

Déodat de Séverac (1872-1921): overview of writings

Déodat de Séverac's corpus of published writings on music is less voluminous than those of his contemporaries (such as Claude Debussy, Paul Dukas, Gabriel Fauré, Charles Koechlin, Florent Schmitt). It mainly comprises a handful of music reviews (of which five have been found, but further ones may exist), responses to journalistic surveys, and a dozen texts or articles broaching various topics—music from the South of France, the “French tradition”, the effects of the Great War on composition, and so forth.

The majority of these writings were published in 1993 by Pierre Guillot in volume, [*Écrits sur la musique*](#) (Éditions Mardaga)—with the exception of a further [text](#) which appeared in the *Courrier musical* (1 June 1909), paying homage to the recently deceased Isaac Albéniz. Yet this representation of Séverac's output appears relatively thin in comparison to his abundant correspondence, a significant part of which has also been published—thanks again to the excellent editorial work of Pierre Guillot—in a volume titled, [*La Musique et les lettres*](#) (Mardaga, 2002).

The music reviews written by Séverac that have been located were all written early in the first decade of the 1900s. In these pieces, nourished by the aesthetic values acquired from his immersion in Vincent d'Indy's composition class (proselytism, traditionalism, an analytic stance toward works, etc.), Séverac essentially set himself the task of introducing and sharing certain works from the Schola Cantorum pantheon, such as those of [Bach](#) or [Wagner](#). The end of the decade, however, is marked by a rejection of the “Scholist” legacy and an indifference to the practice of music criticism. While he had already published two articles in 1902—devoted to the status of Languedocian folksong in [Toulouse](#) and in the [Pyrénées](#)—it was toward the end of the 1900s and in the early 1910s that Séverac deepened his reflections on “Meridional” music (songs, *goigs*, the sardane, the Catalan *cobla*), and honed his regionalist aesthetic. This tendency is on display in the [paper](#) he delivered at the Montpellier Congress on Popular Song and published in *Le Mistral* (1906); in his [article](#) on the songs of Languedoc and the Roussillon in *Musica* (1911); or in his [defence](#) of Catalan popular music published in *La Revue Catalane* (1912).

“La centralisation et les petites chapelles musicales” is without contest the most important (and best known) of Séverac's writings. Arising from his final-year dissertation at the Schola Cantorum, it was published in three installments on [1 January](#), [15 January](#), and [1 March](#) 1908 in the *Courrier musical*. This famous essay, dedicated to his friend Jean Charles-Brun, unveils the political veneer of his regionalist aesthetic. The composer effectively conceives of centralisation as the evil eroding French musical creation, and denounces the role played in this process by the Republican State and by Parisian salons. While the former, according to

Séverac, homogenizes compositional practice and steamrolls the specific talents of the “terroirs” through its unified network of musical education, the latter’s contempt discourages regional composers from freely expressing their temperament in the capital. From his perspective as an isolated regionalist composer, Séverac offers a relatively lucid structural realization of the field of art music in the early 1900s. In doing so, he exposes a domain bifurcated, on the one hand, by a principal opposition between the rear-guard (the composers frequenting the Académie and other State institutions) and the avant-garde, and on the other hand, by a secondary opposition between an established avant-garde (the “d’Indyists” around the Schola Cantorum and the Société Nationale) and an avant-garde on its way to becoming established (the “Debussyists”, former composition students of Fauré at the Conservatoire, members of the Apaches group, and those who would go on to found the Société Musicale Indépendante in 1910). These two poles of the avant-garde, in particular, are criticized for drowning out the regionalist cause amid their futile quarrels.

During the Great War, Séverac mainly assumed the task of [defending the music of the nation](#), campaigning in the press on several occasions to forbid the performance of German music—[that of Wagner](#) above all—on French soil, in concert with the Ligue Nationale pour la Défense de la Musique Française. From the time of his demobilization and until his death in 1921, however, Séverac ceased ([almost](#) entirely) making public pronouncements on music, judging that “the role of the composer is to compose, and not to produce...analyses or criticism”—as he confided to Raoul Davray in 1919.

Alexandre ROBERT

Transl. Peter Asimov

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