

# Arthur Honegger's "Les Ombres": Fragment of a Lost Film Score

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Arthur Honegger (1892-1955), French composer of Swiss parentage, wrote symphonies, concertos, chamber works, and ballets; probably his best-known compositions are the "dramatic psalm" *Le Roi David* and the "mouvement symphonique" *Pacific 231*. But Honegger also wrote music for more than forty motion pictures (some in collaboration with other composers), and that aspect of his career spanned both the silent and sound film eras. Many other French concert hall composers, e.g., Jean Françaix, Jacques Ibert, André Jolivet, Eric Satie, Henri Sauguet, as well as Honegger's confreres in *Les Six*<sup>1</sup>--Georges Auric, Louis Durey, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, Germaine Tailleferre--all composed for silent or sound films, or both.<sup>2</sup> In fact, what is presumed to be the first original film score was also composed by a Frenchman, Camille Saint-Saëns, for *L'Assassinat du Duc de Guise*, in 1908.

Composers in other European countries whose names were normally associated with the concert hall occasionally crossed over into films, e.g., Paul Dessau, Hanns Eisler, Sergei Prokofiev, Dmitri Shostakovich, Ralph Vaughan-Williams, and William Walton. Many of them regarded composing for the films as a challenge. Moreover, some of them wrote valuable essays about their experiences and the unique problems they faced in this kind of work.

"Les Ombres" is a segment of the music that Honegger composed for one of the most celebrated motion pictures of the silent era: *Napoléon vu par Abel Gance* was a giant epic, a motion picture conceived and produced on what was probably the grandest scale of any film before its time in France. The name of its writer and director, Abel Gance, was legendary in the cinema, and for him Honegger had composed and compiled music for the film *La Roue* in 1923. The premiere of *Napoléon* was at the Théâtre National de l'Opéra in Paris on April 7, 1927, where it was so successful that it was repeated nine times.

Ms. Q 45.1

Les Ombres

Extrait de la musique pour le film  
"Napoléon"

Assolvi

Lent

1 Tromp.  $\text{C}$

Cornes  
fa  $\text{C}$

$P$

VI  $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$

VII  $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$

A  $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$

Vclon  $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$

C. B.  $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$   $\text{C}$

Moldenhauer Archives, Zentralbibliothek Zürich

Despite its initial success, the history of the film *Napoléon* is a sad and confusing tale. Gance's rough cut ran nine hours, but even if he had had the film ready in time for the premiere, such an extraordinary length was not acceptable to the exhibitors, and Gance was forced to cut it down to three hours and forty minutes.<sup>3</sup> A month after the premiere, a "definitive" version, lasting nine hours, was screened privately, using some of Honegger's music and excerpts from the classics. Since then, however, exhibitors and distributors have cut and changed the film so many times that it is doubtful if it has ever been seen again in its "definitive" form. In its final, "official" edit (completed in 1928), *Napoléon* ran

six and a half hours. Gance himself produced a much-shortened sound version in 1935, but not with Honegger's music. It was not until 1980 that a version was exhibited that probably came closest to Gance's original concept. It was assembled and edited by the British filmmaker and historian Kevin Brownlow, but the score, composed and compiled by Carl Davis, used only one piece of Honegger's music.<sup>4</sup>

The fate of Honegger's score has been sadder still. Not only has his original manuscript disappeared, but to this day the cue sheet has not been found (if one ever existed). Without it or a similar music list, there is no way of knowing exactly what the score contained. Of one thing we can be certain: even had Honegger been able to compose a completely original score of nine hours duration,<sup>5</sup> he soon would have had to abandon any such idea because Gance was constantly reediting the film. We can therefore safely assume that a large part of the music that accompanied *Napoléon* consisted of the common silent film fare of arrangements from the classics, popular songs, and some stock music that Honegger wrote for other purposes (possibly for newsreels). We do know that for Gance's earlier *La Roue*, the composer drew on preexisting music.<sup>6</sup> Of course, Honegger would have been able to write new music for any scenes from *Napoléon* that the director left intact, but we do not know how much he wrote or how much of it was actually used at the screening (but see note 11 below).

Things did not go well on the afternoon of the premiere; Gance continued to make changes in the film up to the last minute. In fact, on that very day, Gance was still so far behind that the laboratory had not yet finished printing some of the reels.<sup>7</sup> It is easy to imagine the composer's frustration and the exhausted orchestra's impatience at the growing impossibility of the task. The last straw fell when at five o'clock in the afternoon, after the musicians had been rehearsing since nine in the morning without a lunch break, Gance changed the editing once more. At that point, according to Arthur Hoérée, Honegger's collaborator, the composer left the pit in disgust and walked out of the theater.<sup>8</sup> The podium was taken over thereafter by J. E. Szyfer, the conductor of the Opéra orchestra.

Needless to say, trying to produce and perform a suitable musical accompaniment for a lengthy motion picture that was continuously being changed, with an orchestra almost totally drained of its energy, could only have had dismal results. That some critics bitterly attacked the music is not surprising; what is surprising is that Abel Gance himself criticized "the general standard of the music"<sup>9</sup> when, after all, he was mostly to blame for the fiasco.

Although most of the original scores composed for silent films--both here and abroad--have vanished, at least some of Honegger's music for *Napoléon* has survived. A concert suite, comprising eight pieces extracted and arranged by the composer, was published by Éditions Francis Salabert in Paris in 1927.<sup>10</sup> Thus it is possible to compare the printed version of "Les Ombres" with a manuscript score in the Moldenhauer Archives. The title page of the latter says, in longhand, "Extraits de la musique pour le film 'Napoléon'." It contains no descriptions of screen images or action nor any conductor cues such as would be commonly found in the majority of silent film scores or conductor parts. All this, in addition to the fact that Honegger's score has the same number of measures and musical content as the printed version, would indicate that this score was not designed for use in the film, but for the Salabert concert suite. Unfortunately, lacking a cue sheet, one thing we do not know--and probably never shall--is whether "Les Ombres," as it appears here, corresponds to the version that was performed at the premiere of the film (or if in fact it was performed at all).<sup>11</sup>

The "Les Ombres" manuscript comprises eight pages of orchestral score, containing forty measures. The tempo indication is "Lent" (slow); Honegger's instrumentation is very sparse, consisting only of strings, one trumpet, bass drum, and suspended cymbal. The piece commences with a series of quiet, eerie, widely spread whole-note chords in divided strings. The trumpet (muted) enters softly in the ninth measure with a statement of what is presumably Napoleon's theme, a martial tune that appears in a full orchestral setting in another piece found in the suite, and entitled "Napoléon."<sup>12</sup>

Under normal circumstances, the lack of a cue sheet would make it difficult if not impossible to determine for which scene this music was composed. But luckily, the answer can be found in Kevin Brownlow's *Napoleon*. Among the many stills in the book there is a frame enlargement captioned "Les Ombres."<sup>13</sup> This shows the ghostly forms of five figures from the French Revolution, superimposed, by double exposure, over a background shot of a phantom mob inside the walls of the Convention that ruled France during the awful days of the Reign of Terror and that saw Napoleon's rise to prominence. In his synopsis of the scenario, Brownlow describes the scene as Napoleon enters the hall of the Convention:

[Napoleon] climbs the rostrum and gazes at the empty seats. Gradually the hall becomes peopled with phantoms. Fearing this hallucination, he tries to leave, but the gigantic figure of Danton rises from the closed door and advances.<sup>14</sup>

The scene continues as Danton and the others address Napoleon, challenging him to become the leader of the Revolution, at the same time warning him not to "give way to the temptation of power." According to Brownlow, Abel Gance considered this to be the best sequence in the picture.<sup>15</sup> The mysterious, somber mood induced by Honegger's music seems to match perfectly the setting shown in the frame enlargement and the procession of images described by Brownlow.

For a film composer or film music historian, this manuscript holds special interest, not so much because it is an autograph score by a great composer (important though that may be), but because it is a piece of movie music that saw its way to publication for use in the concert hall. It is further significant that the suite from *Napoléon* was published or at least copyrighted for publication the same year as the premiere of the film itself (1927). The manuscript is in the Zentralbibliothek Zürich.

<sup>1</sup> The group of young French composers in the 1920s who rejected Wagnerism and Impressionism and sought to derive inspiration from the urban and witty worlds of music hall, jazz, and the circus.

<sup>2</sup> For filmographies of Honegger and other French composers see Alain Lacombe, *Des compositeurs pour l'image (Cinéma et Télévision)*, with a preface by Jean-Loup Tournier (Neuilly-sur-Seine: Musique et promotion, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> See Kevin Brownlow, *Napoleon: Abel Gance's Classic Film* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), pp. 150, 299, n. 3.

<sup>4</sup> A second, somewhat longer version, also the work of Brownlow, was shown in 1982, again with Davis's score.

<sup>5</sup> Remember that musical accompaniment was performed continuous throughout the showing of a silent film.

<sup>6</sup> See Harry Halbreich, *Arthur Honegger: Un musicien dans la cité des hommes* (Paris: Fayard/SACEM, 1992), p. 463; Marcel F. G. Delannoy, *Honegger*, Nouvelle édition augmentée du catalogue des oeuvres de A. Honegger par G. K. Spratt, with prefaces by Maurice Schumann and Arthur Honegger (Genève-Paris: Editions Slatkine, 1986), p. 156. Adriano, in his liner notes for *Honegger: Film Music* (see note 10 below), states that Honegger had composed music for the Pathé-Journal newsreels.

<sup>7</sup> Brownlow, p. 152.

<sup>8</sup> Hoérée, cited in op. cit., pp. 150-51.

<sup>9</sup> Brownlow, p. 157.

<sup>10</sup> There is a copy of the Salabert publication in the Library of Congress. The entire suite has been recorded by Adriano, conducting the CSR Symphony Orchestra, and is available on the Marco Polo CD 8.223134. It includes helpful liner notes.

<sup>11</sup> Brownlow is of the opinion that all of the eight pieces were performed at the premiere, and furthermore that they comprised the extent of the original music. (Letter from the author, August 3, 1994.)

<sup>12</sup> The full orchestration of the presentation of the theme in this piece suggests that it might have served for the film's Main Title.

<sup>13</sup> Brownlow, p. 149.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 283.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.