Henri Duparc (1838–1933): An Overview of His Writings

Henri Duparc left few musical works and still fewer public writings. Self-critical to the point of destroying several of his manuscripts – including that of his only opera, *Roussalka*, for which he had written his own libretto – he was also dogged by significant health problems which, from the 1880s on, made any creative or literary work extremely difficult. Aside from a few articles published in the press (and written for the most part with the aid of a third party), his literary output consists mainly of a huge correspondence which affords an exceptional glimpse into his creative world, as well as aesthetic reflections that go well beyond the boundaries of his own work.

Except for an article on Camille Saint-Saëns published in the *Journal de musique* in March 1877, all of the few texts published by Duparc in the musical or cultural press arose from outside requests. These include responses to *enquêtes* (the *enquête* or survey being a very popular journalistic genre at the time): in 1904 and 1912, Duparc participated in *enquêtes* on French music carried out respectively by Paul Landormy in *La Revue bleue* and Pierre Montamet in *Excelsior*, and in 1913 he responded to one on Verdi for a special issue of *Musica*.

Two articles of larger scope resulted similarly from commissions or requests for information addressed to Duparc. In 1911, to mark the fortieth anniversary of the Société nationale de musique (of which Duparc was a founding member), Jules Écorcheville asked for an article of souvenirs of the organisation's beginnings, through the intermediary of the conductor and writer Ernest Ansermet, who wrote the text based on interviews with Duparc. The result appeared in late 1912 in the *Revue musicale S.I.M.*, without mentioning Ansermet's collaboration (documented by Duparc's correspondence). In 1922, Julien Tiersot solicited Duparc's reminiscences of the activities of their teacher César Franck during the siege of Paris in 1870–71; Duparc responded with a letter of which Tiersot published a long extract in the *Revue musicale*.

Besides his profound reverence for Franck (who represented in his eyes the supreme ideal of a composer whose music comes from the heart), substantial elements of Duparc's aesthetic transpire in these various publications. A convinced nationalist in politics, Duparc took not the slightest interest in national "schools" in music; for him, art should dwell in a realm of freedom above of any kind of label.

These ideas are developed much further in Duparc's private writings, which represent the bulk of his literary output. While he left no theoretical treatise, he regularly wrote down his aesthetic reflections, notably in his "Notes intimes" of which several extracts were published by Charles Oulmont in an article and book in 1935 (just before a fire at the château of Mondégourat, Duparc's family property,

destroyed the autograph manuscript of these notes). Additionally, Duparc sometimes sent drafts of theoretical texts to certain of his correspondents, as for example his “Notes sur le drame musical” appended to a letter to Jean Cras in April 1920.

In general, it was in his letters that Duparc developed his aesthetic reflections in most depth. From the early 1870s to the mid 1920s, he maintained a busy correspondence with composers such as César Franck, Gabriel Fauré, Ernest Chausson, Vincent d’Indy, Auguste Sérieyx and Charles Bordes, with performers such as Ansermet, the pianist Francis Planté, and the wine merchant and singing teacher Paul Charriol, and with writers including Francis Jammes and Charles de Bordeu. Parts of this rich correspondence – or of half of it, the letters received by Duparc having all been lost in the fire of 1935 – have been published, making accessible more than 350 missives in Duparc’s hand. Many more remain unpublished, however; several can be consulted at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, but most are held in private archives (see Stricker 1961, pp. 99–100 and van der Elst 1972, pp. 412–3).

In his letters, Duparc naturally discusses his own works, describing a creative process that grows more and more laborious as his health deteriorates, discussing his ideas on musical dramaturgy and prosody (he wanted them to be as natural as possible), and seeking help from Sérieyx and Ansermet with proofreading his scores once his failing eyesight prevented him from doing it himself. But he pays even closer attention to works sent him by his correspondents, taking the time to commentate in great detail; this is particularly true in the case of Chausson, a close friend whom he diligently advised during the genesis of the opera *Le Roi Arthus*, and also of Cras, a naval officer and budding composer for whom he took on a mentoring role, as well as, in the literary sphere, Jammes, of whom he analysed with manifest enthusiasm every publication that reached him.

Altogether, Duparc’s writings, public and private, trace the contours of an eminently Romantic musical aesthetic, in which the search for expression goes hand in hand with an ardent thirst for independence. For Duparc, it was essential to belong to no school; moreover, public recognition had no importance in his eyes. This stance is eloquently expressed in one of the passages from his “Notes intimes”, published by Oulmont: “For the reasonable and sincere artist, complete artistic freedom begins with contempt for public opinion: the only thing to be desired is the affinity of a few souls who look for traces of the soul in what is written” (*Mercure de France*, 15 March 1935, pg. 479).

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Further reading

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