

Vincent d'Indy, Beethoven (1911)

His second book on music after the 1906 [César Franck](#), d'Indy's *Beethoven* is subtitled "A Critical Biography", like all the volumes published in the series "Les Musiciens célèbres" launched by the publisher Henri Laurens in 1906. Commissioned as early as 1905, it was published only in 1911. Its modest dimensions (148 pages) match the usual format of the series and were congenial to d'Indy, who often complained of the heaviness of works of German musicology.

After César Franck, of whom he was one of the closest disciples, d'Indy venerated Beethoven more than anyone. As a conductor he performed the symphonies, and in his composition course at the Schola cantorum he analysed the entire oeuvre. For d'Indy, Beethoven even more than Franck represented an essential landmark in the history of music.

D'Indy's point of view is that of a composer, or even a composition teacher. For him, "the only factor to consider in a study of Beethoven, the one that never leads astray, is the *music*" (letter from d'Indy to Octave Maus, Tamaris, [March 1911], in "Lettres de Vincent d'Indy à Octave Maus", *Revue belge de musicologie* 15, 1961, pg. 128): "from 1801 onwards, one can reconstitute Beethoven's life almost step by step from his works" (d'Indy, *Beethoven*, pg. 56). His tripartite layout is inspired by Wilhelm von Lenz's *Beethoven et ses trois styles* (1852), an important reference for d'Indy, and it considers in turn the "life" and the "music" for each of the composer's "periods". Addressing himself to a readership of knowledgeable amateurs, the author does not shirk from analytical and technical remarks.

D'Indy's choice of a mainly aesthetic focus also reflects his hostility to extramusical interpretations, especially political and ideological ones, as had previously been applied to Beethoven in France. In his letters he virulently criticises the "drivelling musicographers who have written books on [Beethoven] as copious as they are idiotic" (letter to Charles Langrand, Tamaris, 18 March 1911, in d'Indy, *Ma vie. Journal de jeunesse, correspondance familiale et intime (1851-1931)*, ed. Marie d'Indy [Paris: Séguier, 2001], pg. 718) and the "travesties" they had inflicted on the "poor great man" (letter to Octave Maus cited above). D'Indy opposed those authors who had made Beethoven into a republican, a revolutionary, a freethinker, or an anticlericalist, in particular taking issue with Victor Wilder, Jean Chantavoine, Julien Tiersot, and Romain Rolland whose *Vie de Beethoven*, published in 1903, had sold very well. Refuting the point of view of these predecessors, d'Indy presents his own vision of Beethoven, underlining his religious convictions, making him somewhat conservative and attached to the *Ancien Régime*, hostile to the French revolutionaries but an admirer of Napoleon, and contesting the very idea that Beethoven could have been a revolutionary in the musical sphere. While unorthodox, such claims are no doubt no more biased than those of some contemporaries; to be sure, d'Indy the ostensible biographer lends Beethoven a number of his own traits. As was his wont, he permits himself numerous asides and personal anecdotes, without shying away from polemic.

D'Indy dates the completion of his book to 27 March 1911, his sixtieth birthday and also the day after Beethoven's anniversary of death. Published at the end of that year, his *Beethoven* would prove less successful than the *César Franck*. The most significant review is that of the Catholic writer Léon Bloy in the *Tablettes de la Schola*, which makes much of the mystical dimension and concerns itself little with musicological validity. Although republished several times and translated into English, Japanese, and Portuguese, the posterity of d'Indy's *Beethoven* falls short of that of Rolland's *Vie de Beethoven*. If the composer commanded a certain authority in matters Beethovenian, he owed it rather to the analyses in the [Cours de composition](#), which Rolland indeed cites abundantly in his own *Grandes Époques créatrices*.

Gilles SAINT ARROMAN

22/01/2017

Trans. Tadhg Sauvey

To quote this article: Gilles Saint-Arroman, "Vincent d'Indy, Beethoven (1911)", Dictionary of Composer's Writings, Dictéco [online], ed. E. Reibel, last edited: 01/02/2024, <https://preprod.dicteco2.ihrim.fr/book/2125>.