

Elsa Barraine (1910-1999): Overview of Writings

Having been awarded the 1929 Prix de Rome, Elsa Barraine enjoyed a certain renown in France during the interwar and immediate postwar periods. As a communist, she was active in the Resistance, co-founding and leading the *Front national des musiciens* (Musicians' National Front) during the Occupation. Her fame began to wane after her departure from the Communist Party at the end of 1949, and she began to distance herself gradually from composition during the 1960s in order to focus on teaching. Most of Barraine's public writings consist of articles to do with music, published in left-wing periodicals (*L'Art musical populaire*, *L'Humanité*), both before and after World War Two.

The repository contains [about twenty articles](#), with likely more remaining to be discovered. Barraine also held roles at various points as music editor for certain newspapers (*L'Humanité*, *Ce soir*), and as editor-in-chief for a music periodical (*L'Art musical populaire*). Between 1937 and 1939, Barraine wrote regularly in left-wing newspapers. In *L'Humanité*, she wrote short reviews of musical scores published by the Éditions sociales internationales, a communist publishing house for which she may also have worked. In *L'Art musical populaire*, a leftist musical journal that served as the house organ of the Fédération musicale populaire (FMP), she wrote articles aimed at bringing music to a broad, popular readership, interested in music but with little education. These articles had the additional objective of offering ideas of potential repertoire to the popular choirs brought together under the FMP. In 1939, Barraine appears to have been the Editor-in-chief of this publication.

During the war and the Occupation, these periodicals ceased production. Nonetheless, Barraine published two articles in 1940 in the journal of the Orchestre National, for which she had begun working. There, she published her column ["À la musique"](#) (November 1940), in which she reflected painfully on the impotence of the art to which she had dedicated herself; growing disillusioned, she declared that she would never be able to return to music until "once evil had been curbed". Indeed, she stopped composing until after the Liberation, directing her energies instead toward the Resistance group she directed, alongside odd jobs that she took on for survival. She likely had a role in writing or editing for the clandestine journal of the Musicians' National Front, *Musiciens d'aujourd'hui*—although no article can be definitively attributed to her.

During the Occupation, she maintained a long correspondence with her friend Wolfgang Simoni, also known as Louis Saguer—a gay, German Jewish composer and communist, then hiding in the *zone sud*. These unpublished exchanges, preserved in

Barraine's archives at the French national library, are rich in information on the composer's daily life during the war.

Following the Liberation, Barraine took up her pen once again, writing in communist newspapers and returning to composition. Given her status as a figure of the Resistance and her roles of cofounder of the Musicians' National Front, she was chosen to direct the musical coverage of *L'Humanité* and *Ce soir* from 1944 until 1946. She held a hard line on the *épuration* (purge) of the musical world (i.e., the official efforts underway to prosecute those who had collaborated with the Nazis), writing several articles on the subject. She also took a stand in favor of "progressive" music in the quarrel over the Jdanov doctrine, in a long article titled "Musiciens réactionnaires et musiciens progressistes" ("Reactionary Musicians and Progressive Musicians") published in *La Nouvelle critique* in May 1949. These journalistic activities ended after her departure from the Communist Party in December 1949. She also maintained a friendship with the writer Paul Éluard, setting five of his poems to music between 1944 and 1977.

Barraine did not return to publishing in the press until the 1980s, with a handful of articles on music education in the U.S.S.R. and on exchanges between French and Soviet musicians. She also published a translation from the Russian of Vsevolod Zaderatsky's [*La Pensée Polyphonique chez Stravinsky*](#), which remained unpublished.

Barraine had a complex relationship with writing. She had received no formal education in her youth. Born to a family of musicians, she entered the Paris Conservatoire at age 9, and was only given lessons in general culture and in grammar by an old neighbor. At age 17, she entered the composition class of Paul Dukas, who initiated her to a world of culture previously unknown to her. Dukas became not only her musical role model but also her intellectual mentor: his teaching gave her a real thirst for knowledge, but also an inferiority complex in relation to the gaps in her education. Nevertheless, Barraine wrote quite a lot, especially in the private sphere, as her abundant correspondence with her friend Louis Saguer during World War Two demonstrates. In the 1930s, she also corresponded with her friend, composer Claude Arrieu, as well as Dukas, with whom she had grown closer to the point of friendship since her departure from the Conservatoire. But Barraine admitted to the difficulties she faced in writing the articles for the press: "I spend a crazy amount of time working up an article, and it's still bad," she once wrote in a letter to Jean-Richard Bloch (22 July 1946). One might say that Barraine's publications are written correctly, but their style is unremarkable, with perhaps an occasional slight tendency toward orality and familiarity. She is far more trenchant in her correspondence, which abounds with slang.

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Further reading

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Hamer Laura, *Female Composers, Conductors, Performers : Musiciennes of Interwar France, 1919-1939*, Abingdon, Oxon, New York, Routledge, 2018.

Le Bail Karine, *La musique au pas : être musicien sous l'Occupation*, Paris, CNRS éditions, 2016.

Reynaud Cécile, *Hommage à Elsa Barraine (1910-1999), catalogue d'exposition 2011-2012*, Paris, BNF, Département de la Musique, 2011.

Thom Mariette, *Elsa Barraine (1910-1999), une compositrice engagée*, mémoire de Master 2 en histoire, Sorbonne université, 2019.

Kollinger Franziska, « Elsa Barraines politische verflechtungen (1940/1944/1949) » in *Archiv Für Musikwissenschaft*, vol. 78, n°2 (2021), p. 122-135.

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