

ATINER CONFERENCE PRESENTATION SERIES No: ART2024-0334

ATINER's Conference Paper Proceedings Series

ART2024-0334

Athens, 6 September 2024

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ART2024-0334

Athens, 6 September 2024

ISSN: 2529-167X

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Vincent d'Indy's View on French Wagnerism in Opera

French artistic culture at the turn of the 19th-20th centuries was strongly influenced by the personality and art of Richard Wagner, which in the sphere of musical art was reflected in the desire of French composers (Chausson, Debussy, Dukas) to comprehend and assimilate the Wagnerian principle of artistic thinking and methods of working with musical material. The aim of this application is to determine the specifics of the interpretation of these principles by Vincent d'Indy, who, unlike his colleagues, remained an admirer of Wagner's work until his death (1931), and who analyzed the most important theoretical works on Wagnerism. To be more precise – the unfinished work “Introduction à l'étude de Parsifal de Wagner” (1937) and the essay “Richard Wagner et son influence sur l'art musical français” (1929, published in 1930).

- 1) *According to d'Indy, the assimilation of Wagner's ideas on the French soil was fostered by the formation of the National Society of Music (la Société Nationale de Musique), along with the activities of Cesar Franck and his students, who adapted the leitmotif method into the field of symphonic works.*
- 2) *Apart from the actual representatives of Cesar Franck's circle themselves but also along with them, d'Indy seeks to examine the works of such composers (E. Reyer, E. Chabrier, A. Magnard, A. Bruneau, P. Dukas, P. de Breville, C. Debussy, G. Ropartz) who were influenced by Wagner in terms of the musical language (harmony, timbre thinking, method of developing thematic material, textural solutions) or the nature of stage representation (preference for subjects related to myths and legends, specific imagery, philosophical ideas).*

Eventually, Dandy concludes that the development of French music would not have been possible without Wagner.

Keywords: *Vincent d'Indy, Richard Wagner, French Wagnerism, Cesar Franck, symphony, opera*

Introduction

French artistic culture of fin de siècle was largely impacted by Richard Wagner; it was influenced both by his personality and by his art. The French Wagnerism was highlighted by the aspiration of French composers to interpret and assimilate Wagner's way of artistic thinking and his methods of work with the musical content. French composers accomplish it in a whole range of genres and hierarchical levels of organisation of stylistic harmony.

The period of French Wagnerism can be estimated based on the compositions in which their authors deliberately used Wagner's music principles. The initial example of this is the *Sigurd* opera composed by Ernest Reyer, which dates back to 1862, the year when the composer started to work on the opera. The year 1915 can be considered as the final year of French Wagnerism, when Vincent d'Indy finished his last *wagneresque* music opus called *La Légende de Sait Christophe*. The list of composers that were greatly influenced by Richard Wagner includes the following names: César Franck, Paul Dukas, Emmanuel Chabrier, Alfred Brunei, Gustave Charpentier and Vincent d'Indy.

Among the before-mentioned composers, Vincent d'Indy was one of the most consistent Wagnerists. Throughout his entire life the Frenchman had been a real worshipper of Richard Wagner's work and his loyal follower. D'Indy's literary and musical works can be considered as the final benchmark of Wagnerism in France.

Vincent d'Indy takes a special role among the French composers, who follow the art of Richard Wagner in their work. Wagner's influence on d'Indy's artistic thinking was so significant that the state-of-the art principles of composition are in first place associated with him. In the 1870s, inspired by Wagner's music, the young d'Indy decided to bring maestro's methods to the French soil. These ideas materialised in the following *wagneresque* compositions: the dramatic legend "*Le Chant de la cloche*" or "The Song of the Bell" (1878-1883), as well as three operas: 1. "*Fervaal*" (1889-1895), 2. "*L'Etranger*" (*The Stranger*; 1897-1901) and 3. "*La Légende de Saint-Christophe*" ("*The Legend of St. Christophe*"; 1908-1915). D'Indy's special relation to Wagner's reform is seen in his theoretical texts, for example, in certain chapters of his work "*Cours de composition musicale*" ("Lessons on music composition")¹. These chapters are dedicated to the analysis of Wagner's dramas. His essay titled "*Richard Wanger*"² that was first made public at the conference **Le Revue hebdomadaire** at the Hôtel du Foyer in Paris in 1913, contains d'Indy's thoughts on Wagner's personality, peculiarities of his artistic journey and the reception in the French culture.

At the end of his life, d'Indy writes two research papers: an essay called "*Richard Wagner and his influence on French musical art*" ("Richard Wagner et

¹*D'Indy V. Cours de composition musicale. Troisième livre / Rédigé par Guy de Lioncourt. Paris: Durand et Cie, 1950, pp. 146-185.*

²*D'Indy, V. Richard Wagner // Écrits de Vincent d'Indy: Écrits de Vincent d'Indy: Volume 2 (1904-1918) / rassemblés et présentés par Gilles Saint Arroman. Arles: Editions Actes Sud / Palazzetto Bru Zane, 2021, pp. 406-430.*

son influence sur l'art musical Français”)³, which was published in 1930, as well as an unfinished paper “*Introduction to the study of Wagner's "Parsifal"* (“Introduction a l'étude de "Parsifal" de Wagner”)⁴ that was published by Paul Landormy in 1931. Since the Parsifal paper wasn't finished and d'Indy writes only about philosophical and religious issues, as well as does not cover the musical aspect of the opus, I will focus on the former work, namely “*Richard Wagner and his influence on French musical art*”. In this paper d'Indy identifies the role of Wagner for the French culture, sets specific modalities or means of influence of his music on the French music scores and explains, why does Wagner's method appeal to him.

According to Vincent d'Indy, the question of Wagner's influence of the French culture is dialectical. In his theoretical works d'Indy had stressed numerous times that on the one hand, without Wagner, the French culture wouldn't had happened. At the same time the music opuses of the Bayreuth master wouldn't had achieved such a high quality without previous accomplishments of such French Opera composers such as Jean-Philippe Rameau, André Destouches, André Grétry⁵. In other words, d'Indy is convinced that Wagner's dramas had influenced the formation of the following sub-groups of the new French music such as chamber music, symphonic music and opera music⁶. In this particular case d'Indy implies representatives of school of César Franck and his followers. One of the main results of Wagner's influence is translated in the leitmotif method in symphonic music, which is captured in César Frack's art, as well as the one of his followers.

D'Indy writes about the result of this influence on the instrumental music in his theoretical works such as “*Cours de composition musicale*”⁷ and in a book dedicated to César Franck⁸. The cyclical principle or a cyclical style is considered a substitute of the leitmotif method of Wagner in the French music.

The hypothesis that getting to know Wagner's drama had influenced the concept of cyclical form in the French instrumental music is backed by specific terms that are used in instrumental and dramatic music, as well as two phenomena behind these terms or fractions of the musical content. The main recurring and renewing element in the music opuses is a cyclic theme, while the leitmotif takes over this function in dramatic music genre.

In the first part of the second book of “*Cours de composition musicale*”, d'Indy writes: “In the symphonic domain the cyclic theme and the leitmotif (*le motif conducteur* – Leit Motiv – conductor's leitmotif) in the dramatic sequence are one

³D'Indy, V. Richard Wagner et son influence sur l'art musical français / Vincent d'Indy. Paris: Delagrave, 1930. 93 p.

⁴D'Indy, V. Introduction a l'étude de "Parsifal" de Wagner / "Les chefs-d'oeuvre de la musique expliqués" publ. par P. Landormy, avec préf. de P. de Bréville. Paris: Mellottée, 1931. 115 p.

⁵Ellis K. En route to Wagner: Explaining d'Indy's Early Music Pantheon / Katharine Ellis // Vincent d'Indy et son temps / Sous la direction de Manuela Schwartz; avec la collaboration de Myriam Chimènes. Liège: Editions Mardaga, 2006, pp. 113-114.

⁶D'Indy, V. Richard Wagner et son influence sur l'art musical français. Paris : Delagrave, 1930, pp. 59-62, 65-66.

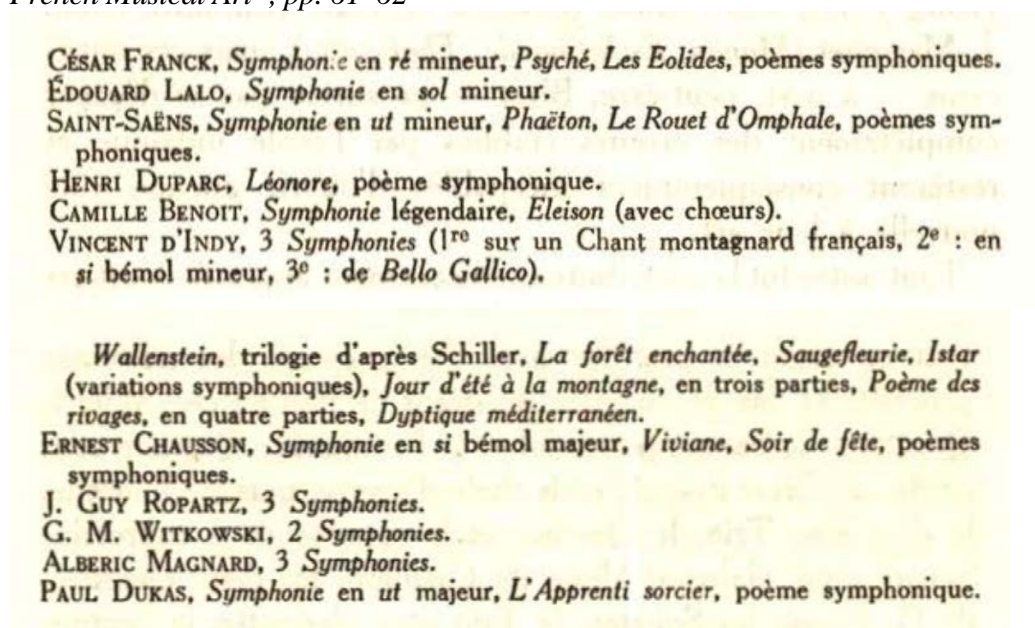
⁷D'Indy V. Cours de composition musicale. Deuxième livre – première partie / Rédigé avec la collaboration de Auguste Sérieyx. Paris: Durand et Cie, 1909, p. 375.

⁸D'Indy V. Cesar Franck // Vincent d'Indy. Paris : Félix Àlcan, 1906, pp. 67, 82-83, 151.

and the same thing”⁹. The French master underlines the correlation between the implementation of the cyclic principal in symphonic and dramatic music by using the same term in both of the cases. This term is called the leading motif or, in French, motif conducteur. This way, while analysing the musical forms, to be precise, the form of the cyclic sonata, D’Indy uses the term “motif conducteur”¹⁰.

As an example, let’s take a look at the list of symphonic pieces, which are marked by Wagnerism according to the author. This list was provided in the essay called “*Richard Wagner et son influence sur l’art musical français*”¹¹.

Figure 1. Excerpt from d’Indy’s Essay “*Richard Wagner and his Influence on French Musical Art*”, pp. 61–62



The listed musical pieces are written in the symphony and symphonic poem (poèm symphonique) genres, however, there are a few symphonic compositions, which genre is not specified by d’Indy. These compositions are provided in the third column of the table. It is important to mention that the genres of these music compositions need to be defined. The French tradition as such, just as well as when following d’Indy’s interpretation, some genres are defined according a very special set of features, very different from the common ones.

D’Indy talks more definitely about Wagner’s influence on the French opera. When studying Wagner’s influence of the French Opera, d’Indy touches upon the music pieces written by César Franck’s students. According to d’Indy, the creation of the National Music Society or La Société Nationale de Musique and the contribution of César Franck and his students - this all contributed to the adoption and assimilation of Wagner’s principles in the French music culture. Apart from the

⁹D’Indy, V. Cours de composition musicale. Deuxième livre – première partie, p. 385.

¹⁰D’Indy, V. Cours de composition musicale. Deuxième livre – première partie. p. 375.

¹¹D’Indy, V. Richard Wagner et son influence sur l’art musical français. Paris: Delagrave, 1930. pp. 61–62.

musicians from the so-called circle of César Franck, d'Indy tried reviewing or studying such authors as Reyer, Ropartz, Bruno, Lukas, Debussy, who had already experienced Wagner's influence from the music language point of view, as well as the way they manage the scenic representation¹².

Figure 2. Excerpt from V. d'Indy's Essay "Richard Wagner and his Influence on French Musical Art", p. 66

		Dates de composition	
		1 ^{re} représentation.	
ERNEST REYER.	<i>Sigurd</i>	1870-1872	Bruxelles, 1884
EMMANUEL CHABRIER.	<i>Gwendoline</i>	1883-1885	Bruxelles, 1886
ALFRED BRUNEAU	<i>Le Rêve</i>	1888	Opéra-comique, 1890
ALBÉRIC MAGNARD.	* <i>Yolande</i>	1890	Bruxelles, 1893
	* <i>Bérénice</i>	1904	Opéra-comique, 1911
	* <i>Guerçœur</i>	1900	inédit
VINCENT D'INDY	* <i>Fervaal</i>	1892-1896	Bruxelles, 1897
	* <i>L'Étranger</i>	1897-1900	Bruxelles, 1903
	* <i>Le Chant de la Cloche</i>	1879-1883	Bruxelles, 1913
	* <i>La Légende de St Christophe</i>	1911-1915	Opéra, 1920
GUSTAVE CHARPENTIER.	* <i>Louise</i>	1893	Opéra-comique, 1900
ERNEST CHAUSSON.	* <i>Le roi Arthus</i>	1890-1899	Bruxelles, 1903
PAUL DUKAS	<i>Ariane et Barbe-bleue</i>	1906	Opéra-comique, 1907
PIERRE DE BREVILLE.	<i>Eros vainqueur</i>	1908	Bruxelles, 1910
GUY ROPARTZ.	<i>Le Pays</i>	1910	Opéra-comique, 1913
CLAUDE DEBUSSY	<i>Pelléas et Mélisande</i>	1890-1893	Opéra-comique, 1895

Let's take a look at the the question which comes as of the foremost importance to d'Indy when analysing the level of influence of Wagner's dramas on the French operas. The first aspect, which d'Indy focuses on is libretto. Libretto should be written by the composer himself for the clearer and fuller reflection of his ideas. Deliberately aligning with Wagner, d'Indy himself writes texts for the dramatic legend "Le Chant de la cloche", as well as for the three operas "Fervaal", "L'Étrange" and "La Légende de Saint-Christophe". Among those who d'Indy mentions in his list, there are several composers who wrote librettos for their operas. Albéric Magnard created three operas on his own librettos – "Yolande", "Guerçœur" and "Bérénice", Gustav Charpentier himself penned libretto for the opera "Louisei", and Ernest Chausson wrote his libretto for the opera "Le Roi Arthus"¹³.

The second and equally important factor is the definition of the genre of dramatic works. D'Indy himself refers to the genres of the operas "Fervaal" and "L'Étrange" as an "action musicale" ("music action" in English)¹⁴, while he calls

¹²D'Indy, V. Richard Wagner et son influence sur l'art musical français. Paris : Delagrave, 1930, p. 66.

¹³D'Indy, V. Richard Wagner et son influence sur l'art musical français. 1930, p. 65.

¹⁴Huebner, S. «Le Hollandais fantome»: Ideology and Dramaturgy in L'Étranger, pp. 263-264.

the genre of the opera “*La Légende de Saint Christophe*” as a *drame scare* (“scared drama” in English).

In terms of music, d’Indy identifies two particular characteristics of Wagner’s art. The first one concerns the search for and careful selection of major themes, which are instantly remembered by the listeners through the influence of the chosen rhythm or melodic charms (*charms mélodique*)¹⁵. The second one, particularity of Wagnerian musical conception is the methodical use of significant tonalities (*tonalités significatives*) established as a means of construction for the work. While touching upon the issue of major tonalities, d’Indy references the music works and composers that were Wagner’s predecessors, to be more precise, he cites two operas by Christoph Gluck “*Alceste*” and “*Armide*”, as well as operas by Carl Maria von Weber “*Der Freischütz*” und “*Euryanthe*”¹⁶. D’Indy believes that Wagner, who was drawing on the experience of his predecessors, perfected this principle to its most refined implementation. The Frenchman notes “certain tonalities” (*tonalités significatives*) in Wagner’s dramas starting with *Tristan and Isolde*, “which affect the expression of a special feeling and which, for no other purpose, are never used in any other way”¹⁷.

In this essay, d’Indy examines how the aforementioned features of wagneresque tendency emerge in the French composers’ operas. This way, he believes that Ernest Reyers’ *leitmotif* lacks flexibility of Wagner’s themes or melodies, as his *leitmotif* recurs too often without any significant changes to them¹⁸. As for d’Indy, Emmanuel Chabrier particularly excelled in terms of harmonic innovation. The work of Alfred Bruneau is marked by inconsistencies between the nature of his characters and the nature of the thematic material. At the same time, Ernest Chausson and Albéric Magnard were the ones who most accurately reflected on Wagner’s principles. In particular, Mangard “sought to create a harmonic atmosphere around the chosen theme, which, while making it rather difficult to express vocally, gave it a particular and ever-identifiable character”¹⁹. On the other hand, Paul Dukas is recognised for the most original embodiment of Wagner’s ideas, especially in regard to melody²⁰. D’Indy wrote the following about “*Pelléas et Mélisande*” by Claude Debussy, now let’s take a look at the exact quote: “Debussy’s unique theatrical piece <...> is a true achievement of the period when influenced by Wagner, the French art swung ahead on the path of progress”²¹. The French maestro states that through Wagner’s influence, the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* contributed to consolidation of the following features in the French art - order, logic and proportion.

¹⁵D’Indy, V. *Richard Wagner et son influence sur l’art musical français // Vincent d’Indy et son temps/Sous la direction de Manuela Schwartz; avec la collaboration de Myriam Chimènes*. Liège: Editions Mardaga, 2006, p. 50.

¹⁶Ibid, p. 50.

¹⁷Ibid, p. 50.

¹⁸Ibid, pp. 67-68.

¹⁹D’Indy, V. *Richard Wagner et son influence sur l’art musical français*. Paris: Delagrave, 1930, p. 70.

²⁰D’Indy, V. *Richard Wagner et son influence sur l’art musical français*, p. 76.

²¹Ibid, p. 66.

When touching upon his own compositions in his essay, d'Indy notes that he was the one who made the first attempts to use quotations from Gregorian monophony in musical drama. However, it is very likely that d'Indy referred to Wagner's ideas used in "*Parsifal*" and "*Tannhäuser*", (as protestant chorale becomes the intonational basis for the choral scenes and instrumental parts in Wagner's music). In addition to that, d'Indy calls himself one of the firsts to use the leitmotif and the tonal architecture of scenes in a perfectly thought-through way²². The composer calls the dramatic legend "*Le Chant de la cloche*" the most wagneresque of his dramatic compositions. This is the initial work in which d'Indy began entrusting the exposition of themes to the voice or the vocal part instead of the musical instruments, leaving the symphonic development of these themes to the latter ones. D'Indy's said in his essay: "And in all this, I believe that I have fulfilled my duty as a French artist (ma mission d'artiste français), without plagiarising Wagner's art or misusing the means that are provided by his art"²³. When describing his operas, d'Indy gives examples of thematic material from "*Fervaal*" as an example of assimilation of Wagner's leitmotif system. Then he further explains that "*L'Étrange*" and "*La Légende de Saint Christophe*" are written following the same principle.

The list that was made by d'Indy includes works of d'Indy's own students. Joseph Guy Ropartz, who was both César Franck's and d'Indy's student, and created the "*Le Pays*" opera (1910-1912, based on Charles Le Goffic's libretto). The genre of this opera is defined as "drama on music in three acts" (*drame en musique en trois actes*). The opera's plot is infused with motifs referring to the works of both Wagner and d'Indy. An example of which would be the motif of breaking one's oath. In this case one can recall "*Götterdämmerung*" and "*Fervaal*". Just like d'Indy in his "*L'Étrange*", Ropartz aspired to translate the action into the realms of feelings and experiences. For this reason, he decided to limit the amount of characters to just three, creating some kind of a chamber psychological drama. The basis of the opera musical material consists of the four main leitmotifs, which are interconnected with the fatal role of the Iceland swamp in the opera's plot. It includes love and the dreams of the female protagonist Kaethe, the male longing for homeland in the theme of Tual, the grounded nature of Kaethe's father Jörgen (Michel Fleury Le Paysi, 2007). Albéric Magnard, another student of d'Indy, dedicated his opera "*Bérénice*" to Guy Ropartz, which is based on the tragedy of the same name by Jean-Baptiste Racine (1911).

Wagner's influence on French musical culture is a complex and dialectic phenomenon. French Wagnersim manifested itself in opera in a variety of aspects: aspiration to plots related to myths and legends, principles of dealing with thematicism, the nature of development of the musical structure, as well as the specific nature of harmonic and timbre solutions. Understood in a very specific way, Wagner's ideas served as a basis for multidirectional and essentially ambiguous processes in French culture. When summarising his essay "*Richard Wagner and his*

²²Ibid, p. 71.

²³Ibid, p. 71.

influence on French musical art” Vincent d’Indy concludes that “Wagner's influence was highly beneficial to our French musical art”²⁴.

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²⁴*D’Indy, V.* Richard Wagner et son influence sur l’art musical français. Paris: Delagrave, 1930, p. 91.