



Arthur HONEGGER

Pacific 231

Arthur Honegger (10 March 1892 – 27 November 1955) was a Swiss composer, who was born in France and lived a large part of his life in Paris. A member of Les Six, his best-known work is probably *Antigone*, composed between 1924 and 1927 to the French libretto by Jean Cocteau based on the tragedy *Antigone* by Sophocles. It premiered on 28 December 1927 at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie with sets designed by Pablo Picasso and costumes by Coco Chanel. However, his most frequently performed work is probably the orchestral work *Pacific 231*, which was inspired by the sound of a steam locomotive. Born Oscar-Arthur Honegger to Swiss parents in Le Havre, France, he initially studied harmony and violin in Le Havre. After studying for two years at the Zurich Conservatory he enrolled in the Paris Conservatoire from 1911 to 1918, studying with both Charles-Marie Widor and Vincent d'Indy. He made his Paris compositional debut in 1916 and in 1918 wrote the ballet *Le dit des jeux du monde*, generally considered to be his first characteristic work. In 1926 he married Andrée Vaurabourg, a pianist and fellow student at the Paris Conservatoire, on the condition that they live in separate apartments because he required solitude for composing. Andrée lived with her mother, and Honegger visited them for lunch every day. They lived apart for the duration of their marriage, with the exceptions of one year from 1935 to 1936 following Vaurabourg's injury in a car accident, and the last year of Honegger's life, when he was not well enough to live alone. They had one daughter, Pascale, born in 1932. Honegger also had a son, Jean-Claude (1926–2003), with the singer Claire Croiza. Honegger always remained in touch with Switzerland, his parents' country of origin, until the outbreak of the war and the invasion of the Nazis made it impossible for him to leave Paris. He joined the French Resistance and was generally unaffected by the Nazis themselves, who allowed him to continue his work without too much interference. He also taught composition at the École Normale de Musique de Paris, where his students included Yves Ramette. However, he was greatly depressed by the war. Between its outbreak and his death, he wrote his last four symphonies (numbers two to five) which are among the most powerful symphonic works of the 20th century. Of these, the second, for strings, featuring a solo trumpet which plays a chorale tune in the style of Bach in the final movement, and the third, subtitled *Symphonie Liturgique* with three movements that evoke the Requiem Mass (*Dies irae*, *De profundis clamavi* and *Dona nobis pacem*), are probably the best known. Written in 1946 just after the end of the war, it has parallels with Benjamin Britten's *Sinfonia da Requiem* of 1940. In contrast with this work is the lyrical, nostalgic *Symphony No. 4*, subtitled "*Deliciae Basilienses*" ("*The Delights of Basel*"), written as a tribute to days of relaxation spent in that Swiss city during the war. Honegger was widely known as a train enthusiast, and once notably said: "I have always loved locomotives passionately. For me they are living creatures and I love them as others love women or horses." His "*mouvement symphonique*" *Pacific 231* (a depiction of a steam locomotive) gained him early notoriety in 1923.

Honegger's *Pacific 231*, is an orchestral work, written in 1923. It is one of his most frequently performed works. The popular interpretation of the piece is that it depicts a steam locomotive, one that is supported by the title of the piece alongside film versions. Honegger explained that he wrote it as an exercise in building momentum while the tempo of the piece slows. He originally titled it *Mouvement Symphonique*, only giving it the name *Pacific 231*, a class of steam locomotive designated in Whyte notation as a 4-6-2, with four pilot wheels, six driving wheels, and two trailing wheels (the French, who count axles rather than wheels, call this arrangement 2-3-1) after it was finished. Honegger was widely known as a train enthusiast, and once notably said: "I have always loved locomotives passionately. For me they are living creatures and I love them as others love women or horses." The orchestra consists of: 2 flutes, piccolo flute, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon – 4 French horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, – 4 percussionists (tenor drum, cymbal, bass drum, tam tam) – strings. *Pacific 231* is the first in Honegger's series of three symphonic movements. The other two are *Rugby* and *Mouvement Symphonique No. 3*. Honegger lamented that his "*poor Symphonic Movement No. 3* paid dearly for its barren title." Critics generally ignored it, while *Pacific 231* and *Rugby*, with more evocative titles, have been written about in depth. A 1949 award-winning French film, *Pacific 231*, directed by Jean Mitry, used the orchestral work as the sound track for a tribute to the steam locomotive, and included close-up footage of driving wheels, running gear and railroad operations, mostly taken at speed, and cut/choreographed to the music.