

# Arthur Honegger

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**ARTHUR HONEGGER.**

By René Elvin.

*Arthur Honegger, famous Swiss composer and one of the great figures in contemporary music, recently celebrated his sixtieth birthday. His masterpiece, the oratorio "King David," has been given in London by the Royal Choral Society. René Elvin, who knows Honegger well and who paid a broadcast homage to him in the B.B.C. Music Magazine on his birthday, tells here something of the man and his work.*

It would be both pleasant and useful if men of genius or outstanding talent always looked the part; the people whose work we admire most are so often disappointing to meet, and so insignificant to look at! Fortunately there are some cases in which the physical appearance is truly the outward sign of the spirit within.

Of such is the Swiss composer Arthur Honegger. You have only to look at his leonine head, so strongly reminiscent of Beethoven, with its mighty forehead topped with a luxuriant head of hair, long, raven-black and only recently turned to grey, to know instinctively that here is someone uncommon — a "king among men".

What is more, that impression remains when listening to him, and it is likely to be strengthened the more one listens to his works. I would not, like the student asked to specify the minor prophets of the Old Testament, "make invidious comparisons between holy men" and try to name the greatest among contemporary composers, but most competent critics agree that Arthur Honegger is certainly one of them.

**SEARCH FOR STYLE**

Born in 1892 in the French seaport of Le Havre, where his father was in business Honegger showed the early signs of a musical disposition so usual in masters of the art that they can hardly be called precocious. His budding talent was lovingly fostered at home, and he later worked under the very best teachers of the Zurich and Paris conservatories. His early essays in composition show him still searching for an individual style among conflicting influences.

Then, towards the end of the first World War, he formed with his fellow-pupils Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, Georges Auric, Louis Durey and Germaine Tailleferre, a group of which the young

writer Jean Cocteau made himself the brilliant spokesman, and which was to become world-famous as *Les Six*.

The earnest discussions between them, but even more Honegger's own quest for his personal mode of expression, resulted in his finding at last his guiding star and revered master in Johann Sebastian Bach.

Honegger's earliest large-scale work, the masque *Le Dit des Jeux du Monde*, was first performed in December, 1918. It embodied the harsh dissonances expressing a world still out of joint, but they were kept in check by his new-found self-discipline. The work created something of sensation, and Honegger was henceforth a marked, if not a made, man.

In the early 1920's he wrote a number of melodies and chamber music works, still violently dissonant, in accordance with the then prevailing musical atmosphere. They were received with vociferous enthusiasm by the partisans of the "new" music, and rejected with equally loud marks of disapproval by those of the old.

The decisive turning point in Honegger's career came with a work which marked a completely new departure in his style: the now world-famous oratorio *King David*.

The circumstances of its composition were interesting, as they show that the composer, even while he was following the trends of his time, remained at heart a true son of his Swiss homeland.

High in the verdant hills and dark pinewoods of the Jorat district above Lausanne lies the pleasant little village of Mézières. There, some forty years ago, the Swiss writer, René Morax, founded a festival where simple dramas with music and dance were performed during the summer months by local talent, with the occasional help of outside professionals.

In 1921 Morax, having completed a Biblical play on the life of King David, looked around for a composer to write the incidental music. Time was short: the work had to be done within two months, and the musicians to whom he offered the job declined it, as they felt they could not do themselves justice at such short notice. When all seemed lost, Morax asked the advice of the Swiss conductor, Ernest Ansermet, who told him that he knew the very man for the job. Honegger accepted at once.

It was as if that simple religious text had released in him hidden springs previously lying dormant just

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as, two centuries ago, the compilation made from the Bible by Charles Jennens brought to white heat the genius of Handel and produced *Messiah*. In fact, there is something of Handelian grandeur in Honegger's score; and, in a good performance, the effect is overwhelming.

Soon choirs began to clamour for the new oratorio. Honegger arranged the 27 brief numbers of the original version, scored for 15 instrumentalists only, into a full-scale "symphonic psalm", and, in that form, *King David* has been performed all over the world, and is still the composer's best-known work.

#### " RAILWAY " MUSIC

Close to *King David* in popularity for a number of years was Honegger's next orchestral work, the symphonic movement *Pacific 231*. It was written in 1923, a period when composers were impressed, indeed obsessed, by the machine. It owed its title to the locomotive of that type, and its inspiration to the feeling of physical elation produced by the dynamic energy of an engine hauling a heavy train at top speed. In common with most small boys, Honegger has always been fond of railway engines, and he loves to drive them; he is, in fact, a skilled locomotive driver: during a concert tour through Englanud in 1927 the L.N.E.R. let him drive a special train from King's Cross to Hitchin, which he did with the greatest gusto and without the slightest mishap.

Honegger's production has been almost as prolific and his works are as varied as those of his "master", Johann Sebastian Bach. They comprise, next to many songs, piano pieces, film scores and chamber music works, tone poems like *Rugby*, the musical apotheosis of football; concertos; symphonies like the *Symphonie Liturgique* recently broadcast in the BBC Third Programme; and a number of large-scale works, some first conceived for the stage, and later arranged in concert form, such as the biblical drama *Judith*, the lyrical tragedy *Antigone*, the ballets *L'Impératrice aux Rochers* and *Sémiramis*.

He has also written the incidental music for Paul Claudel's mystery play, *Jeanne d'Arc au Bûcher* (*Joan of Arc at the Stake*), which makes a striking use of the Martenot musical wave instrument and created a deep impression at two BBC concerts; a "modern oratorio" for soli, chorus and orchestra entitled *Les Cris du Monde*; and even a sprightly operetta, *Les Aventures du Roi Pausole*, so light-hearted that few people knowing Honegger

only by his more serious works would have credited him with the frolicsome spirit that animates it.

#### LOATHES HUMBUG

In fact, nothing comes to him more naturally than simplicity. Honegger is a friendly soul, completely unassuming, and eminently one who can "walk with kings, nor lose the common touch". There is, however, one thing he loathes: pretentious humbug.

I remember with almost embarrassing vividness an incident that occurred years ago when we went together to the Salle Pleyel, at that time the newest concert hall in Paris, to hear an English pianist whose now well-known name no wild horses will drag out of me.

The artist, then quite new to the French public, had been advertised rather extravagant publicity, but was so obviously nervous as to be completely out of touch, and made some rather dreadful slips. Honegger, who had groaned audibly as the wrong notes multiplied, finally pounced forward from the stalls like a lion falling on his prey, shouting in his stentorian voice: "Enough! enough! go back to where you came from! How much did you pay to play here?"

The pianist looked up, saw the embattled Honegger looking ready to tear her limb from limb — and disappeared more dead than alive.

Though he does not suffer the pretentious, the talentless, or the fools gladly, Honegger has proved on countless occasions to be an enthusiastic and selfless upholder of all that is best in modern music.

He himself is, beyond a doubt, the greatest living Swiss composer, and one of the foremost musicians in the world today.

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