

ARTHUR HONEGGER

David C F Wright

Oscar-Arthur Honegger was born in Le Havre on 10 March 1892 of Swiss parents. He studied at the Zurich and Paris Conservatories with Widor and D'Indy and he became member of Les Six, the others being Auric, Durey, Milhaud, Poulenc and Tailleferre.

Honegger's earliest works date from about 1916 which works have a Gallic charm as shown in his *Pastorale d'Ete*. His orchestral work, a ballet, *Horace Victorieux* owes much to Richard Strauss, but it was his oratorio *Le Roi David* which made his name. It is a work of simple design and utterance with excellent contrapuntal features and a symphonic style that does not clog the texture. Not so his symphony no 1 of 1930 which, like the Elgar symphonies, are clearly thick and turgid as many musicians confirm. But, unlike Elgar, Honegger's later works are noted for their clarity. His *Symphony no 2* for string orchestra with a trumpet ad libitum in the finale is a fine work although Karajan's recording does the work a great disservice. Honegger looked upon this work as the expression of his feeling about Europe in crisis and the trumpet speaks of hope as opposed to the dark colours of the previous movements. There are moments of tranquillity, grotesque humour and powerful muscular music.



The *Symphony no 3*, the *Liturgique* has the opening movement *Dies Irae* is very exciting and contains virtuosity as it does in the finale of *Symphony no 5*. The other movements of the *Symphony no 3*, *De profundis Clamavi* and *Dona Nobis Pacem* are cleverly set in the dark parts of the orchestra and the work has a glorious serene close.

The *Symphony no 4*, *The Delights of Basel*, is for a chamber orchestra also has a dark-hued palette. It has dotted rhythms reminiscent of the *French Overture*. There is excellent woodwind decoration as in the opening of the *Symphony no 5*. The piano is used in the *Fourth Symphony* to vary the texture and this symphony dates from 1946 as does the *Concerto da camera* for flute, cor anglais and string orchestra, a diverting work written for Paul Sacher, the celebrated Swiss conductor.

The Koussevitzky Foundation commissioned the *Symphony no 5* for the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1951, and is a tour de force for this great orchestra particularly in the first movement. But the work may be hindered because of the other somewhat frivolous movements. However the excellent Symphonic Movements are recalled in the opening movement as they also show superb orchestration.

Honegger often said that he did not wish to be a slave to texts and literature yet his large works have employed voices and a narrator. Such works as *Le Roi David*, the opera *Judith*, the opera *Antigone*, *Jeanne D'Arc au Bucher* and *Le Danse des Morts*. Honegger felt that *Antigone* was his best work in which he uses a highly contrapuntal style. *Jeanne D'Arc* has spoken parts which often calls for less musical treatment. Nonetheless, the conclusion of this work is both riveting and deeply profound and gives a real satisfaction that music rarely gives.

I cannot understand why people make so much of 'serious' composers using jazz. This is the case in

Honegger's Concertino for piano and orchestra which starts as a sort of charming divertimento before it degenerates into crude, vulgar music. His most successful piano work is probably the Toccata and Variations of 1916.

In 1926, Honegger married Andree Vaurabourg, who was a pianist and fellow student, on the condition that they lived in separate apartments. This was so, apart from 1935-6 when Mrs Honegger was involved in a car accident, and also in the last year of Honegger's life when he could not live alone. He had a son, Jean -Claude (1926-2003) with the singer Claire Crozia. With Andree he had a daughter, Pascale, born 1932. Between these two children and, in 1929, he composed his Cello Concerto sometimes said to be his only 'real' concerto.

There are three string quartets of which the last is a fine work with a strong opening movement, a glowing slow movement and an upbeat finale.

He composed seven operas, one with Ibert entitled L'Aiglon of 1937, three operettas and revues with his interest in light music. They certainly do not have the quality of his other works such as the Three Symphonic Movements which include Pacific 231 and Rugby which are tour de forces. Pacific 231 expressed his love for the steam locomotive and, for the pianist Marguerite Long, he composed Scenic Railway.



Les six

He wrote some film scores, two violin sonatas, a viola sonata, a cello sonata and songs which do not seem to have fared well.

It is sad to relate that Honegger suffered from depression from time to time and this caused him to doubt what musical path to travel. As with other composers, there may have been more income in writing lesser works. His depression was made worse by the war.

His last work was the Christmas Cantata of 1953.

He died of a heart attack on 27 November 1955.

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