

Vincent d'Indy, Cours de composition musicale (1902-50)

An essential and problematic work, the [*Cours de composition musicale*](#) dominates Vincent d'Indy's whole literary output.

From 1897 until his death in 1931, d'Indy taught composition at the Schola cantorum in Paris, of which he was a co-founder. His teaching, a mixture of aesthetics and philosophy, history and analysis, and the study of genres and forms, follows a logical and chronological scheme of five "years" (which in practice could take ten years or more). In 1899 he set about writing up this "course" for publication with the assistance of one of his students, Auguste Sérieyx, who from 1900 to 1914 taught the first-year men's harmony class at the Schola. The five years divide amongst three books and four volumes (the second book being split in two), for a total of nearly 1500 pages of text and music examples, of which the publication stretched across the half-century from 1902 to 1950. Following d'Indy's death, Sérieyx undertook the publication of the second part of the second book on his own, and Guy de Lioncourt, the successor to d'Indy's composition class, acquitted himself of the third book after the Second World War.

Such editorial vicissitudes were hardly likely to guarantee the work's conformity to d'Indy's oral teaching. Nor do the various amendments made to the first two volumes on the occasion of new print-runs show much evolution. D'Indy even felt that "in the event of a re-edition of the first book, there would be more than one passage to rewrite" (Guy de Lioncourt, *Un Témoignage sur la musique et sur la vie au xx^e siècle* [Paris: L'Arche de Noé, 1956], pp. 172-3). In terms of form, he regretted Sérieyx's dryness and "watering-down of my accesses of enthusiasm", which "seemed . . . necessary to me, since (besides the fact that they were sincere) they can arouse admiration in students and *do them good*, sometimes *for their whole lives*... I remember the huge effect on me when as a young man I read the exclamations in Berlioz's [*Traité d'orchestration*](#): his 'What a poet!' and 'O Weber!!' and other cries of the heart transposed onto paper did more to guide my career than all the didactic precepts in that treatise, and I regret that you have muted these words which I wrote on purpose" (letter from d'Indy to Sérieyx, 8 Oct. 1909, Bibliothèque cantonale et universitaire de Lausanne, FAS 256). In terms of substance, d'Indy left his collaborator a certain leeway, indeed giving him "credit" and even "responsibility for certain explanations and ideas" (CCM I, pg. 7). In any case, as the critic Henri Quittard noted on the appearance of the second volume, Sérieyx, without changing d'Indy's thought, was probably "obliged to condense it and fix it in a necessarily reduced form", and thereby "unconsciously pruned many nuances that gave it its true character" (*La Revue musicale*, 1 April 1910, pg. 188). Though it must be used with caution, the *Cours de composition* nevertheless remains essential to an understanding of d'Indy's thought.

Much as d'Indy liked to refer to the teaching of his mentor César Franck, his course is highly personal. Approaching his fiftieth year, he was able to draw on his extensive experience and broad culture to fashion an ambitious summa that expounds his conception of the musical art – its religious origins, its expressive and educative goal, its architectural laws, its progressive evolution. The form of the *Cours de composition* is governed by d'Indy's cyclic vision of art history, particularly on display in the theory of the microcosm (CCM I, pg. 5) and the "family tree" of forms (CCM II/1, pg. 13). D'Indy divides the history of Western music into three "eras" – rhythmo-monodic (third to thirteenth centuries), polyphonic (thirteenth to seventeenth centuries), and metrical (seventeenth century "to the present") – but also establishes a fundamental dichotomy between symphonic music (an "art of gesture"), governed by the laws of architecture and symmetry, and dramatic music (an "art of the word"), subject to scenic action and expression. This double division according to eras and genres determines the structure of the work. The first book is devoted to the study of the fundamentals of music (rhythm, melody, notation, harmony, tonality, expression) and the first two eras (monophony and polyphony), the second book to symphonic music, the third to dramatic music.

Hardly dealing with questions of technique, by contrast to Jérôme Joseph Momigny in his *Cours complet d'harmonie et de composition* (1803–6) and Anton Reicha in his *Cours de composition musicale ou Traité complet et raisonné d'harmonie pratique* (1818), d'Indy prioritises the study of form through analysis of canonical works. In so doing, he follows a trend that had been growing throughout the nineteenth century, from Reicha's *Traité de haute composition* (vol. 2, 1826) to Czerny's *School of Practical Composition* (1849) to Émile Durand's *Traité de composition musicale* (1899). He nevertheless stands out among his peers and predecessors in the detail of his analyses and the breadth of the repertoire covered, which ranges from plainchant to Debussy. The work is unmistakably of its time in its ambition to encompass the whole history of Western music, in the appreciable influence of evolutionist thinking on its survey of forms and genres, in its insistence on a unitary conception of works and on the role of tonality and modulation, and in the innovative character of its analyses, which borrow considerably from the ideas on phraseology and tonal function of Hugo Riemann, one of the most important German theorists of the time. Though anchored in medieval philosophy and largely derived from his own experience, d'Indy's musical thought also borrowed from various authors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Mattheson, Rameau, Hegel, Lamennais, Wilhelm von Lenz, Charles Lévêque, Wagner, Tolstoy, Ruskin, etc.).

D'Indy's way of approaching the repertoire is naturally quite subjective. He favours composers who accord with his progressivist vision of art and his principles of expression and construction: Palestrina, Monteverdi, Bach, Rameau, Gluck, and above all Beethoven, Wagner, and Franck. Without denying their genius or their talent, he affords less space for Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Chopin, Schubert, and Liszt. He does not hesitate to analyse modern works (by Dukas, Fauré, Debussy, Richard Strauss, etc.), not to mention a good number of his own. As for genre, instrumental music (sonata, variation, symphony, string quartet) and opera/music-drama receive the most coverage, whereas the fantasia, symphonic poem, character

piece, and *Lied* are studied much more superficially and he make no effort to hide his distaste for the concerto and ballet. Finally, for pedagogical purposes he does not hesitate to underline what he considers the qualities and failings in each score.

By nature, the *Cours de composition musicale* addresses itself first and foremost to apprentice musicians, both performers and composers. D'Indy indeed held that no one should be ignorant of the history of the art: creators can only contribute to its necessary progress by following the route marked out by their predecessors, just as performers can only faithfully interpret the works of the repertoire by understanding their form and studying the style of their authors. In this respect, his conception of teaching differs markedly from that of the Conservatoire at the time, where the mastery of technique took first place. In this sense, the first volumes of the *Cours* amount to a kind of manifesto and were received as such, incurring a response from Camille Saint-Saëns several years later in his pamphlet [*Les Idées de M. Vincent d'Indy*](#). The chapter on harmony, in which d'Indy advances the provocative idea that "chords do not exist" (CCM I, pg. 91), also proved controversial, feeding into the quarrel between the students of the Schola and those of the Conservatoire, "horizontalist" partisans of counterpoint against "verticalist" defenders of harmony. Charles Koechlin even alluded to it in the Avant-Propos of his [*Traité de l'harmonie*](#) (1927). By contrast, the slowness with which the last two volumes came out considerably weakened their impact and harmed their reception. While the work as a whole might appear arbitrary in certain aspects of its organisation, erroneous or obsolete from the musicological point of view, dated in its classification and politico-ideological allusions (not least its antisemitism), it remains an indispensable document of its time and of its author's formation and aesthetic. While the analyses of works are open to discussion, they retain their interest in that they come from an incontestable master of the compositional process. It is no doubt for this reason that the *Cours de composition*, despite quickly coming to appear reactionary with respect to the twentieth-century revolution in the musical language, exercised a profound influence on the education of generations of musicians. Besides those who came from all over the world to take d'Indy's course at the Schola, it was studied by artists as different as Heitor Villa-Lobos, Michael Tippett, and Henri Dutilleux, and has even been translated into Japanese (more recently, the first book has been translated into English). Olivier Messiaen himself took inspiration from it for his teaching at the Paris Conservatoire.

Gilles SAINT-ARROMAN

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Trans. Tadhg Sauvey

Further reading

Rémy Campos, « Le *Cours de composition* de Vincent d'Indy », *Théories de la composition musicale au xx^e siècle*, sous la direction de Nicolas Donin et Laurent Feneyrou, Lyon, Symétrie, 2013, vol. 1, p. 67-92.

Alice Gabeaud, *Auprès du Maître Vincent d'Indy. Souvenirs des cours de composition*, Paris, Editions de la Schola Cantorum, 1933.

Herbert Schneider, « Voraussetzungen und Bedingungen des Komponierens. Zum *Cours de composition* von Vincent d'Indy », dans *Französische und deutsche Musik im 20. Jahrhundert*, Herausgegeben von Giselher Schubert, Frankfurter Studien VII, Mainz, Schott, 2001, p. 47-64.

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