

Jean Wiéner, *Allegro Appassionato* (1978)

Alongside Darius Milhaud's [*Ma Vie heureuse*](#) (1973) and Georges Auric's [*Quand j'étais là*](#) (1979), *Allegro Appassionato* belongs to the genre of composers' autobiographies written during their twilight years. And yet, Wiéner's book, characterized by a tone at once serious and debonair, is nothing like a swansong. Pierre Belfond, his publisher and commissioner, hoped the work would help the public get to better know a composer whose work was often reduced to the incidental music to *Touchez pas au grisbi*.

The interest of *Allegro Appassionato* is twofold: for one, it is of documentary interest, because the pianist and composer looks back on the different stages of his career. Rather than segmenting these into chapters, he illustrates these phases by way of documents from his personal archives (manuscript scores, concert programs, newspaper articles, personal photos). He surveys his childhood and musical training at the Paris Conservatoire, where he became friends with Darius Milhaud (p. 11); his beginnings, having burst onto the Parisian avant-garde scene in the wake of World War One, marked by several collaborations with Jean Cocteau and the "Six", but also by his decisive encounter with jazz (p. 43); his meeting Clément Doucet, and the dazzling career the two pianists shared as a duo, from mid 1924 until 1940 (p. 85); his first forays in film music in 1932 (p. 134); his activity during World War Two (p. 157); and his compositional output for radio, cinema, television, and (more rarely) the concert stage after 1945 (p. 171). Occasionally, Wiéner shifts from memoirist to historian and critic. Several interesting passages are given over to the history of the *Bœuf sur le toit* (p. 43), to glorifying Satie (p. 98), or to the role that music should play in a film (p. 139).

But the most remarkable aspect of Wiéner's volume is the conception of music that he develops. Adhering to the view he had already outlined as early as 1928, in one of his most important texts—["Le Jazz et la musique"](#) ("Jazz and Music") (*Conferencia*, vol. 22, no. 12, 5 June 1928, p. 623–631)—Wiéner's conception is not unrelated to his activism in the Communist Party, which remained constant from the mid-1920s until his death. It is democratic and social, while also being elitist. It is democratic insofar as he believes that the primary function of music is to stir emotions, and that it should therefore remain accessible to the greatest possible number; hence the importance Wiéner places in popular song, and his scorn for the compartmentalization of musical genres. It is social because, at a time when "music enters everyone's home" (p. 206) via radio and subsequently television, it plays a unifying role for youths of all social classes. Yet it is also elitist, because the desire for a music accessible to all does not mean one must cease to distinguish musical "gifts", or refuse to acknowledge a hierarchy of musical "talents" (p. 207). This value system motivates Wiéner to turn his back on musical "engineers"—by which he means Boulez, Stockhausen, and Xenakis—and to privilege instead another canon of contemporary music comprising Henri Dutilleul, Olivier Messiaen, and Betsy Jolas, but also Léo Ferré and Pink Floyd.

Allegro Appassionato has not made much of a mark on the history of composers' writings. Perhaps this is because, at the time of its publication in 1978, Wiéner held himself at a distance from the musical avant-garde; perhaps, too, it is because his writings paid little heed toward vocal polemic nor did it yield to established schools of thought. The obscurity of his work has hardly been diminished by the rare references made to it by scholars of French music from the early 1920s (even accounting for all the methodological perils involved in citing retrospective works). And yet, his testimony is a valuable source for an as yet untold (counter)narrative of French music after 1945.

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