

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 19 (1992)
Heft: 3

Artikel: Born one hundred years ago : Arthur Honegger
Autor: Etter, Martin
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907244>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 31.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

"It was always my desire and my endeavour to write music which would be accessible to the wider public but which would at the same time attract those who really knew about music."

Both the Swiss and the French regard him as their compatriot – the Swiss because he came from an old Zurich family and studied in Zurich, first with the violinist Willem de Boer, then with the great theoretician Lothar Kempfer, and finally with the conductor and composer Friedrich Hegar; the

Martin Etter

French because he was born on March 10, 1892, at Le Havre, lived most of his life in Paris and departed from it there on November 27, 1955. He had a very close relationship with all the French creative musical spirits of his day, and they always counted him as one of their own.

They were six altogether, and Arthur Honegger was one of them. The others were Darius Milhaud, Louis Durey, Georges Auric, Francis Poulenc and Germaine Tailleferre – the famous "six" who in the decade of the 1920s formed the centre of musical development in Europe. They were six multifarious composers who consistently opposed the obsession with volume of the late romantic school and tried to express "simplicity and the primal urge of the exotic peoples instead of classical refinement, brevity and clarity instead of the vague concept of distance". They believed in "melody rather than harmony"; and they preferred jazz, Satie and Couperin to Beethoven, Wagner and Debussy. These were principles which had the inevitable result of distancing Honegger from his erstwhile Paris teachers, such as Lucien Caplet, Charles Marie Widor, Vincent d'Indy and André Gédalge.

In the forty years of his composing years Honegger has about two hundred works to his credit – symphonies and oratorios, dramatic theatre music and intimate scores for chamber orchestra, lieder, piano and choral works. Most of these were taken up with enthusiasm by the great international theatres and concert halls and now belong to the permanent repertoire of orchestras, soloists and choirs wherever classical music is practised. Arthur Honegger is probably the only Swiss composer to have obtained a truly world audience. The only

Born one hundred years ago

Arthur Honegger



others who have acquired a reputation which has approached that of Honegger are Othmar Schoeck and Frank Martin.

A large number of very various influences may be discerned in his work: from Bach to jazz, from polytonality to expressionism, from Richard Strauss to Igor Stravinsky. But the truth is that Honegger worked out his own specific tonal language, in which clarity and severity of form are the dominant elements while in no way diluting his easy contact with his public. Most of his works are totally accessible without any highbrow effort of explanation – they are neither esoteric nor provocative, neither eclectic nor characterised by forced originality. Honegger never tried to entrench himself in the supposed ivory tower of genius.

But his work was always respectfully serious. Honegger's five symphonies are undoubtedly to be seen as true confessions of faith and as appeals to a mankind which was running the risk of betraying the humanistic ideals which were so dear to the composer. This element is particularly apparent in the Second Symphony for String Orchestra and Trumpet which he completed in 1942: he abundantly illustrates in this work his abhorrence of war and his mourning for all the destruction and death which is going on around him. Only towards the end, with the Bach-like chorale, is Arthur Honegger able to intone the eter-

nal message of consolation and hope, as well as his unalterable conviction of a better future just over the horizon.

Honegger never betrayed the deeply humanitarian ideals which found their expression in his world famous oratorios – in the haunting calls for humanity and purity which pervade "Jeanne d'Arc au Bûcher", in the wood-engraving detail of the all-engulfing "Roi David", in the call for togetherness which marks every syllable of "Nicolas de Flue" and in the simple faith of the "Cantate de Noël".

Honegger is in more worldly mood for the musical tragedy, "Antigone", for the immensely stirring "Cris du Monde" and for the expressive "Danse des Morts" – as well as for the "Aventures du Roi Pausole", Honegger's only operetta, in which the composer tries with a fair measure of success to approach the light-handed frivolity of the classical nineteenth-century comic opera style.

And lastly we should not forget Honegger's music for films – the expression of his age – the best of which was for Abel Gance's "Napoleon", "Farinet" of Ramuz and Christian-Jaque's "Revenant" – nor his music for the theatre and for radio. These effectively round out the richly varied work of Arthur Honegger; they bear witness to the enormous variety of his artistic creativity, as well as to his permanent readiness to adapt to modern progress. ■