

Reynaldo Hahn, Notes (Journal d'un musicien) (1933)

Consisting of a selection of journal entries dating from the middle of the 1890s to the years preceding the First World War, *Notes (Journal d'un musicien)* was published by Plon in Paris during the summer of 1933 (ii+293 pp.). Hahn would have liked to have titled it *Notes sans portée* (where “portée” can mean either “musical staff” or “significance”), but the pun had already been used by Willy for the title of a collection published by Flammarion in 1896. *Notes* comprises three large sections: “Juvenilia”, “Rome, Venice, London, Bucharest, Berlin”, and “The Eve of the War”. An earlier version of the parts on Rome and Venice had already been published in October 1928 in *La Revue hebdomadaire*, with the title “Fragments d'un journal”. To complete the 1933 volume, some [“Nouveaux souvenirs inédits”](#) would subsequently appear in seven instalments in *Candide* (August–September 1935), a weekly of Maurassian sympathies whose literary pages however were somewhat immune to the nationalist and antisemitic tendency. In 1949 Plon republished [Notes](#) in its original form, without the later additions, under the simplified title of *Journal d'un musicien*.

In his foreword, Hahn apologises for “certain naiveties” attributable to his “shameful youth” at the time he began to keep his journal, which “has very often been interrupted”. He had redacted numerous passages concerned with music out of a worry that “impressions . . . rapidly jotted down . . . might be wrongly taken”, as well as pages “marked by an overly intimate character” or revealing his “compositional worries”. Recalling that he is only an “occasional writer” and that “French is not even [his] native language”, he asks for his readers’ “indulgence”.

There follows a collection of stories and encounters, incisive narrations of his social life, impressions of his travels, intimate reflections, and aesthetic judgements touching on all the arts (though the moderns are practically absent). Among the persons encountered along the way are Pauline Viardot, Gustave Moreau, Hortense Schneider, Pierre Loti, Mallarmé, and Saint-Saëns. Hahn also relates his frequentation of the salon of Princess Mathilde Bonaparte, who “expresses opinions of homespun simplicity with a curmudgeonly good nature” (pg. 12), as well as that of Alphonse Daudet (“charming, full of gaiety, with a wise eye”, pg. 21), where he spent time with Edmond de Goncourt who “spoke to him at length about painting”, not to mention the coterie of the Princesse de Polignac, with whom, after a dinner at the Palazzo Contarini in Venice, he and other invitees “read through a hundred Italian operas, singing and playing all the roles” (pg. 187). Hahn can occasionally be sardonic faced with certain foibles of high society, as during a dinner hosted by Madame de Pourtalès where “elegance and futility” went hand in hand: “The L.s,

husband and wife - he of singular insignificance, she with the air of a concierge who has spent some time in school. The C.s, he personifying roundness, she myopia" (pg. 100).

Hahn in his peregrinations comes across as curious about everything. Thus, he is by turns impressed by "the love of the pompous and enormous, the unbridled megalomania" prevailing in Germany (pg. 240), charmed by the "enchanting" yet "juvenile" Venetian dialect (pg. 179), stirred in the royal gardens of Versailles where he experiences "a sort of dilation of the whole being before so much that is vast, pure, mysterious, gilded!" (pg. 83). As for music, which despite the disclaimers to the contrary comes up many times, it belongs to his constant search for an "art [that] attains a high degree of expressive power only when it imitates life" (pg. 283). But "good music" must also gird itself with "a sort of glazing that must cover everything and that [. . .] highlights the less colourful parts and dims the overly vivid tints" (pg. 12). Mozart therefore presides over his pantheon, which also includes Gluck, Schumann, Chopin, Mendelssohn, Gounod, Saint-Saëns, and Massenet but also Offenbach and Messager.

Though the *Revue des lectures* (15 Aug. 1933) complained that the work offered only "somewhat tedious notes" and "few passages on musical questions", Henry Malherbe in *Le Temps* it considered it "something like an essay in comparative aesthetics" (16 Aug. 1933). Malherbe saw in the author "a disciple of Maurice Barrès", whereas for Léon Daudet his prose was rather "inspired by the famous *Journal* of the Goncourts" and proved worthy of "what contemporaries said about Rivarol's conversation: 'fireworks launched on the water'" (*Candide*, 20 July 1933). The opinion was shared by Dominique Sordet, who did not find "in the history of music many composers so gifted when it comes to general intelligence, artistic sensibility, and culture" (*Ric et Rac*, 2 Sept. 1933). Guy de Pourtalès too rated Hahn highly, calling him "the most unpredictable and discerning of art critics": "Since Berlioz's *Mémoires* and Debussy's *Monsieur Croche antidilettante*, I know of no book by a musician that can be compared to it" (*Marianne*, 2 Aug. 1933).

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