

D'Indy, Vincent (1851-1931): Summary of Writings

Vincent d'Indy's writings constitute a corpus as diverse as it is substantial. A vital source of knowledge regarding the musician's life, career and, especially, his ideas, d'Indy's writings are also of undeniable historical interest, as their author played a leading role in French musical life during the Third Republic.

At an early age, d'Indy developed the habit of expressing his feelings and ideas in writing. Between 1863 and 1869, he kept notebooks about his travels and holidays. From 1869 to 1877, he maintained a relatively regular diary which he entitled *Ma Vie*, probably unaware that Wagner had given the same title to his own autobiography ([Mein Leben](#), 1870). In 2001, a compilation of extensive excerpts of these early notebooks as well as a substantial anthology of d'Indy's correspondence was published under the same title (*Ma Vie*), shedding new light on this most controversial and influent musician. These early writings are full of observations and considerations, often highly developed and related not only to music but also to the visual arts, literature, religion, politics, etc. They thus shed valuable light on d'Indy's intellectual and aesthetic profile, as well as on the origin of the theories he later developed and taught. The ensemble offers an irreplaceable record of musical life in France at the turn of the Second Empire and the Third Republic, enriched by the account of d'Indy's first travels in Europe (Belgium, Italy, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Spain).

With over three hundred identified correspondents, d'Indy's correspondance, still largely unpublished, is among the most considerable when compared to other musicians of the same period. Throughout his life, he was a highly prolific writer of letters, whether to his family and friends or for professional reasons. His aesthetic ideas and the biographical threads begun in his diary were completed and extended with his early, saga-like letters to his cousin Edmond de Pampelonne, as well as those he wrote almost every day to his wife Isabelle from 1875 to 1905, whether during his travels, or when he was in Paris and she in the Ardèche. Among the other most remarkable ensembles are his letters with Isaac Albeniz, Charles Bordes, Pierre de Bréville, Henry Cochin, Paul Dukas, Guy de Lioncourt, Octave Maus, Paul Poujaud, Romain Rolland, Guy Ropartz, Blanche Selva and Auguste Sérieyx. They bear witness to the diversity of his interests and activities, but also to his work as an author which he only shared with those closest to him.

Although reluctant in his youth to write or speak in public, d'Indy published [Histoire du 105e bataillon de la Garde nationale](#), in 1872, recounting his military experience during the siege of Paris (1870-1871). For the next twenty-five years, his printed writings were scarce and mainly linked to his activities as a "activist" musician (concert reviews for the Société nationale de musique, presentations of

concert programmes, prefaces to his scores, jury reports for composition competitions, a project to organise teaching at Conservatoire de Paris). From the last years of the nineteenth century onwards, his functions as director of the Schola Cantorum brought him to make public statements more often, in his speeches, lectures, articles, responses to surveys, open letters, or interviews. The prestige resulting from his brilliant career and his position as one of the school's conductors also made him a sought-after preface writer. On the other hand, he long refused the position of music critic or columnist, making only a late exception for the *Revue musicale S.I.M.* (1912-1914, alongside Debussy), *Comœdia* (1907-1908; 1922-1928) and *Le Courrier musical* (1915-1931), where his contributions were as rare as they were impactful. D'Indy was an idealistic and uncompromising man of conviction who was not afraid of polemics and even sought them out. Over his career, almost 400 various public statements were published in the press, many of which were reproduced or quoted in other papers. He often expressed himself with a certain emphasis, using a vocabulary that is as excessive in praise as it is in criticism, with an irony and even causticity that made many enemies, despite the almost unanimous respect he received. He addressed most of the major subjects debated at the time (Wagnerism, lyrical theatre, religious music, early music, pedagogy, popular education, etc.), and his statements echoed in a singularly reactionary manner in an early twentieth century marked by the flowering of the avant-garde. Even in a tense historical context, (the Dreyfus case, separation between Church and State, open conflict with Germany), he did not shy away from defending political and religious ideas that went against the tide.

In the course of his career, d'Indy was commissioned to write several books on topics on which he was considered to be a true expert: [*César Franck*](#) (1906), [*Beethoven*](#) (1911), [*Richard Wagner et son influence sur l'art musical français*](#) (1930), [*Parsifal*](#) (posth. 1937). He was assigned an article on the Schola Cantorum for the *Encyclopédie de la Musique et dictionnaire du Conservatoire* (1931) and participated in Walter Willson Cobbet's *Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music* (1929) in which he notably wrote the articles on Beethoven and Franck. Nonetheless, his most notable literary work remained the impressive [*Cours de composition musicale*](#) (1902-1950), a written version of his teachings at the Schola Cantorum encompassing his artistic doctrine. However, this total amount must be interpreted with caution due to the posthumous publication of two of the four volumes and the important role taken in its drafting by his collaborators Auguste Sérieyx and Guy de Lioncourt.

Lastly, D'Indy wrote librettos for most of the lyrical works of his mature years. After collaborating with the writer and journalist Robert de Bonnières on the comic opera *Attendez-moi sous l'orme* (1882) based on Jean-François Regnard and various other unfinished projects, he decided to do without the services of a librettist. Disapproving the conventions behind the term "libretto", he rather preferred to use "poème". He himself composed the texts for [*Le Chant de la Cloche*](#) (1886), [*Fervaal*](#) (1897), [*L'Etranger*](#) (1903) and [*La Légende de Saint-Christophe*](#) (1920), making an exception for *Le Rêve de Cinyras* (1927), a lyrical comedy based on Xavier de Courville's eponymous work. The rather enigmatic character of these truly symbolic poems results from the blending of various sources, especially

literary and autobiographical, oscillating between prose and free verse. In addition to these dramatic poems, each of which was published separately, d'Indy also wrote the poetic text for several of his choral works (*Sur la mer*, 1888) and melodies (*Lied maritime*, 1896 ; *Les Yeux de l'aimée*, 1904).

Gilles SAINT ARROMAN
03/03/2020

Trans. Oakley Kiefer

To quote this article: Emmanuel Reibel, "D'Indy, Vincent (1851-1931): Summary of Writings", Dictionary of Composer's Writings, Dictéco [online], ed. E. Reibel, last edited: 26/01/2024, <https://dicteco.huma-num.fr/person/2111>.