. Chanson performers had previously been denied membership, though one nearly made it. Charles Trenet applied twice for a position, and was rejected both times by the hardliners and traditionalists – one time, apparently, because of a misplaced comma in his covering letter. But there have certainly also been members who contributed to the chanson genre. Jean Cocteau, for instance, or François Mauriac, laureate of the Nobel Prize in Literature, who wrote several beautiful lyrics for chanteuses such as Juliette Gréco.

The Académie Française is a beacon among other highly respected institutions, which are its equal in standing, and which demonstrate the effect a state's self-image can have on cultural establishments. Anyone

EDITH PIAF:
HER GENERATION





ABOVE THE YOUNG MOUSTAKI WAS MORE THAN JUST EDITH PIAF'S LOVER. WITH *MILORD* HE ALSO WROTE ONE OF HER GREATEST HITS. OPPOSITE LEFT GEORGES MOUSTAKI AND BARBARA WERE CLOSE FRIENDS. HE WROTE *LA DAME BRUNE* (THE LADY WITH BROWN HAIR) FOR HER, WHICH THEY SANG AS A DUET. OPPOSITE RIGHT GEORGES MOUSTAKI WAS THE EPITOME OF THE ELEGANT BOHEMIAN.

a matter of time before the young musician would be discovered. Most importantly, he met Georges Brassens, who then was already a star and later, in common with Moustaki, one of the singers whose chansons formed the standard repertoire of the 1968 generation. Brassens became something of a mentor as well as a lifelong friend for Georges Moustaki, and he encouraged him to make money and a living from his music.

Out of admiration for Georges Brassens, the young man changed his name from Giuseppe to Georges Moustaki.

He soon appeared on the radar of that famous lady with excellent taste in young, beautiful men and an even better instinct for up-and-coming talent. Edith Piaf and Moustaki, almost 20 years her junior, became lovers at the end of the 1950s, and the global icon took the young Greek under her wings. Both of them benefited. Moustaki wrote one of Piaf's greatest hits, *Milord*; her 'house composer', Marguerite Monnot, contributed the melody. *Milord* became a worldwide success, and for Georges Moustaki it was the breakthrough as an *auteur* (songwriter). In the following years, he wrote for numerous celebrities, such as Yves Montand, Juliette Gréco, Henri Salvador and Serge Reggiani, who won the Grand Prix de l'Académie du disque français with his version of *Ma liberté* (My Freedom) in 1968. Edith Piaf also took her young lover on a major American tour in 1959 and 1960. However, her health began to deteriorate, and in New York she collapsed on stage for the first time. Back in France they were

involved in a serious car accident. Edith Piaf was badly injured and had to take a long break. Their relationship did not survive the stress, and the couple separated. It would take a few years before Moustaki could build on the success of *Milord* and several attempts to gain a foothold as a live singer in front of an audience met with limited success. At the beginning of the 1960s, the time had not yet come for a free spirit like Moustaki but this would change at the end of the decade.

At the end of the 1960s, Moustaki finally met a woman who didn't seem to have anything in common with the great Piaf. Sensitive and language-loving with an interest in art, Barbara was a perfect match for the person



Moustaki was becoming during this time. He wrote *La dame brune* (The Lady with Brown Hair) for her and they sang it as a duet. The chanson was a fine, very poetic dialogue between the two artists; it fitted perfectly with Barbara's and Moustaki's styles both addressing each other as who they were, possibly lovers, but certainly artistic soulmates. They recorded it together for the first time in 1967, and Moustaki also accompanied Barbara on her tours. He was still her sidekick, a duetting partner and a good friend off stage. When Barbara was unable to perform at a concert due to illness, he took over the programme and the stage as a soloist. This was the Olympia stage, and was the starting point of Moustaki's solo career as a singer.

One chanson in particular made him famous: with *Le métèque* he had written a global hit, and the chanson was at the same time an expression of his self-image as an outcast, a lover, a poet. He himself was the *gueule de métèque*, the 'gob of the shiftily-looking Mediterranean immigrant', and he wore the insult with the pride of a poet. *Métèque*, a racist term, was how the parents of the girl he had fallen in love with had referred to him.



From this personal insult as a human being, he created a chanson that over the years would become a hymn for tolerance and against racism, especially for the young. Georges Moustaki's music also needs to be understood as political statements; it gave those who wanted to change the world in those years the protest songs they could identify with. He represented a new way of life, equality, brotherhood and pacifism, the importance for people to be true to themselves and stand up for their own beliefs. His great classics, *Ma liberté* (My Freedom) or *Ma solitude* (My Solitude), for example, fitted perfectly with the position Moustaki occupied within the genre of the French chanson. In 2009, the great and distinctive *auteur-compositeur-interprète* finally retired from the stage because of a lung disease. He died in Nice on 23 May 2013.



THE EXISTENTIALISTS
ON THE RIVE GAUCHE

Poets and Revolutionaries

The thin red line that defines the main features of the *chanson* is by no means a French invention. It is an image that helps us understand certain social conditions in other Western societies. From a political point of view, it runs between right and left. The dualism separates conservative from progressive, and bourgeoisie from bohemia. After World War II, the line also marked the difference between those who wanted to quickly suppress the memory of this enormous human catastrophe and those who wanted to reflect on it.

France, too, was divided – the Vichy regime under the leadership of Maréchal Pétain had surrendered to the National Socialists and made the German military occupation possible. France was split into an occupied and an unoccupied zone, into collaborators and resistance fighters. In London, General de Gaulle led the French government in exile and in his legendary radio broadcasts he called on the French to resist. At the end of the war, France was one of the victorious powers. Pétain was sentenced first to death and then to life

imprisonment, and de Gaulle triumphantly returned to France victorious, to continue as its strong leader for more than 20 years. Yet a deep rift still ran through French society. While Germany took decades to come to terms with its guilt over the war and the Holocaust, a new scene developed in Paris that dealt with the central catastrophe of the war in its own way. Here, too, the thin red line was evident; it ran between those who wanted to remember what had happened and those who wanted to forget the past and look forward to new beginnings and the economic upswing of the post-war period.

In the urban landscape of Paris, the thin red line even had a geographical manifestation – it was formed by the Seine. A new bohemian community of intellectuals, artists and free spirits emerged on the *Rive Gauche* (Left Bank), marking a style-defining neighbourhood. The Sorbonne, the famous university of Paris, was at the heart of this Latin Quarter, the area around Saint-Germain-des-Prés and the Montparnasse district. And, in common



with other universities, it became the breeding ground for new, world-changing ideas in the second half of the 20th century. The area on the Seine's Rive Gauche was by no means a new home for bohemians. Before World War II, an exceptionally unconventional and artistically rich, intellectual and creative set, including a very large number of young Americans, had already settled there and first coined the term 'Left Bank' as a political concept.

A French scene was now also emerging and at its centre was a philosopher who gave the movement a new name: Jean-Paul Sartre, the principal figure of existentialism, a movement which would become the spiritual home for an entire generation. Birth, said the existentialists, was a lottery; people were thrown into their own existence purely by sheer chance; humans therefore had to endeavour to give meaning to their own lives. Existentialism was the rejection of any form of ideology, they believed, a guide to thinking for oneself and a call for reflection on the individual and their life. The self was just as easy to shape as the world as a whole. Existentialism was inherently sceptical of any existing power relations, and ultimately it led to the large protest movements of 1968 that would change the Western world. In its anti-bourgeois ideas, existentialism was a template for the French chanson, which historically had always incorporated a rejection of anything bourgeois. Jean-Paul Sartre, the author and philosopher, wrote the lyrics for Juliette Gréco's *Rue des Blancs-Manteaux*

PAGE 104 A BASS PLAYER WITH HIS OWN GUITAR ARE ALL ONE NEEDS: GEORGES BRASSENS ON STAGE. OPPOSITE HE: THE MOST IMPORTANT PHILOSOPHER OF THE 20TH CENTURY. SHE: THE MOST IMPORTANT FEMINIST WRITER OF THE 20TH CENTURY. TOGETHER, JEAN-PAUL SARTRE AND SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR WERE THE EXISTENTIALIST DREAM COUPLE ON THE RIVE GAUCHE. TOP THE CAFÉ DE FLORE WAS ONE OF THE MEETING PLACES FOR THE BOHEMIAN ARTISTS IN SAINT-GERMAIN-DES-PRÉS.



(literally The Street of the White Habits). She sang this beautiful song, set to music by Joseph Kosma, at her debut concert. Sartre had already written his main work, *L'être et le néant* (Being and Nothingness), during the war – which, as a resistance fighter, he partly spent in German captivity. With the publication of this book he established the philosophy of existentialism. Now it was mainly the young who were gathering around the almost 50 year-old, who would stir up world affairs for a long time to come.

Existentialists were, however, by no means lost in joyless self-reflection. On the contrary: the scene on the Rive Gauche was an extremely fashionable affair, a movement of young people creating their own lifestyle. An existentialist look came into vogue – people wore black, horn-rimmed glasses similar to Sartre's, polo neck jumpers and corduroy jackets – a timeless style to this day. The women's eyeliner, in Cleopatra fashion, emphasised the beautiful faces of Barbara and Juliette Gréco, among others, and gave them a certain aura of mystery.

The hippest bars in post-war Paris were, of course, on the left bank of the Seine. Some traditional bistros became magnets for existentialists – writers, filmmakers, writers, philosophers, musicians, artists and other intellectuals met there. Sartre was a regular



Juliette Gréco

Juliette Gréco had to be seen live to fully understand the unique aura that surrounded her. To add to her mystique, her concerts sometimes turned out very differently to what audiences expected. Her performance in Cologne in the early 2000s was a perfect example. Her appearance at the Philharmonie was a great social event for the city on the Rhine, which had always had French connections. The dignitaries showed up, the notaries, doctors, entrepreneurs, the mayor and of course the entire cultural in-crowd of Cologne. An icon such as Juliette Gréco simply couldn't be missed. There were a noticeably large number of young people in the audience – adoration of the great diva of French chanson had reached the grandchildren's generation. And everyone was dressed up in anticipation of an evening dedicated to the best that French culture had to offer.

When Juliette Gréco took the stage, one of those magical moments occurred – there was an initial brief, but clearly perceptible silence, then the audience erupted in tumultuous applause. Gréco stood on the stage, tall, magnificent and unmistakable in her black robe, the beautiful, ageless face framed by a black fringe; with her inimitable gestures she repeatedly brushed strands of hair from her face. Around her eyes, the heavy kohl liner, the Gréco look, was the epitome of French elegance. But who was the real Gréco? The 'muse of the Parisian existentialists'? An inspiration to the most important poets of the 20th century, who wrote beautiful lyrics which she would immortalise in her chansons? One of the most exciting women in the world, free, independent, powerful, self-confident? A woman who

OPPOSITE JULIETTE GRÉCO BEGAN HER CAREER AS THE 'MUSE OF THE EXISTENTIALISTS' AND BECAME AN ICON OF THE FRENCH CHANSON AS WELL AS OF BOHEMIAN ELEGANCE.



ABOVE FROM 1966 TO 1977, GRÉCO WAS MARRIED TO THE ACTOR AND FILM DIRECTOR MICHEL PICCOLI. THIS PHOTO WAS TAKEN ON THEIR HONEYMOON IN THE SOUTH OF FRANCE.

loved both women and men, men like Miles Davis and Serge Gainsbourg, who was married to Michel Piccoli and helped promote the careers of other chanson singers such as Jacques Brel and Leo Ferré? An incomparable *chansonnière*, she stood on the stage of the Cologne Philharmonic, speaking rather than singing with her warm, deep voice, breathing a very special life into her famous chansons. After only two songs the audience were already on their feet shouting: 'Bravo! Une autre! Encore!' An incredible spark had been lit and Gréco had captured its energy. She performed one encore after another; clearly exhausted, she left the stage several times, but her fans refused to let her go. She returned, again and again, visibly moved. Her pianist helped her up and down the three steps of the stage. Anyone looking carefully would have noticed that he was doing so



ABOVE FANNY ARDANT IS THE IDEAL FRENCH WOMAN: VINCENT DELERM CREATED A VERY BEAUTIFUL TRIBUTE TO HER WITH HIS CHANSON *FANNY ARDANT ET MOI*.

cannot end without mentioning Vianney. Born Vianney Bureau in 1991, he, too, is one of the very young and highly successful performers in France whose catchy pop music keeps central characteristics of the classical chanson alive. He achieved his breakthrough with his debut album *Idées blanches (White Ideas)*, released in 2014, full of sensitive, soulful chansons, melodiously catchy and sung with a high, boyish voice. Mostly, he accompanies himself with the guitar and he is a joy to listen to. Vianney also proves that classical chanson and modern pop can be bridged. With his popular, yet also very poetic and profound lyrics and melodies, he is a successor in the great tradition of the *auteurs-compositeurs-interprètes* in France.

A chanson is much more than just a song sung in the French language. Its lyrics are at times powerful, at times light and playful; at times revolutionary, at times extremely poetic. There is only one thing that chanson texts never are: banal. Just as most singers draw from

a common repertoire of chansons from all generations, they also make use of a fund of mostly very French themes and sensitivities. The subjects cover love in all its diverse states, nostalgia, world-weariness, loneliness, mockery, satire, *joie de vivre* and freedom. And again and again, the chanson is provocative and makes critical reference to the world and social conditions of each period. Similarly to jazz and rock 'n' roll, the chanson is a very distinctive musical discipline, but unlike most other types of music around the world, it has a clearly defined geographical home, which lies within the boundaries of the francophone world and yet its fame and influence radiates far beyond it. The chanson is a timeless gift from French culture to the world. Given the great beauty of this very special music, the world should say: 'Merci!' and of course: 'Vive la France!'

OPPOSITE AT THE END OF OUR JOURNEY, A LOOK AHEAD: WHEN ASKED WHICH CONTEMPORARY SINGER IS MOST LIKELY TO TAKE THE CLASSICAL CHANSON INTO THE FUTURE, THE ANSWER MIGHT WELL BE 'VINCENT DELERM'.

