

Gustave Charpentier (1860-1956): Overview of Writings

Gustave Charpentier had no real literary education as his studies were limited solely to his years at the Conservatoire. Nevertheless, he left a varied and rather substantial body of work largely intended for public readerships and which, even today, remains little-known. Charpentier's writings belong to a range of genres: there is an important volume of correspondence (from the 1930s onward, he painstakingly kept typescript copies of his own letters which are now conserved in the collections of the Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris); a few articles for the press on musical subjects (presentations of his works, such as *Louise*, *Julien*, and *Les Impressions d'Italie*, and a few articles on his contemporaries, primarily Bruneau and Wagner) or on the bygone atmosphere of Montmartre ("[Sept heures du soir, Nice](#)" and "[Les Pavés du faubourg](#)" in *La Muse*, 29 June 1914, p. 1); his unpublished memoirs; musical programs, notably for the "republican" open-air spectacle *Le Couronnement de la muse*; and the libretti for his operas (*Louise*, *Julien*), as well as a few unfinished projects (*Éros*, *Orphée*, *L'amour au faubourg-Duthoit*, *Julie*).

Charpentier first came to literature and writing as an avid reader: on his desk were could be found various works by Michelet and Hugo as well as the poems of Verlaine and Baudelaire. Before leaving for the Prix de Rome in 1888, he rubbed shoulders with writers in the cafés of Montmartre (notably the Café du Delta but also the Chat Noir, then at the peak of its popularity), among them Maurice Le Blond (1877-1944) and Émile Zola's future son-in-law, Saint-Montorgueil (Octave Lebesgue, 1857-1933). He also spent time with figures active in the spheres of both literature and music such as Jules Marie Méry (1867-1943), chansonnier and mayor of the 20th arrondissement, and Saint-Pol Roux (Pierre-Paul Roux, 1861-1940), who was long incorrectly credited as the librettist of *Louise*. Charpentier's style is succinct and close to spoken expression, seeking elegance without renouncing directness or slipping into a formal tone.

Charpentier's writings are the prolongation and culmination of his musical work; his texts on social issues and his writings on music shed light on his many interests. The pages devoted to popular education, directly linked to *Couronnement de la muse* and *Louise*, aim to open the world of classical music those of the humblest origin. Born into a working-class family—his father (Charles Charpentier) began as a baker in Salines de Dieuze before working as an accountant for the Lorthiois textile mills in Roubaix—, Charpentier was particularly attached to the idea that the condition of the masses might be improved through an education (literary, musical, artistic, etc.) that would allow them to understand their role in the politics of the French republic. Honorary vice president of the of the Université Populaire du faubourg Saint-Antoine, Charpentier shared a belief with other contemporaries in

the need to democratize culture. After founding the Conservatoire Populaire Mimi Pinson in 1902, he publicly took position on popular art in 1908, although his reflections had been gestating in a private, annotated state for ten years.

During the days devoted to art organized by the French association of freethinkers (*Association des libres penseurs de France*), Charpentier presented a text entitled "[L'Art populaire](#)" in which he demonstrated the ambiguity of the adjective "popular" and offered a pedagogical project for teaching the arts that aimed to transform workers into "citizens" ("*L'Art Populaire*", *Annales des Fêtes et Cérémonies civiles*, Paris, 1910-1911, p. 433-438). The programs published for *Couronnement de la muse* were also conceived with this goal in mind: carefully written and illustrated, they featured new introductions for each performance of the work depending on the industrial activities the city in which the spectacle was presented. The "Muse" became "black" in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, in homage to the coal workers, and was incarnated by a female textile worker in Saint-Étienne, the role occupied by most women in the area.

In contrast, when Charpentier took up his pen to write about music, far more sporadically, when he felt the need to exteriorize and assert his impressions or show the "aesthetic" link that certain subjects had with his own music. Perhaps this is the reason he never had a regular column in a daily paper or specialized magazine, limiting his publications in the press to occasional articles. In this forum the composer addressed his colleagues and a public of amateurs who were nevertheless informed and knowledgeable about musical life in France and in Paris in particular. It is from this perspective that his article "[Êtes-vous wagnérien ?](#)" (*Le Journal de Roubaix*, 1884, republished in 1889) must be read, a sort of programmatic manifesto that expresses his fidelity to the master of Bayreuth, but that seeks above all else to surpass the Wagnerian model and find a new French dramatic path "after Wagner". The musical naturalism of Alfred Bruneau and Émile Zola provided a convincing response for Charpentier in contrast with the German "Gesamtkunstwerk". ("[L'Attaque du moulin](#)", *Gil Blas*, 1893; and the review of *L'Ouragan* in "[Les théâtres](#)", *Le Figaro*, 1901.) Charpentier affirmed that new era for French opera had begun, as much in terms of subject matter as for the renewal of the operatic genre itself, with Bruneau becoming the new "prophet" to follow. In his activity as a music critic, Charpentier paid little attention to his "colleagues", with only [Reynaldo Hahn's *La Carmélite*](#) (1902) and [the one-thousandth performance of *Carmen*](#) (1904) attracting his attention. He left no public impressions on Claude Debussy. Still, he was attentive to contemporary musical life and participated [in a series of interviews on the new theatre of the Opéra-Comique and its future director, Albert Carré](#) for *Le Figaro* in 1898.

Following in the footsteps of Massenet's [Mes souvenirs](#) (1912), and Bruneau's [L'ombre d'un grand cœur](#) (1931), Charpentier decided to compile a variety of documents (correspondence, articles for the press and a few unpublished meditations) to publish as his *Mémoires*. Initially conceived in nine volumes with illustrations, then reduced to 217 pages for editorial reasons, from a present-day perspective, the *Mémoires* are can only be seen as incomplete. They mention only *Louise* and *Le Couronnement de la muse*, there is no trace of *Julien*, and only few of his early works (*La Vie du poète* and the *Poèmes chantés*). Although it allows for a

better understanding of the composer's character, this account mentions no-one else, with the exception of his master, Massenet, reconsidered in the shadow of Wagner.

Following the publication of [Charpentier's early correspondence with his family](#) (edited by Françoise Andrieux, 1984), the author of the present article is currently undertaking a project to publish the composer's *Mémoires* accompanied by his writings on music and social issues (Vrin, Musicologies, forthcoming).

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Further reading

Andrieux, Françoise, *Gustave Charpentier artiste social. Contribution à l'étude de l'éducation musicale populaire*, Thèse de doctorat en Musicologie, Université de Paris Sorbonne, Paris IV, 1985.

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Niccolai, Michela, *La Dramaturgie de Gustave Charpentier*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2011.

Gustave Charpentier et son temps, Niccolai, Michela et Branger, Jean-Christophe dir., Saint-Étienne, Presses universitaires de Saint-Étienne, 2013.

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