**Barraine, Elsa Jacqueline (1910-1999)**

Laura Hamer

Born Paris, 13 February 1910; died Strasbourg, 20 March 1999

French composer

**Summary**

Elsa Barraine’s precocious musical talents were recognized at an early age; she entered the Paris Conservatoire at the age of twelve. She studied composition with Paul Dukas, harmony with Jean Gallon (*premier prix,* 1925), fugue with Georges Caussade (*premier prix,* 1927), and accompaniment with André Estyle (*premier prix,* 1927). She won the *Prix de Rome* in 1929. Between 1936 and 1940, and again after the war until 1948, Barraine worked for Radio France. During the Second World War, she was active in the French struggle against the Occupation by co-founding the *Front national des musiciens pour la liberté et l’indépendance de la France* with Roger Désormière and Louis Durey. She was appointed to the teaching staff of the Paris Conservatoire in 1952, working as a professor of sight-reading until 1969, and later returned as a professor of analysis. Barraine’s compositional process was intricately bound up with her personal Humanistic and humanitarian beliefs, and reactions to the tumultuous upheavals of the twentieth century. Despite its raw emotional context, her music (with the exception of the serial *Musique Rituelle*, 1966 to 1967) is essentially tonal and cast within vigorous formal structures. She is recognised as one of the leading French composers of the twentieth century.

**Long Entry**

Elsa Barraine was born into a musical family; her father was the principal cellist at the Paris Opera. Her precocious musical talents were recognized at an early age; she entered the Paris Conservatoire at the age of twelve. At the Conservatoire, she studied composition with Paul Dukas, harmony with Jean Gallon (*premier prix,* 1925), fugue with Georges Caussade (*premier prix,* 1927), and accompaniment with André Estyle (*premier prix,* 1927). In 1929, Barraine became the fourth woman to win the *premier grand prix de Rome* in musical composition for her cantata *La Vierge Guerrière*, at the exceptionally young age of nineteen. Between 1936 and 1940, Barraine worked for Radio France, as a pianist, sound recordist, and head of singing. During the Second World War, she was active within the French struggle against the Occupation. In 1940, she co-founded the *Front national des musiciens pour la liberté et l’indépendance de la France* (National front of musicians for the freedom and independence of France) with Roger Désormière and Louis Durey. She was engaged as Musical Director for the recording firm Chant du Monde from 1944 to 1947, and after the war, she returned to Radio France as a sound mixer and remained until 1948. Barraine was appointed to the teaching staff of the Paris Conservatoire in 1952 as a professor of sight-reading. In 1969, she succeeded Olivier Messiaen as a professor of analysis. She composed prolifically throughout her life, and was acknowledged as one of the leading French composers of the twentieth century.

Barraine was extremely sensitive to contemporary social and political events, and her creative process was intricately linked to her personal Humanistic and humanitarian beliefs and reactions to the tumultuous upheavals of the twentieth century. She was so affected by the horror of the Second World War that she was unable to compose throughout the duration of the Occupation. Despite the raw emotional context and content of her music, Barraine’s works—with the exception of the serial *Musique Rituelle* (1966 to 1967), inspired by the Tibetan Book of the Dead—remain firmly grounded within tonal musical language, solid technical craft, and vigorous formal structures.

Barraine’s early musical development was closely nurtured by her teacher, Paul Dukas. Like Dukas, her paternal family was Jewish, and this formed an important cultural bond between them both. Her *Deux preludes et fugues pour orgue* (1928), based upon the melodies of the traditional Jewish prayer “Blessed are you, our God,” and psalms 114 and 116, bore the dedication “Respectful homage to my master Paul Dukas.” She also contributed the short piano piece “Hommage à Paul Dukas” to *Le tombeau de Dukas* (1936, intended to pay tribute to Dukas, who had died in May 1935). Barraine established her reputation in 1930 with her symphonic variations *Harald Harfagard*, after Heinrich Heine, which was the first of many works to draw on a literary source. Barraine’s compositional tendency to respond to the times in which she lived was firmly developed before the Second World War. Her orchestral work *Pogromes* (1933), after the poem by André Spire, was written in reaction to the rise of Hitler and Nazism. Her second symphony (1938) is entitled *Voïna* (Russian for ‘war’), and reflects her unease over the ascent of fascism and anti-semitism, and the imminence of the Second World War.

The years directly following the war were particularly fecund for Barraine, and the subjects that she chose for musical commentary continued to reveal her sensitive and Humanistic concerns. In 1944, her cantata *Avis*, after a poem by Paul Eluard, was dedicated to the memory of Georges Dudach, who had been shot by the Germans. Her orchestral variations *Song Koï Ou Le Fleuve Rouge* (1945), meanwhile, were inspired by the Vietnamese struggle for independence from the French. Barraine returned to the cantata—the genre which had first brought her musical prestige when she won the *prix de Rome* in 1929— and completed several works in this genre between 1950 and 1960, such as *Les cinq plaies, La cantate du vendredi saint*, *Christine*, and *Les paysans*. Her position on the faculty at the Paris Conservatoire inspired a number of works, such as the *Suite juive* for violin and piano (1951) and *La boîte de pandore* for piano (1954 to 1955), which were written for use by her students. She was also an accomplished composer for the screen, and collaborated on several French films in the period directly following the Second World War, notably with the filmmaker Jean Grémillon, with whom she collaborated on *Le printemps de la* *liberté* (1948) and *Pattes blanches* (1951).

**References and Further Reading**

Ourgandjian, R. “Elsa Barraine,” *Compostrices Françaises*, ed. Association Femmes et Musique, Paris: Éditions Delatrou France, 2007. 41-6.

(Dictionary overview of Barraine’s life and carrer; in French.)

Bourin, O., Germain-David, P., Massip, C., and Ourgandjian, R. *Elsa Barraine: une compositrice française au XXème siècle*, Paris: Delatour France, 2010.

(Collected edition of essays on various aspects of Barraine’s career and works; in French.)

**List of Works (Selective)**

1928 *Deux preludes et fugues pour orgue*

Dedicated to Paul Dukas

1929 *La vierge guerriere*

Winning *prix de Rome* cantata for orchestra, chorus, and vocal soloists

1930 *Harald Harfagard*

Symphonic Variations after Heinrich Heine (made Barraine’s name)

1931 Symphony no. 1

*Envoi de Rome*

1933 *Pogromes*

Orchestral music after André Spire

1938 *Symphony no. 2*

*Voïna*

1944 *Avis*

For chorus and orchestra, after Paul Eluard

1944 *Poesie ininterrompue*

Cantata after Paul Eluard

1945 *Song koï ou le Fleuve Rouge*

Orchestral variations inspired by the Vietneamese struggle for independence

1948 *Pattes blanches*

Film score (directed by Jean Grémillon)

1950 *La Chanson du mal-aime*

Ballet after Guillaume Apollinaire

1950 *Claudine a l’ecole*

Ballet after Colette

1966-7 *Musique rituelle*

For organ, gong, and xylorimba, inspired by the Tibetan Book of the Dead;

(Barraine’s only serial composition).

1977 *De premier mai en premier mai*

For unaccompanied voices, after Paul Eluard.