

Rodolphe Mathieu (1890-1962): An Overview of His Writings

The complete writings of Rodolphe Mathieu comprise two notebooks of private reflections, an unfinished version of an educational guide designed to identify musical potential in children, three articles published in 1918-19, and a volume entitled *Parlons... musique* (*Let's Talk Music*, 1932) which compiles essays published in various newspapers between 1928 and 1932 plus a number of unpublished chapters.

An original mind, freethinking and self-taught, the Québécois composer Rodolphe Mathieu cuts an enigmatic figure on the interwar musical scene. A precursor of musical modernity, he tried through self-reflection and scientific reading to understand not only the process of musical creation but also the universe in which we live, starting from the origins of life, astronomy, matter, and human behaviour. Refusing to adhere to the dictates of the Catholicism of the time and an open atheist, he sought to develop his own ideas and find personal answers to the great questions of life.

Seen as a recluse withdrawn from social activity, Mathieu began to write down his first reflections haphazardly, without a set plan. These reflections constitute the first manuscript notebook, entitled *Problèmes-Aperception*, a 1208-page document written between about 1915 and 1930. "He is preparing a book of essays dealing with 'Human Consciousness', 'Infinite Consciousness', 'The Birth of the Human Race on Earth', and other aphorisms on philosophy, music, and morality", writes Léo-Pol Morin in an article of May 1918 devoted to Mathieu and published in the first modern and multidisciplinary magazine in Québec, *Le Nigog* ("Rodolphe Mathieu and the *Terroir*", *Le Nigog*, May 1918, periodical republished by Comeau & Nadeau, 1998, pp. 158-62). The previous February, the same journal had published some of Mathieu's ideas, in the form of aphorisms, on his conception of composition, in which he calls into question the traditional theories of musical form as imparted by the treatises of the time in favour of an individual and personal design: "Musical forms must be relative to our expressive needs. They must never be determined in advance in a definite plan which almost always turns out the same, for the work would be no longer living but a rigid structure" ("*Perceptions*", *Le Nigog*, Feb. 1918, repub. Comeau & Nadeau, 1998, pp. 49-50, in Lefebvre 2000, pp. 5-8).

The manuscript of *Problèmes-Aperception* comprises three sections. Mathieu began the first, "Conscience et expression" ("Consciousness and Expression"), in Montreal around 1915 and finished it in January 1921 in Paris, where he had been living since April of the previous year. He worked on the second, "Pensées et problèmes" ("Thoughts and Problems"), devoted to the analysis of the creative process, through

July 1922. The last section was probably written after his return to Québec and concerns the states of waking and dreaming, but one senses the difficulties that he encountered in mastering still relatively new concepts on these psychological states. Whilst staying in Paris, Mathieu had in fact attended the discussions of the “Groupe d’études philosophiques et scientifiques pour l’examen des idées nouvelles” (Philosophic and Scientific Study Group for the Examination of New Ideas), founded in 1922 by the psychoanalyst René Allendy (1889–1942), which brought together artists, scientists and intellectuals. The encounter left traces on this first manuscript.

The second document, a 596-page typescript entitled [*Le Dernier Testament ou les Vérités révélées par les faits*](#) (*The Last Testament, or, Truth Revealed by Fact*), was written between 1947 and 1952, under the pseudonym Lange A. Tomik. Here, Mathieu surveys the politico-religious landscape and takes a critical and sometimes cynical look at his time and at the conservative society that then controlled the individual’s fate by refusing any right to originality of thought. The title ironically alludes to the indisputable sources of doctrine in the Catholic Church and is in itself a provocation that would have triggered immediate censorship had it been published.

In the 1950s, Mathieu wrote an educational tract entitled [*Tests d’aptitude musicale*](#) (*Musical Aptitude Tests*), an unfinished 71-page typescript modelled on the studies of Édouard Claparède, who had lectured to the “Groupe d’études philosophiques et scientifiques” and published two books on the subject: *L’orientation professionnelle : ses problèmes, ses méthodes* (Geneva: BIT, 1922), and *Comment diagnostiquer les aptitudes chez les écoliers* (Paris: Flammarion, 1924). Mathieu submitted a preliminary version to the Royal Society of Canada in 1955 in hopes of obtaining funding to complete his research on career guidance for young musicians. This award having been refused, he abandoned the study.

Besides these unpublished documents and the *Nigog* article, in 1919, before departing for Paris where he lived from 1920 to 1925, Mathieu published two articles in the liberal newspaper *Le Canada*: [“Une question de programme : l’initiation artistique”](#) on 4 April and [“Les musiciens canadiens en tournée”](#) (“Canadian Musicians on Tour”) on 2 May. In both cases, he addresses musicians and especially pianists directly, asking them to offer more substantial programs rather than standbys, and thus to familiarise the public with unpublished or unfamiliar works.

But it was only between 1928 and 1932, after his return from Europe, that Mathieu published fourteen articles, some of them polemical, especially those concerning the use of folklore as a source of inspiration and a proposal for the nationalisation of musical production, realised only in the early sixties with the establishment of a government programme for commissioning new works. Eleven of these essays, to which Mathieu added seventeen previously unpublished ones, make up the anthology published in 1932 under the title [*Parlons...musique*](#) (see the relevant entry).

Going against the nationalist and conservative discourse of his times - in which a historian as influential as Fr Lionel Groulx could write that "to deviate from the traditional psychology and give oneself over to singularity and individualism would be nothing less than to sacrifice true humanity for a morbid psychologism in which the human personality dissolves into instinct and impulsive anarchy" (*Nos responsabilités intellectuelles*, Association catholique de la jeunesse, leaflet n° 6, 1928) - Mathieu insisted, in both his writings and his music, on the primacy of the subject and the importance of personal expression, the necessary basis for any original artistic creation. In this, he was a pioneer of modernity.

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Further reading

- *Rodolphe Mathieu, Choix de textes inédits annotés par Marie-Thérèse Lefebvre*, Montréal, Guérin éditeur, 2000.
- *Tests d'aptitude musicale* : Fonds Famille (MUS 165), Bibliothèque et Archives Canada (BAC).
- Marie-Thérèse Lefebvre, *Rodolphe Mathieu. L'Émergence du statut professionnel de compositeur au Québec*, Québec, Septentrion, 2004, p. 102-106.

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