

D'Indy, Vincent (1851-1931): brief presentation of his writings

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

The author took an early habit of expressing his feelings and ideas in his writings. Between 1863 and 1869, he wrote about his travelling or holidays experiences in notebooks. From 1869 to 1877, he kept more or less regularly a diary which he entitled *Ma Vie*, probably unaware that Wagner had given the same title to his own autobiography (*Mein Leben*, 1870). Under the title *Ma Vie*, the 2001 publication containing extensive excerpts of his youth's notebooks as well as a substantial anthology of his correspondence allowed to perceive in a new light this once so controversial and influent musician. These early writings are indeed full of observations and considerations, often highly developed and related not only to music but also to the plastic 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. Finally, the corpus 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 the musician's first travels in Europe (Belgium, Italy, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Spain).

With over three hundred addressees identified, d'Indy's correspondence, still largely unpublished, is one of the most considerable compared to the other musicians' correspondences of the same period. Throughout his life, the musician was a highly prolific writer of letters, whether destined to his family and friends or of a professional order. His aesthetic reflection and the biographical thread initiated in his diary were completed and extended with his early saga-letters to his cousin Edmond de Pampelonne, those he wrote almost every day to his wife Isabelle from 1875 to 1905 during his travels, or when he was in Paris and she in Ardèche. Among the other most remarkable collections 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. These testify of the multiplicity of his interests and activities, but also of his work as an author which he only shared among his close relatives.

Although reluctant in his youth to write or speak in public, d'Indy published *Histoire du 105e bataillon de la Garde nationale*, as early as 1872, in which he recounts 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 "militant" musician (concert reviews for the Société nationale de musique,

presentations of concert programs, prefaces to his scores' editions, jury reports for composition competitions, a project to organise teaching at Conservatoire de Paris). From the last years of the 19th century onwards, his functions as director of the Schola Cantorum led him to multiply his statements, whether through his speeches, lectures, articles, replies to surveys, open letters or interviews. The prestige that his brilliant career and his position as leader have brought him also made him a sought-after preface writer. On the other hand, he refused for a long time 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 impactful. D'Indy was an idealistic and uncompromising man of conviction who was not afraid of polemics but rather seeking it. Over his entire career, the very unequal dimensions of his public statements published in the press amount to nearly 400 texts, many of which are 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 or even causticity resulting in the making of 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 20th century marked by the flowering of the avant-garde. Also, in a tense historical context, (the Dreyfus case, separation between Church and State, open conflict with Germany), he didn't back from defending political and religious ideas going 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 on Walter Willson Cobbet's *Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music* (1929) in which he notably did the articles on Beethoven and Franck. Nonetheless, his most notable literary work remained the impressive [Cours de composition musicale](#) (1902-1950), a written format of his teachings at the Schola Cantorum encompassing his artistic doctrine. However, this book must be used with caution, due to the posthumous publication of two of the four volumes that constituted it and the important part taken in its drafting by his collaborators Auguste Sérieyx and Guy de Lioncourt.

Lastly he 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 those of his following works : [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 symbolical 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).

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03/03/2020

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To quote this article: Emmanuel Reibel, "D'Indy, Vincent (1851-1931): brief presentation of his writings", Dictionary of Composer's Writings, Dicteco [online], ed. E. Reibel, last edited: 25/08/2020, <https://dicteco.huma-num.fr/person/2111>.