

Reynaldo Hahn: Du chant (1921)

Dedicated “to Madame Adolphe Brisson, as a testament to my respectful and grateful friendship”, Reynaldo Hahn’s first work, *Du chant* (220 p.) was published by the Paris-based Éditions Pierre Lafitte in late February 1921. The volume comprises lectures on song first published in nine issues of the *Journal of the Université des Annales*, from [15 January 1914](#) (year 8, vol. 1, no. 3) to [15 January 1915](#) (year 9, vol. 1, no. 3); these lectures had been delivered at that institution between 22 November 1913 and 19 May 1914. Founded in 1907 by Yvonne Sarcey (who was the daughter of theater critic Francisque Sarcey, and whose real first name was Madeleine), the Université des Annales was an offshoot of *Les Annales politiques et littéraires*, a journal run by her husband, Adolphe Brisson. Using the academic designation of a “university”, Sarcey organized various lecture series by literary and artistic personalities, targeted to an audience of women, who rarely attended the state University in those days.

The organization and the texts are identical between the articles and the book, which take up the sequence of the lectures: [« Pourquoi chante-t-on ? »](#) [Why do we sing?], [« Comment chante-t-on ? »](#) [How do we sing?], [« Comment dire en chantant ? »](#) [How to say something in song], [« Qu'appelle-t-on avoir du style ? »](#) [What does it mean to “have style”?], [« Comment émouvoir ? »](#) [How to move emotions], [« Certaines causes de la décadence du chant »](#) [Certain causes of the decadence of song], [« Le chant expressif dans la musique ancienne »](#) [Expressive singing in early music], [« Le chant descriptif dans la musique moderne »](#) [Descriptive song in modern music], [« Du goût »](#) [On taste]. In his foreword, the author specifies that “this book was not *written* or made to be *read*”; rather, it is a collection of “nine lessons” delivered before a “young and kind audience”, characterized by an “element of improvisation”. Even so, he attempts a full and rounded consideration of the question, not only from a purely vocal perspective, but also concerning matters of interpretation and aesthetics.

For Hahn, the relationship between text and music is fundamental. He unreservedly advocates “submission of music to the word” (p. 28), according an essential role to prosody: “someone who sings well and speaks [dit] poorly is of no interest to me”, he affirms (p. 19). Diction thus constitutes the basis of the art of song; it is “to the word what the glance, the expression, is to the eye” (p. 78). On matters of vocal technique, mastery of breath is essential, even as “there are two kinds of breathing: physiological breathing (which constitutes the foundation, the basis of singing) and expressive breathing”, used to produce expressive effects (p. 51–52). Hahn does not forbid these, so long as they are justified and used with restraint by a vocalist with style—that is, one who has perfectly mastered “a whole body of general rules by which singing could be assured of accuracy, gracefulness, correctness, and [...] a

certain ‘tidiness’ which singing can never abandon, even in the most effusive and whimsical moments” (p. 109). Hahn is neither naively purist, nor an unconditional partisan of expressive excess; everything for him is a matter of measure and taste.

Hahn asks that singers not only take account of dynamic markings—to avoid yielding to the “habit of singing loudly [which] expands the vocal apparatus” (p. 110)—but rather to perform truly cerebral work for their entire career. Accordingly, he recommends practicing singing with one’s mind, because, in order to be truly expressive, the singer must adhere internally to a role, to the “words that they pronounce”, to a “state of mind” (p. 128). To be able to sing, one cannot be overcome by emotion, but must preserve “a point in the brain which remains lucid and under voluntary control” (p. 122). Furthermore, for Hahn, the great singer is one who turns their art into a vocation, and who “*concentrate[s] on singing*”: “Thoughts of singing never leave us, and we live, night and day, with this companion who forever tries to escape us, but to whom we cling with all the strength of despair and all the persistence of desire” (p. 132).

In *L’Écho de Paris* (24 October 1921), Adolphe Boschot pays homage to these “meditations about and around song”, expressed by a “musician who speaks of music because he loves music”, and who “does not consider it to be a useless ornament, nor a forbidding science”. This opinion was echoed by the great tenor Jean Reszké on the occasion of a reedition: “Anything that might occur by instinct to a gifted singer seeking perfection has been noted in this book. Everything that one must look for and everything that one must avoid is contained in this series of advice to singers” (*Les Annales politiques et littéraires*, 30 November 1924). In 1957, [the work](#) was republished by Gallimard in their series, “Pour la musique”, directed by Roland-Manuel.

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