

Honegger, Arthur (1892-1955): brief presentation of his writings

Without the slightest tendency to literary writing, Arthur Honegger was nonetheless the author of an important and diverse critical production. Huguette Calmel gathered all his writings in a single [volume](#) of more than 800 pages published by Champion in 1992. Those are organized in four parts: 1) Among “diverse contributions” (300 pages), we can find the answers to surveys about him or about some of his colleagues; texts written after the creation or the hearing of one of his works; sometimes open letters; and finally some musical reviews, in particular when he contributed to the revue *Musique et théâtre* de 1925 à 1926. Throughout his life, Honegger thus published articles in various specialized newspapers or magazines (*Le Courrier musical*, *La Revue musicale*, *La Page musicale*, *L’Information musicale*, *Appogiature*, *Opéra*, *L’Opéra de Paris*, *Le Journal des Jeunesses musicales*, *le Journal musical français*) or other generalist newspapers (*Chantecler*, *Candide*, *Le Mois* or *Excelsior*) ; 2) The “Préfaces” contains a dozen works (about thirty pages each) from the end of the 1930s, answering the requests for a famous composer; 3) The articles of music criticism published in the weekly *Comœdia*, from 1941 to 1944. They represent his most important contribution to journalistic music criticism (more than two hundred pages) and were used to compile an anthology published in 1948 under the title [Incantation aux fossiles](#); 4) The volume [Je suis compositeur](#) (a little more than 100 pages), published in 1951 and composed from the transcription and rewriting of his radio interviews with the critic Bernard Gavoty.

His rather abundant correspondence, yet scattered and largely unpublished, gave rise to three publications: [Lettres à ses parents \(1914-1922\)](#), gathering about 130 letters; [Lettres à Suzanne Charlotte Agassiz \(1942-1954\)](#); and his correspondence with Paul Claudel in [Correspondance musicale](#) of the latter.

For Honegger, musical review was of a secondary nature compared to composition. He considered that being a composer should not imply an inherent task of a meta-poetic production or a theoretician approach: “Speaking of music is always dangerous” (*Comœdia*, n° 1, 1941, also in *Écrits*, p. 373). When he spoke of his own, it was first and foremost a pedagogical manner to ease his comprehension without entering considerations that are too technical. He never ceased to question the interest of scholarly discourse on music and mocks “the cohort of pseudo-scientific musicographers [who] file profound, admirable, nebulous, absconding studies, the reading of which remains incomprehensible to the common man [, and who are] almost always afflicted with an inner deafness that renders them insensitive to the very essence of music” (“Lettre-préface”, 1946, reprinted in *Écrits*, p. 344). When he became a music critic himself, it was always from a distance: “I promised myself that I would remain the musician who writes nothing but music,” he noted in his first article in *Comœdia*, recalling the “nonsense” spouted out by certain critics

which alone allowed them to pass to posterity (adapted in *Écrits*, p. 373). Besides his friendship with René Delange, director of the publication, the financial motivations were undoubtedly important when he accepted the role of critic at *Comœdia* during the Occupation, when cinema had practically ceased to be an important source of income for him.

His criticism was no less sincere and committed, with a true sense of the word. As a composer, he positioned himself as a competent authority in a world of criticism that he divided, in a humorous and provocative way, into three categories: “1° those who have an artistic sense or sensibility, but are technically incompetent; 2° those who are competent, but have no artistic sense; 3° naturally those who have neither artistic sense nor technical competence.” (“Théâtre de musique”, 1926, later adapted in *Écrits*, p. 71). His criticism was always meant to be understanding of the works and the creators, even if it truly revealed his own tastes. According to him in 1949, in addition to Schönberg and Stravinsky, it was Bartok, more than Satie, who “is the true representative of the post-Debussist musical revolution” (“Préface”, 1949, later adapted in *Écrits*, p. 353). In 1947, he prefaced Nicolas Obouhov's *Traité d'harmonie tonale, atonale et totale* but at the end of his life he took a clear stand against René Leibowitz: “I picture twelve-tone composers as convicts who, having broken their chains, would voluntarily tie around their feet hundred-kilo balls to run faster...” (*Je suis compositeur*, 1951, later adapted in *Écrits*, p. 716); on the other hand, he supported the sometimes controversial careers of André Jolivet and, above all, Olivier Messiaen. In fact, he remains keen on the expressive dimension of music instead of the abstraction of a pure research on sound material: “I fully appreciate the fact that music can replace other art forms and I admit it, even though conscious of the contempt that this will earn me among the purists of so-called “pure music”, the evocation of a visual image by a sound combination seems to me, from an artistic point of view, absolutely licit.” (*Comœdia*, n° 1, 1941, adapted in *Écrits*, p. 375). From this arises the issue of the audience and of a readable construction: “[The listener] wants above all 'to see what it represents', whether it be music or painting. If he can follow a strongly understandable idea, he will be intrigued, and his awakened attention will subsequently make the necessary effort. “If, on the contrary, the listener is not engaged in the discourse at the very beginning, and if the latter is subject to too many digressions, he might just abandon the part”. (*Comœdia*, n° 36, 1942, also in *Écrits*, p. 452).

When he seized his quill, it was always with the aim to be useful and defend modern composers. We must “fight against the received idea that a music should at least be a hundred years old to properly exist, or at the very least “understood” - a word without any meaning on a musical perspective - if not listened to and experienced.” (*Comœdia*, n° 1, 1941, also in *Écrits*, p. 374). Rather than an *a posteriori* criticism of the concerts, he sought to encourage the public's curiosity for all the new auditions by constantly questioning the timidity of the musical programming, where the same works and repertoires played in a loop. He tackled conductors without any spontaneity and soloists who used music for their own interests instead of being at its service. “Music is not what matters, but the virtuosity of its execution” (*Je suis compositeur*, 1951, adapted in *Écrits*, p. 723). At the end of his life, he seemed to have lost hope in this cause: “Music does not perish from starvation, but from being

overfed". There is too much production, too much supply for too little demand". The composer no longer had a place in society He thought he was witnessing "the end of our musical civilization, just before the end of our civilization at all." (*Je suis compositeur*, 1951, adapted in *Écrits*, p. 724). This fundamental pessimism did not shadow his truly relevant vision and clarity of the musical life of his time.

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