

20 franc banknote: Arthur Honegger, 1892-1955 Composer

Arthur Honegger was one of the most multifaceted composers of his generation. Schooled in the works of Johann Sebastian Bach, Max Reger and Richard Strauss and influenced by elements of early 20th century French music, he developed a musical idiom of his own which combined Germanic rigour and modern Parisian artistry in a fruitful synthesis. Honegger was a mediator between the worlds of German and French music. He acquired a mastery of nearly all musical forms, and his impressive achievements in the fields of symphonic music, chamber music, oratorio and opera placed him firmly among the very greatest composers working in the first half of the 20th century.

Le Roi David, 1921

Honegger's early years were marked by rigorous study and a prolific flow of compositions. Classical and romantic composers alike, Richard Strauss, Max Reger, Claude Debussy, Igor Stravinsky, Arnold Schoenberg, his friend Darius Milhaud and - all his life - Richard Wagner influenced his development. His most productive period began after the First World War. He was a member of the informal group of musicians known as the *Groupe des Six* who - under the influence of Jean Cocteau - strove to achieve a specifically French mode of aestheticism and championed antiromanticism as a state of mind. Honegger's first great success was *Le Roi David*, an oratorio in 23 scenes composed at the urging of Ernest Ansermet and Igor Stravinsky and first performed in 1921 at the Théâtre du Jorat in Mézières in the Swiss canton of Vaud. Further works in this genre included *Cris du monde* (1931) and *La Danse des Morts* (1940), a composition inspired by Paul Claudel. Even such an early work as *Roi David* demonstrated an important precondition for Honegger's lasting influence - his determination to compose music that in its lucidity appealed to a broad public and to connoisseurs alike.

Music for the stage

Much of Honegger's work was intended for staging - operas, melodramas, ballets, and dramatic oratorios and cantatas. His stage music includes the two pioneering operas *Judith* (1925), whose wild musical utterances evoked German expressionism, and *Antigone* (1927), which are regarded today as both the starting point, and representative examples, of modern music for the stage. Two of Honegger's major dramatic oratorios are the masterpiece *Jeanne d'Arc au Bûcher* (1935), set to a text by Paul Claudel, and *Nicolas de Flue* (1940), a dramatic legend composed on the occasion of the Swiss National Exhibition.

Pacific 231, 1923

Honegger's works for orchestra include five symphonies and a number of symphonic pieces such as *Horace Victorieux* (1920/21) and *Chant de joie* (1923), which were also performed at the Théâtre du Jorat. As a modern-minded man who followed contemporary developments with interest he also conveyed his love of sports and technology in his music. Particularly in his depiction of things technical - even machines - the feeling, humanism and sensitivity that were the cornerstones of his creativity are most evident, for instance in the orchestral tone poems *Pacific 231* (1923) and *Rugby* (1928).

From chamber music to films

In addition to works for the stage, Honegger composed a large body of chamber music, including three string quartets, several sonatas for violin, viola, cello and clarinet, and a number of pieces for piano. He also composed many choral works, e.g. *Cantique de Pâques* (1918), *Les Mille et Une Nuits* (1937) and his last work *Une Cantate de Noël* (1953) for baritone, mixed-voice choir, organ and orchestra, which shows the composer's growing concern with religion, already evident in his *Symphonie Liturgique* of 1946. Honegger's interest was not, however, confined to serious music, and he composed a large number of lighter works for the stage, radio, ballet and films.

Although his work created strong ties with France, Honegger never lost sight of his Swiss origins. Even in later years, he composed many works for Swiss ensembles, some of them on specifically Swiss subjects. A number of his oratorios and orchestral works had their first performance in Switzerland and later acquired a worldwide reputation, thanks in no small part to the Swiss conductors Paul Sacher in Basel and Ernest Ansermet in Geneva.

Milestones

1892	Arthur Honegger was born on 10 March, the son of a Zurich family resident in Le Havre.
1909-1911	Studies at the Zurich conservatory (violin and theory of music).
1911-1913	Studies in Paris (violin, orchestration, composition, conducting, counterpoint and the fugue).
1919	First performance of first string quartet.
1920	Member of the <i>Groupe des Six</i> . Arthur Honegger became a close friend of Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, Georges Auric, Germaine Tailleferre and Louis Durey. The group's spiritual father was Jean Cocteau.
1921	First performance of <i>Le Roi David</i> Mézières (canton of Vaud), Switzerland.
1927	Married the pianist Andrée Vaurabourg, who became well known as an important interpreter of his music.
1947	Concert and lecture tour of the United States and South America.
1948	Awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Zurich.
1955	Arthur Honegger died in Paris on 27 November.