

André Messager

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Illness has finally vanquished a man of seventy-five whom old age had not been able to touch. It is not that the composer of *Passionément* made any effort to conceal the ravages of the years. His art and his person, equally trim, had nothing to hide. Ordinary mortals, it has been said, depart reluctantly into the future. André Messager seemed to have understood that death lies not in front of the man who walks upright, but behind him, in the darkness of a past bound for oblivion. Too young himself to envy youth, he loved it so spontaneously that he never felt the need to tell it so. His severity, which was no less formidable than his frankness, did not spare establishment figures, too pampered by fate for him to owe them any further indulgence; but it readily vanished when dealing with those beginners whom no one would encourage if they should stray from a dull routine. We have seen with our own eyes the master of *Isoline* ask to be introduced to a young composer whose first stage work was being premiered, and give him praise and advice that seemed motivated less by the condescension of a master than the affection of a friend. We have seen this future member of the Institut conduct, to the outrage of his colleagues, the music of three members of Les Six. This kindness towards youth stemmed from a sympathy so natural to him that even those who disapproved of it never saw in it the slightest trace of fawning. An unrivalled musical culture had merely kindled in Messenger an indefatigable, exquisite and intense curiosity. Although he himself practised only one form of his art – seemingly the most modest – he was no less open to the most

diverse manifestations of music, whatever it was and wherever it came from, as long as he recognised some worthwhile novelty therein.

This musician, the most strictly and traditionally French of all our composers, whose style offers an example of unerring continuity, was one of the first to understand and promote the works of the New German School. This spiritual descendant of Dalayrac and Philidor truly established the dramas of Wagner here in France, and Herr Richard Strauss owes him no less than did Claude Debussy. Let there be no mistake, however: such an attitude bears witness to breadth of understanding, rather than betraying eclecticism of taste. The music of Messager provides us with proof of this, standing at the opposite pole from the German Romantics, retaining its place in the line of the masters of French *opéra-comique* who came immediately after Gounod. What an admirable form of nationalism! Sufficiently confident of his fidelity to open the windows and breathe with impunity the air from outside, sufficiently generous to comply eagerly with the duties of hospitality. André Messager carried out those duties – which his genius as a conductor disposed him to fulfil – to the point of self-abnegation. There was a time when the salons, charmed by his mordant, devil-may-care wit, were more interested in obtaining his opinion of *Parsifal* than in asking him about his own works. In 1898, the same Wagnerian and Franckist snobbery that sought in him the great exegete and incomparable interpreter would have thought it an insult to conflate him with the creator of *Véronique*. Thirty years have passed, which have witnessed the inexhaustible enchantment of *Pelléas et Mélisande* conjured up by the subtle baton of André Messager. During those thirty years, French music has come home. In endeavouring to reclaim its heritage, it has made some honest discoveries. Today, it has finally become convinced that ecstatic music theatre, cosmogonic symphonies and neo-Beethovenian quartets were never its forte. Tomorrow, it will discover in André Messager the only composer who preserved the specifically French tradition of *opéra-comique* amid the caprices of taste and the fluctuations of fashion. For the composer of *Les P'tites Michu* ‘never thought of writing operettas’. He explicitly said as much to M. André Schaeffner:

Many of my works – even, just recently, *Monsieur Beaucaire* – have only been entitled ‘operettas’ at the request of theatre directors who saw in the name some obscure extra prospect of success... My idea has always been to continue the tradition of French *opéra-comique* (with dialogue) that runs through Dalayrac, Boieldieu, Auber.

(*Cinquante ans de musique française*, vol. II, p.397)

The sort of misunderstanding to which this error over the genre of Messenger’s works lent itself, after having perhaps initially contributed to their success, will have dimmed only temporarily the glory of their creator, who is more than merely charming. In the heyday of the cyclic sonata and the augmented fifth, our musician’s admirers were nevertheless irritated to see such an artist, whose technical mastery was not a whit inferior to that of his mentor Saint-Saëns, having his works put on in the same theatres as the purveyors of oompah-pah and refusing to elevate himself to loftier undertakings. It has been said of the French that they resemble that gallant fellow who admitted that his pearls were fake, and commentators have chosen to recognise here, beneath the cloak of humility, the superior coquetry of an art that prefers to operate well within its limits. But to tell the truth, in expressing only ‘the gallantry of passions’ (as Fauré put it) Messenger did not think that he was wasting his talents on an inferior genre by composing *opéras-comiques*. He told me two years ago, on the occasion of the revival of *Béatrice*, which is a serious opera: ‘The time has come for me to write severe music – operettas are decidedly too difficult...’ The pleasantry wittily encapsulated an opinion that Messenger voiced to us more than once, and which was dear to his heart. He used to say that the continuous orchestral texture commonly employed in modern opera gives the composer facilities which he abuses. Nothing is easier than to spin out the themes and keep the drama purring along indefinitely. Melodies call up and answer each other, the music feeds effortlessly on its own substance; whereas the ‘number’ opera, in which each scene must exhaust the material on which it is built, presupposes a constantly renewed invention, yet without tolerating disparity.

Such unity of tone, so difficult to maintain in the multiplicity of dramatic twists and turns that threaten to break it in *opéra-comique*, proclaims Messenger's genius even in his slightest works. It may be asserted that no composer of our day has made lighter of the difficulties of composition. The fluency is so great that it erases the traces of the effort deployed, and since this music is coupled with unpretentious verse, the average listener does not suspect the value of the professional secrets being confided to him or her.

Messenger's harmonic language is extraordinarily original. It is founded entirely on the modal system that the École Niedermeyer sought to legitimate in the last century. Fauré, who like Messenger had been a pupil at the school, retained this teaching only insofar as it was compatible with his invariable penchant for enharmonic modulation. From *La Fauvette du Temple* (composed in 1885) onwards, Messenger remained faithful to a harmonic technique which cannot be reconciled with the one imposed by our conservatories. In this respect, the influence of his early works on the music of his contemporaries cannot be overlooked. *La Béarnaise* dates from 1885, and so Pomponio's admirable *Couplets* in its second act predate by two years Henri's famous *Romance* in *Le Roi malgré lui*, which was in its turn to exert a kind of fascination on Ravel. Indeed, the composer of *L'Heure espagnole* was no less aware of what he owed to Messenger, no less flawless an orchestrator, as witness *L'Amour masqué* and *Passionnément*, that masterpiece in which the economy of means and the absolute conformity of aims and functions are no less admirable than in *Le Tombeau de Couperin*.

I have long dreamt of a concert where the Letter Song from *Véronique* and the little maid's *Couplets* from *Passionnément* would be sung in immediate proximity with the finest and most famous modern *mélodies*. Were these exquisite and tenderly profound pieces to be transported from the theatres of the Boulevard to the platform of the Salle Chopin, audiences would be more easily convinced of their creator's rightful place among the best composers of his time: the amiable Massenet does not reach so high and the great Fauré does not shine with a much purer brilliance in our empyrean.

This elegance without austerity, this sensibility which knew how to hone its gifts without overemphasising its discoveries, doubtless aim less to dazzle than to charm us. André Messager, the perfect gentleman of music, could not imagine that his art could have any purpose save our delight. And if some may find that such an aesthetic is not overly ambitious, we shall remind them that it was the aesthetic of Nicolas Poussin.



René Guissart, metteur en scène ; Florelle et Fernand Gravey, principaux interprètes de Passionnément, opérette bien conçue de Maurice Hennequin, Albert Willemetz et André Messager, adaptée à l'écran par Albert Willemetz et Jean Boyer, pour Paramount.

Three of the artists from the Paramount film.
J. Gana Collection.

Trois artistes de l'adaptation cinématographique pour Paramount.
Collection J. Gana.