

André Caplet (1878-1925): Overview of Writings

André Caplet—composer, conductor, violinist, violist, pianist, orchestrator, arranger—was also the author of a dozen articles on music, several more consequential texts on conducting, and an imposing private correspondence. His written output remains quite modest by comparison to that of many of his contemporaries. The importance of conducting in his career, and his premature death at 46 years of age, partly explain the fact that he left so few writings on music.

Recent research has brought to light Caplet's writings, both public (music criticism, essays on conducting, autobiographical notices) and private (correspondence with musicians, notably Charles Koechlin and Claude Debussy, whose close collaborator and friend he was; the *Journal* of 1907; a text on his relationship to Christianity). Several of these texts are conserved in the sizeable Fonds Caplet at the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

The writings published or destined for publication date for the most part to after the First World War. The fact that Caplet never pursued lengthy general studies (he worked as an orchestral musician from a young age to support his family) explains no doubt his belated and somewhat distant relationship to the pen, by comparison to other composers. Absorbed with composition, conducting, and orchestration in the 1900s, then by his post as music director of the Boston Opera between 1910 and 1913, and finally by the war during which he acquitted several functions as a mobilised musician, Caplet only really began to write on music at the end of 1918. At that time, he established himself definitively in France and soon cut back his conducting schedule in order to devote himself more fully to composition.

After the Armistice, Caplet taught orchestral conducting at the École des chefs de musique américains in Chaumont whilst awaiting demobilisation. It was there that he wrote and/or compiled several pages of notes and exercises for the benefit of his students, but also with an eye to publishing an essay on orchestral conducting, a project that would remain unfinished. In the seven manuscript documents comprising these "Principes d'orchestre" (Ms. 20390, BnF-Mus), Caplet confided technical and aesthetic reflections on the conductor's art, a series of pieces of advice and musical examples, and beating patterns. Two shorter manuscripts in Caplet's hand bring together rhythm exercises and analyses of the tonal schemes of major works, respectively.

Caplet also wrote nine articles for *Le Courrier musical* to which he was attached from November 1921 to March 1922. These reviews of concerts by the Orchestre Pasdeloup are characterised by their technical considerations (whether in terms of the works or their performance), a general rejection of the nineteenth-century repertoire and corresponding attraction to older works, and also promotion of contemporary music. This last aspect points to Caplet's more general engagement on behalf of new music. The interpretation of the music of his times was indeed at the heart of his practice as a conductor. Recall that he was a cofounder of the Société musicale indépendante (SMI) in 1910 and joined the Société internationale pour la musique contemporaine (SIMC) on its foundation in 1922.

This engagement took a more openly political turn when Caplet, along with Maurice Ravel, Roland-Manuel, and Albert Roussel, published an [open letter](#) defending Jean Wiéner, whose concerts had been vehemently attacked by Louis Vuillemin in *Le Courrier musical* of 1 January and 15 February 1923. In their response, published on 15 March, Caplet and his colleagues contrasted their openness to contemporary music of whatever provenance to Vuillemin's conservative and xenophobic nationalism, declaring that "The undersigned . . . in no way share his opinion on the so-called 'concerts métèques . . . They declare themselves happy to have been able,

thanks to M. Jean Wiéner, to hear Arnold Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire* and a series of new works, French and foreign, of which one can dispute the tendencies, but not the interest."

Finally, the very personal and poetic [article](#) that Caplet devoted to Debussy's *Gigues* in November 1923 should be mentioned. Caplet, the transcriber and proof-reader for *Images*, reveals in this brief text a profound knowledge of Debussy's piece, but also all the affection he felt for him.

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28/02/2022

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Further reading:

Philippe Cathé et Denis Huneau, « André Caplet-Charles Koechlin : un relation prometteuse trop vite interrompue », dans Denis Herlin et Cécile Quesney, dir. *André Caplet, compositeur et chef d'orchestre*, Paris, Société française de musicologie, 2020, p. 160-181.

Denis Huneau, « André Caplet critique musical », dans Denis Herlin et Cécile Quesney, dir. *André Caplet, compositeur et chef d'orchestre*, Paris, Société française de musicologie, 2020, p. 183-199.

Denis Herlin, « Transcrire et orchestrer : l'amitié d'André Caplet et de Claude Debussy », dans *André Caplet, compositeur et chef d'orchestre*, Denis Herlin et Cécile Quesney, dir., Paris, Société française de musicologie, 2020, p. 75-114.

Denis Herlin et Cécile Quesney, « André Caplet par lui-même » [édition de trois textes autographes de Caplet : 1. Journal (janvier-février 1907) 2. Caplet et son rapport au christianisme (ca 1924) 3. Notices autobiographiques], dans *André Caplet, compositeur et chef d'orchestre*, Denis Herlin et Cécile Quesney, dir., Paris, Société française de musicologie, 2020, p. 457-470.

Cécile Quesney, « "Principes d'orchestre". Un manuscrit d'André Caplet », dans *André Caplet, compositeur et chef d'orchestre*, Denis Herlin et Cécile Quesney, dir., Paris, Société française de musicologie, 2020, p. 481-513.

To quote this article: Cécile Quesney, "André Caplet (1878-1925): Overview of Writings", Dictionary of Composer's Writings, Dictéco [online], ed. E. Reibel, last edited: 09/01/2023, <https://preprod.dicteco2.ihrim.fr/person/39145>.