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| Honegger, Arthur (1892-1955) |
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| Composer Arthur Honegger was one of a group of six young French composers, known as *Les Six*, in the forefront of post-WWI Parisian musical modernism. *Les Six* (Honegger, Francis Poulenc (1899-1963), Darius Milhaud (1892-1974), Georges Auric (1899-1983), Germaine Tailleferre (1892-1983), and Louis Durey (1888-1979)) frequently presented their work together. They were championed by author Jean Cocteau (1889-1963), and loosely associated with composer Erik Satie (1866-1925). Contemporary critics noted a seriousness and profundity to Honegger’s music that contrasted with that of the other members. Honegger’s instrumental compositions, such as his chamber and symphonic works, often cultivated large multi-movement formal structures. Several of his oratorios (for orchestra, chorus, and soloists) treated biblical topics. He also wrote operas, songs, music for ballet, and film scores. Early works, such as the 1921 oratorio *Le Roi David* and the 1923 symphonic work *Pacific 231* (which musically depicts the acceleration and deceleration of a steam locomotive)helped seal Honegger’s international reputation as a modernist whose music was nevertheless eclectic and accessible. Much of Honegger’s music is characterized by strong motoric rhythms, use of counterpoint and contrapuntal devices (imitation and fugue), and an inclusive harmonic language that uses tonality, extended tonality, and atonality. |
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In Paris during the teens he absorbed an array of musical influences—the French Impressionists (Debussy and Ravel), Béla Bartók (1881-1945), Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951), and Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971). His student works, particularly his chamber works, set the path for his future development through their use of traditional thematic development, architectural principles of sonata form, contrapuntal devices (imitation, fugue), and eclectic harmonic vocabulary.  Honegger’s earliest public performances were with a loose circle of composers known as *Les noveaux jeunes*. Author Jean Cocteau championed the composers in a handful of 1919 articles in the Parisian press. In January 1920, journalist Henri Collet (1885-1951) wrote a pair of reviews in which he identified six young composers (Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, Georges Auric, Germaine Tailleferre, Louis Durey, along with Honegger) as *Les Six français*, making the comparison with the five Russian composers of Balakirev, Cui, Borodin, Mussorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov. By doing so, Collet’s article launched an effective public relations maneuver for the six composers, since it positioned them as the standard-bearers of postwar Parisian modernism. The composers were henceforth known collectively as Les Six.  Members of Les Six noted that their association was one more of mutual friendship than of identical aesthetic positions, although most described a shared interest in melodic clarity and a reaction against Impressionist harmonies. However, because Poulenc, Auric, and Milhaud were interested in incorporating popular music sources (such as music of the circus, fairgrounds, music hall, and jazz) into their concert music, public perception of the music of Les Six was linked to frivolity, brashness, banality, and humor. Honegger noted that his own aesthetic positions were more allied with serious chamber and symphonic music, and he spoke of his reverence for the music of J.S. Bach. One contemporary critic referred to Honegger as the “most profound” of the six. Nevertheless, Honegger did participate in several joint ventures with the other composers (particularly the 1921 absurdist ballet *Les mariés de la tour Eiffel*), and many Les Six works of the 1920s—including Honegger’s—explored musical textures and ideas associated with neoclassicism.  Honegger’s international reputation developed largely from the success of two works, the 1921 oratorio *Le Roi David* and the 1923 symphonic work *Pacific 231*. These remain among Honegger’s most popular and most-performed works. *Le Roi David* is a biblical oratorio based on the life of King David, written for amateur musicians, and it is thoroughly eclectic, combining neo-Baroque counterpoint with tonal, extended tonal, and atonal harmonic languages. *Pacific 231* is a one-movement work for orchestra (the first of three works Honegger referred to as *Mouvement symphonique*) that musically depicts the acceleration and deceleration of a steam locomotive. It displays a number of musical characteristics associated with much of Honegger’s music, in particular strong motoric rhythms and the use of counterpoint and contrapuntal devices.  Those two works help to illuminate the thrust of some of Honegger’s later music. Honegger continued to write biblically or religiously themed works for orchestra, chorus, and soloists, including *Judith*, *Jeanne d’Arc au bûcher*, *Danse des Morts*, and *Une Cantata de Noël*, often in collaboration with important French literary figures such as poet Paul Claudel. After *Pacific 231,* Honegger wrote two other *Mouvement symphoniques*, as well as five three-movement symphonies. The third symphony, subtitled *Liturgique*, was completed in 1946 in the aftermath of World War II and the Nazi occupation of Paris. Honegger provided a general program to the work, suggesting that it depicted a modern drama between forces of humanity and those of barbarism, suffering, and mechanization.  Along with these religious choral compositions and symphonic works, Honegger was a prolific composer in numerous categories, including opera, string quartet, piano, and music for ballet. He also took a leading role in film music – during the 1930s he composed music for twenty-four films – and provided music for radio plays between 1933 and 1951. Honegger’s book *Je suis compositeur* [*I Am a Composer*], originally published in 1951, included a series of conversations between Honegger and the critic Bernard Gavoty. In the book, Honegger sets forth a number of his own principles regarding music, and his ethic of craftsmanship; he also makes clear his lack of interest in compositional movements such as twelve-tone serialism. Honegger died in Paris in 1955. |
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