

EMILE GOUÉ

David C F Wright DMus

Emile Goué is another tragic figure in the world of music. He suffered at the hands of the Nazis which makes our repugnance at the Nazi regime valid and justified.

He was born in Chateauroux, France on 13 June 1904 and his career began as a scientist obtaining a degree in physics when he was twenty five. When he died in 1946 he was Professor of Mathematics at Louis-le-Grand. He was a brilliant academic but that was not the only string to his bow since he loved music and called it a metaphysical activity and inseparable from his life.

Metaphysical is a strange word to use. It means abstract, abstruse, unduly theoretical of, if we go to the seventeenth century, it refers to the work of poets who used elaborate imagery and intense feelings. Music for Goué was a passion and a philosophy.

He entered the Toulouse Conservatory in 1924 when the director was Aymé Kunc who was born in Toulouse in 1877 and died there in 1958. He was a composer but better known as a teacher.



Goué went to Paris in 1936 receiving guidance from Albert Roussel. Charles Koechlin took Goué as a pupil. The war intervened and Goué was called up and became a prisoner of war from June 1940 to May 1945. He was interred in Oflag XB in Neinberg. This had an overwhelming effect on him and often destroyed his spirit. He fought the effects and became Professor of Mathematics. But he only survived for about eighteen months after his release. He died in a sanatorium outside Paris on 10 October 1946. He was 42.

His early music may show some influence of Debussy but when he was a prisoner his music improved and became more mature and, at times, he expressed his inner torments. He would take a theme and develop it. He was concerned with form and logic but still maintained the thought that tonality was not dead and that it was the fundamental basis of music. His sufferings made his music profound.

Someone has written that a pianist composer said that nothing is more detestable than music without an idea behind it, and that this quotation applies to Goué. I would take issue with this and strongly. Does every work have an idea behind it? What music has no idea behind it? A friend who is a concert pianist of renown says that the only idea behind some works is the desire to show off. Does that count.? Some music is sterile. What is the idea behind that? Surely sterile music is detestable. There is a lot of music that says nothing.

It is said the Goué was once fascinated by form following in the line of Vincent D'Indy. It is clear that music must have form and coherence. Certain fantasies and rhapsodies can be formless and, therefore, unsatisfactory having no logic or direction.

Goué had excellent contrapuntal skills and it is interesting to note that his music does not sound French. In fact, it sounds more Germanic with his musical language which is original as all composers should be. His music is hardly known but deserves to be known.

There is sometimes a modality in his music such as in the Deux Nocturnes of 1936 which deals with the river bank and the lighthouse. It has a feel of melancholy and the rhythmic content may suggest the activity of the waves. This surprisingly glorious music is unlike any other nocturnes and vastly superior to many. They call for sensitive playing. The second is more dramatic and dark and is disturbing. The composer was fascinated by the sea as shown again in his work Les jeux de l'océan sur les falaises de Vendée. This comes from his opera Wanda of 1934. To me it is very dark and, if the sea is again portrayed, it is the sea at night awaiting sunrise. There is a mighty climax and the tolling of a bell.

The Ambiance Suite no 1 Op 11 is in three movements said to be influenced by Debussy. The movements are Chanson folle, Le sanglot monocorde et mavourant de nos rêves and Clown Triste. I can detect some Debussy, which is worrying. I did not respond to the first piece as it depended on ostinato upper piano cascades which is wearisome. The second piece meanders somewhat but is still well-written. The last piece is said to be sad but it is a joyous fun piece and the best piece in this suite by far... a splendid piece.

It has been remarked that when Goué was weaned off Debussy his music was vastly better.

The Petite Suite Facile no 1 Op 18 is three tiny pieces. Although simple, they are not trite and are set in a neo-classical style. The central piece is Question sans répose, a title used by Charles Ives in his piece The Unanswered Question. There is a second Petite Suite Facile Op 21 with three pieces entitled Fugue enfantine, Chant de Quiétude and Pantomime.

The set of three pieces Prehistories Op 40 is a mature work in his own developed style. The Debussy influence is gone. The originality is stunning and the dissonances are glorious. These pieces were written in 1943 when he was a prisoner of war and the feelings of his incarceration are here... the anger and the despair, yet the music is not an Edwardian wallow. The final movement called Invocation has a march which depicts madness with many varying harmonies before it calms down.

The Prelude, Choral and Fugue Op 37 is a title Franck used in 1884 for a piano work. Goué wrote this in 1941 in his prison camp. It is a very fine achievement. He was able to write to his wife Yvonne on 7 April 1943 posting this work and his three Rilke Songs dedicated to her and their three children. The prelude is monothematic as Haydn used in the first movement of his Symphony no 84. Goué uses various harmonies and a syncopated rhythm with an ostinato figure. The Chorale is poetic with some fascinating chords and the anguish of his circumstances are here. The Fugue is a super piece and does not suffer from academia. The contrapuntal skill is evident as is the chromaticism. Careful listeners may detect an air of fatality. The composer must have thought about his own morality and if he was to survive.

I have often pondered how anyone could write such fine music in these depressing and tormenting circumstances

His other major piano work is the Sonata Op 13 of 1931 which prefigures his mature style that was to emerge. The neo-classical style is set against a modern style which becomes predominant and is



polytonal. The second movement has a majesty about it with a simple melody enhanced in a mysterious atmosphere. The last movement is very lively and rounds off a fine sonata.

There are other piano works, but I believe I have mentioned enough of them to engender interest.

His suffering as a prisoner of war reminds us of how obscene war is. Despite what many assert, the majority of wars are caused by greed and the insatiable thirst for power and not religion. War sends innocent young people into the front line and to death, and, as it has been remarked, that as Bush and Blair declared war on Iraq, then they should have been in the front line from the very beginning.

Had Goué survived what other gems would he have written? He was deprived of his life by Nazi socialism, and his wife and children were left bereft, and we have been deprived of a progressive and obvious talent.

© COPYRIGHT David C F Wright, DMus 2012 – This article or any part of it, however small, must not be copied, quoted, reproduced, downloaded or altered in any way whatsoever nor stored in any retrieval system. Failure to comply is in breach of International Copyright Law and will render any offender liable to action at law.

With thanks to Peter Cook for supplying recordings.