JEANNE D'ARC AU BÛCHER

A COLLABORATION BETWEEN ARTHUR HONEGGER AND PAUL CLAUDEL

by Stephanie Henry

This article coincides with the 100th anniversary of Honegger's birth, March 19, 1892.

WHAT! . . . *ANOTHER Joan of Arc? No, I won't do it!* With this unequivocal reply, Paul Claudel dismissed Ida Rubinstein's commission for a play about Saint Joan and hastily boarded his train to Brussels.[1] And so began one of the most intriguing musical collaborations in the history of the oratorio. *Jeanne d'Arc au Bûcher (Joan of Arc at the Stake)* — commission by Ida Rubinstein, book by Paul Claudel, and music by Arthur Honegger — is a true collaboration in every sense of the word.

The history of this oratorio ("dramatic oratorio" in the collected works) begins with Ida Rubinstein (1885-1960) prior to the encounter described above. The Russian-born actress was destined to play a major role in the Parisian cultural scene during the early decades of the twentieth century. She was intelligent, talented, and extremely wealthy, using her considerable influence and status as a patroness of the arts to showcase many of her own creative fantasies. Her stunning beauty, one of her most valuable assets, was legendary among those who knew her; in 1909 Serge Diaghilev was so taken by her engaging stage presence and breathtaking beauty that he immediately signed her on with his Ballet Russe. (The fact that she couldn't dance didn't seem to matter.) Self-confident, extremely persuasive, and highly articulate, Rubinstein was the sole inspiration behind some of the twentieth century's best-known stage collaborations, among them Rimsky-Korsakov's *Schéhérazade* (1910), Debussy's *Le Martyre de St. Sebastien* (1911), Ravel's *Bolero* and *La Valse* (1928, 1929), Milhaud's *Les Choëphores* (1935), and Honegger's *Jeanne d'Arc au Bûcher* (1935).

It was Rubinstein who, after seeing a spectacular mystery play production at the Sorbonne directed by musicologist and friend Gustave Cohen, came up with the idea for a *jeu populaire* (popular play) about Joan of Arc. She convened a meeting between herself, Cohen, and Honegger in order to formulate ideas about a production along similar lines that would meet all her specifications, one of which was *a priori*: *she* would play the title role. This had many ramifications. For instance, the principal role in *Jeanne au Bûcher* is, notably, a spoken one. This is because Rubinstein could not only not dance, she could not sing either. (Even in Scene 10, where Joan sings short phrases of the Trimazo song, a provision is made for the actress to mouth the words if necessary while a chorus member sings.) Additionally, her mediocre acting skills led to the creation of a scenario in which the character Joan remains bound to her stake at center stage for the duration of the work. Here is a classic case of a work conceived from its earliest stages in accordance with the artistic capacities (in this case, limitations) of one for whom it is written.

However, during the initial plan-

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ning stages, after Honegger finally agreed to write the music, the main concern was to find a suitable librettist. Darius Milhaud, a friend and associate of Rubinstein, had recommended Paul Claudel with whom both had previously collaborated. Rubinstein, however, was reluctant to ask Claudel on this occasion, due to what she thought was lack of interest in a work she had proposed to him a month earlier. Instead, she engaged the services of an unnamed but distinguished woman of letters. This anonymous librettist suggested replacing Honegger when irreconcilable differences between the two threatened to undermine the project. At this point Rubinstein sent Milhaud in search of Claudel, whose negative reply to the commission seemed to confirm her reservations. His brusque response (quoted at the beginning of this article), was not prompted, however, by any aesthetic differences between him and Rubinstein, but rather by his keen sense of artistic propriety and his total reverence for historical integrity. These qualities would play a seminal role in the success of the collaboration, which ultimately took place.

By the time Rubinstein approached Claudel, he was convinced that nothing new could possibly be added to the already well-documented legacy of St. Joan. There was a plethora of literary works published on the life and martyrdom of the celebrated saint, some dating from as far back as the 15th century.[2] Indeed, a translation of the original accounts from Joan's 1431 trial and 1456 rehabilitation sat on the public shelves of the Bibliothèque Nationale for all to read.[3] Claudel, too, had contributed to this vast catalog with two plays of his own that dealt peripherally with the heroic maid — *L'Annonce faite à Marie* and *L'Otage* (1911). From an artistic perspective, Joan's universal popularity, especially among French Catholics, was also troubling to Claudel for reasons he outlined in his memoires:

> I have never liked the idea of taking a great person as the subject for a piece, because the author feels restricted by a situation too well-known to give him sufficient freedom of movement.[4]

The long-awaited canonization of Joan of Arc in 1920 definitely placed her in this "great person" category and automatically rendered any subjective enhancement of her story unacceptable to the poet. As he saw it, history had already documented the evidence surrounding her arrest, conviction, and posthumous acquittal, thereby precluding any need for fictionalizing. He shared a similar view during the writing of *Le Livre de Christophe Colomb* in 1928 (music by Darius Milhaud), and in a letter to friend Arthur Hoereé we find further clarification:

> Joan of Arc is an official heroine who spoke, and whose words, remembered by all, cannot be subject to too free a transcription. It's difficult to establish an historical personage in a fictional frame.[5]

That Claudel's fidelity to historic perspective took precedence over his creative tendencies is difficult to believe (although his deep-seated religious convictions were highly influential). But in view of the fact that this commission would ultimately stand in the shadow of the rest of his monumental oeuvre, Claudel's concerns appear to be slightly exaggerated.[6]

The fact that Claudel the poet felt very strongly about the arguments he raised in defense of his position cannot be denied. Having reached the apex of his career, he could afford to be selective and self-indulgent. But in the final analysis, it was Claudel the Christian who reversed his position and accepted the task which suddenly took on a decidedly personal aspect. According to his own account, after making his intentions known in response to Rubinstein's commission, he had a vision of such impact that he instantly changed his mind and immediately set to work on the libretto.

> I saw clasped hands making the sign of the cross and, immediately after, the complete libretto of Jeanne au Bûcher was, so to speak, thrust upon me. On the whole I write pretty slowly, whereas the libretto of Jeanne au Bûcher was written in a few days.[7]

It was important to understand that in writing the poem for the Rubinstein commission, Claudel was

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also embarking upon a mission to preserve and strengthen his own faith. The poem took him 14 days to complete, at which time he posted a letter to Darius Milhaud: "My dear Milhaud, would you tell Ida Rubinstein that I am coming to see her on the 16th at three. I will bring her *Jeanne au Bûcher* completely finished."[8]

Jeanne au Bûcher was the first of many successful collaborations between Claudel, the French poet laureate, and Honegger, the Swiss-born composer, and many of the features that would become hallmarks of their collaborative style emerged in this work. Characteristic of this style was the influence Claudel exerted over musical considerations. There are few precedents in Western music for the symbiotic-like exchange that occurred during the creation of this opera-oratorio, as it was referred to in its initial stages.

In his book *I am a Composer*, Honegger discredited the widely-held notion that *Jeanne au Bûcher* was his own: "Claudel's contribution was so great that I hardly see myself as the real author, but as a humble collaborator."[9] "All the musical atmosphere stems from the text. Its score is established and the composer in fact has only to let himself be guided in order to get on with the job."[10]

In the commemorative *Hommage à Paul Claudel*, Honegger reminisced about working with Claudel, whose sensitivity to the lyric qualities of the text was not only a great source of inspiration but, judging from the following observation, rather out of the ordinary:

> Two weeks later, [Claudel] was reading [the poem he wrote about Joan] to us and I felt one of the great emotions of my career, because I believe that rarely has a musician received so rich a support in the realization of a score. Moreover, the indications that Claudel was giving me orally made the work clear and I would almost say easy.[11]

These "oral indications" manifested themselves during recitation, where the lyrical content of the words was stressed, suggesting musical enhancement to the sensitive ear. Further evidence of the value associated with this unique aspect of Claudel's artistry is supplied in remarks made by the composer about the oratorio *Dans la mort* (1938):

> I urged him [Claudel] to read and to reread the poem to me, to give me all the necessary indications, so that I might more closely realize his thought. That had been so precious to me in *Joan of Arc* that I didn't want to neglect this contribution.[12]

Milhaud recalled the following in conjunction with the *Les Choëphores* (1915):

> He [Claudel] talked of "Les Choëphores," on which he was then engaged and concerning which he held very decided opinions about the kind of musical accompaniment required. He described scenes to me in which the text became so intensely lyrical that it called for musical expression; others in which only words could convey the fierce exaltation of the characters.[13]

Paul Claudel's literary output was prolific and included a variety of idioms — theater, lyric poetry, and prose — his theater works being the best known. In the collected works, *Jeanne au Bûcher* is classified as poetry, but it was conceived as a fully staged musical theatre piece with costumes and scenery.[14] His theatrical world was all-encompassing, combining his interest in speech and expression with such aspects of production as scenic design, staging, acting technique, dancing, and film. He frequently took initiative in designing his own *mise en scène*, and regularly attended rehearsals of his works in progress. He was conversant in all media, incorporating into his scripts dance, cinematic technique, and of course, music.[15] In Claudel's vision of total theater, music played a significant role, functioning strictly as a vehicle for textual expression. In this sense, it played a dominant role, supporting the text, imposing rhythm upon it, or sometimes helping speech along into

song. To his way of thinking, the ideal integration would be for music to spring " . . . from poetry as poetry springs from prose, and prose from silence and the formless mutterings of the mind."[16] This metamorphosis from speech into song, intangible on the page, is precisely the phenomenon described by Honegger and Milhaud in their sessions with Claudel.

The organic theory of the "evolution" of words into music is implicit in Claudel's unconventional poetic style, the essence of which is derived from its substance rather than its form. Claudel dispensed with the standard poetic format of Alexandrine meter (twelve syllables of six iambics or short/long combinations, with a pause after the third iambic) and favored instead a freer, more expressive style, known as *vers Claudelien*. The style exploited the phonic and syntactical potential of each word rather than the familiar structural elements of rhythm and rhyme. This sonic emphasis had its roots in the *fin de siècle* works of Mallarmé and the French Symbolists, who cultivated a high regard for the power of music and tried to exploit the musicality of the spoken word in their writings.

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The enthusiasm with which Honegger embraced Claudel's philosophy merely reflected his own sensitivity for what he termed the "plasticity" of the word. By the time the composer met Claudel, he had long since established his own criteria for setting text to music: *Cantique de Paques* (1918), *Le Roi David* (1923), *Judith* (1926), and *Cris du monde* (1931). These criteria were thoroughly outlined in the preface to his opera *Antigone* (1927) and became the focus of subsequent inquiry:

> I sought a rhythmical scheme as closely as possible akin to the melodic plasticity of the French word; hence my declamation has physiognomy very different from all that has heretofore been done in dramatic music.[17]

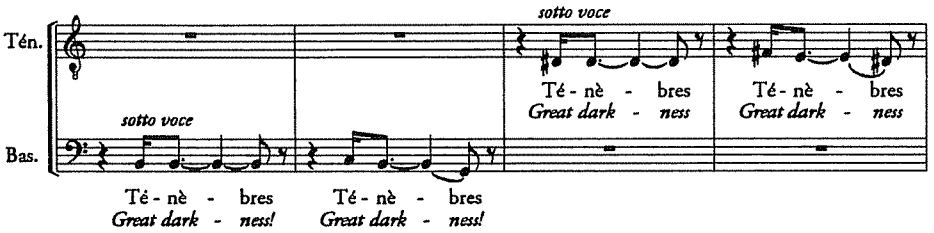
In other words, Honegger allowed the lyric or plastic qualities of the words to suggest a melodic shape to him, not the other way around.

By working backwards and examining some of the musical settings from *Jeanne au Bûcher*, we see first-hand how Honegger constructed the lines based on this theory of inherent lyricism.

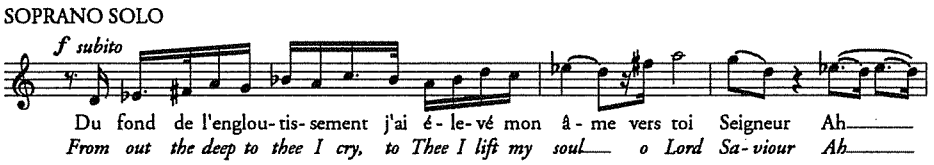
As these examples help illustrate, the relationship between the sound and meaning of the words and their ultimate melodic and rhythmic configuration is an organic one. A second look at the excerpts reveals another concern of no small importance to conductors: language. It does not take much experimentation to discover that, although the translation provided is excellent, the English does not declaim in the same way Honegger intended. The music is indisputably wedded to its French text.

From the standpoint of melodic and rhythmic construction, then, it is clear what the nature of some of Claudel's musical contributions to

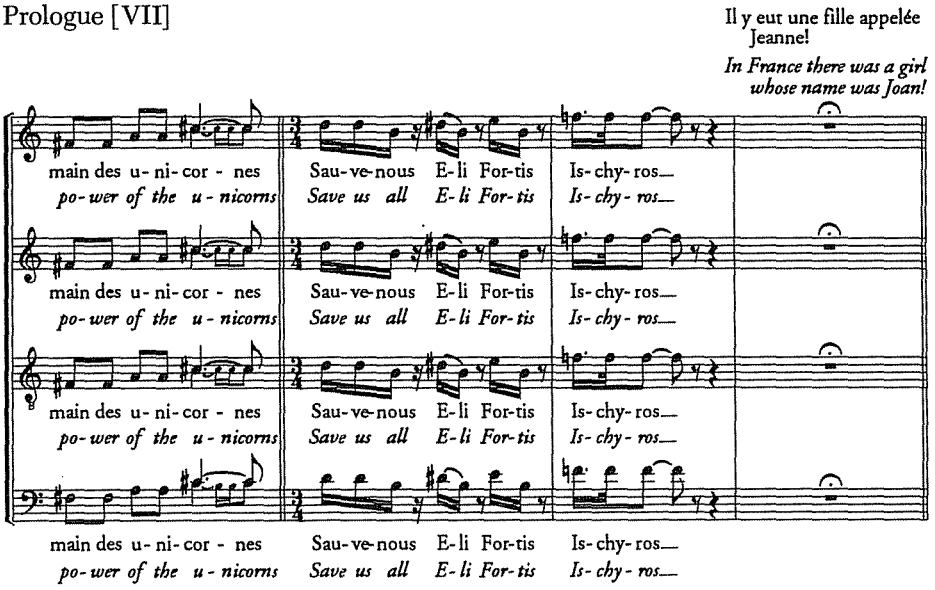
Prologue [I]



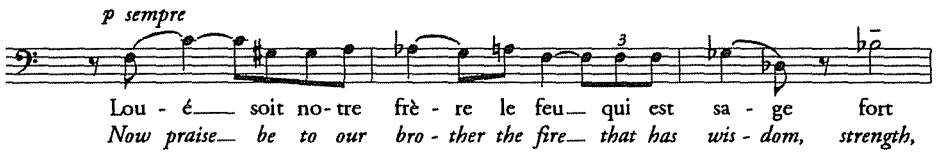
Prologue [IV]



Prologue [VII]



Scene 11 [92]



Jeanne d'Arc au Bûcher were, and how they were implemented by the composer. A change in focus brings us to another level of understanding in the genesis of this work — Claudel's philosophic orientation to the role of music in drama. Claudel was acutely aware that mere speech, no matter how well-modulated, couldn't always render his poetry adequately effective. Something more was needed to enhance communication. In the following excerpt from his talk on *Jeanne d'Arc au Bûcher* given at its 1938 Basle premiere, Claudel addressed this issue:

> The voices [i.e., music] under the story, under the action, are important to hear. Music creates the atmosphere, it is the music that intensifies the rhythm, it is the music which opens the heart, it is the music that impregnates the speech with feeling and thought, it is music that speaks and music also that listens.[18]

The rhetoric may be lofty but the point is clear. Just as music enhances the drama through its application to the word, music is at the same time a byproduct of the drama. In the case of *Jeanne au Bûcher*, evidence of this principle can be found in every scene. A description of one scene in particular will suffice.

Scene 7 finds Joan lost in childhood memories from the days when she first heard her infamous voices calling her to battle. It is clear from the text that this is a flashback. Joan recollects aloud the sounds of the voices singing to her, as well as the chiming of bells from the church tower near her home. She remembers mounting her horse, riding to the King, and escorting him back in triumph to his coronation at Rheims. Underneath the scene, in which Joan speaks, are the shouts of her recollections — the din and clatter of a military procession grows louder and louder, coupled with the wild pealing of bells and the voices of her saints, the whole gradually increasing in volume and intensity to a huge climax as the procession enters the cathedral. The effect is stunning. And except for Joan's monologue, there is no visible evidence — sets or scene changes — to show the listener what is happening. There is only the score. The music is analogous to a scenic backdrop, a cinematic flashback, or a radio drama. It literally floods the stage with light, painting with sound that which is not available for the eyes to see. It was no accident that Honegger was highly sensitized to this type of composition; throughout his career he composed regularly for both film and radio.

Much of Claudel's thinking about numerous aspects of theater, particularly the role played by music, was shaped and influenced by what he saw in Japan. Described by many as an incurable mystic, Claudel immersed himself in the exotic mysticism of the Orient during his stay there from 1921-27. Living in Tokyo on diplomatic assignment, he became intimately acquainted with the dramatic idioms of Noh and Kabuki; and in one of his commentaries on the theater, he made this observation:

> The Japanese theatre has solved perfectly the problem of music in the theatre. It must never compete with the action or alternate with it, like an item in a concert, but act as intermediary between play and audience. There are a few notes on the *shamisen* to attract or relax the attention . . . . There are a few sudden strokes of the gong to herald violent episodes, or else solemn ones . . . or a great thundering when called for. Sometimes there is a plaintive flute, and the whole is carried out freely and almost instinctively.[19]

Contrary to 20th-century Western tradition, music in the theater of the Noh and Kabuki was used by the dramatist solely for the purpose of enhancing the drama, not the other way around. Music was conceived organically as part of the story development. This was the ideal Claudel tried to preserve in his own productions. In his searing polemic against Richard Wagner, "Le Poison Wagnérien," Claudel used the German's *Gesamtkunstwerk* approach to the music drama as a basis for hostile comparison, accusing him of dramatic exploitation at the hands of over-indulgent musical artistry.[20]

In a broader sense then, music, like costuming, scenery, and physical gesture, had to play a reinforcing or suggestive role, functioning on behalf of the drama rather than as an entity in itself. One gets a real sense of this musical application principle from Claudel's description of a scene from a Kabuki play:

> The atmosphere is heavy with foreboding. Someone is coming. Something is going to happen. It is a situation which in Europe would provide work for the whole orchestra. In Japan there is simply a little yellow man perched on a platform . . . and in front of him a large drum which his job is to bang. He is the man in charge of the thunder. This single hollow sound repeated . . . louder and oftener until the moment when the terrible apparition for which we have been waiting comes to freeze our blood, is enough, without orchestra or score, to put us in the right frame of mind.[21]

This, of course, is precisely what Honegger succeeded in accomplishing in *Jeanne au Bûcher*.

What, exactly, led to the mutual understanding between composer and poet in the process of determining the nature and degree of musical application is not known. However, there is evidence to suggest that Claudel dictated instructions to Honegger for each of the oratorio's 11 scenes. (The Prologue was appended to the score in 1944 as a gesture of hope for national unity in France.) Claudel's instructions for Scene 1, recalled numerous times by the composer in interviews and articles, went as follows:

> The voices of the sky: one hears a dog howling in the night. Once, twice. The second time the orchestra joins in with a kind of sob or sinister laugh. The third time, the choirs. Then silence. Then the voices of the night in the forest to which is added, perhaps, very feebly, Trimazo's song and a clear

. . . . . .

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. . . . . .

impression of a nightingale. Then silence and a few bars of painful meditation. Then again, the choir humming. Crescendo. Diminuendo. Then the distinct voices: "Joan, Joan, Joan!"[22]

The brevity of this single example, unfortunate in that it is the only one to have been recorded, does not in any way diminish its validity relative to a study of Honegger's compositional process.[23] Other documentation supports the notion that Claudel's descriptions provided a very real framework for Honegger as he approached composition of the score.

Of central importance to Honegger's constructional methodology was the concept of edifice or scaffolding — a scenario of sorts. This was a significant factor in determining the ultimate shape and character of a piece, and according to Honegger, a fact that lent cohesion. In discussing his approach to symphonic composition, he stated:

> I experience great difficulty in determining the frame for my work . . . one must give the impression of a composition in which all is linked, the image of a predetermined structure.[24]

Collaborative works, such as works done in conjunction with a text, or film, for example, provided him with sufficient framework and scaffolding for musical cohesion:

> As far as I am concerned, symphonic works give me much trouble . . . they demand an effort at sustained reflection. On the contrary, as soon as I can refer to a literary or visual pretext, my work becomes much easier . . . . When the scenario of a ballet or a film is submitted to me . . . I very quickly imagine the appropriate music for such and such a passage.[25]

Clearly, Claudel's expressively wrought recitations and colorful musical descriptions were of incalculable assistance to Honegger during the composition of this oratorio.

In conclusion, there appears to be considerable evidence to support the idea that, although Honegger did indeed compose the score to *Jeanne d'Arc au Bûcher*, the responsibility for many of its aspects — declamation, voicing, format, melodic configuration, and even orchestration — was shared by Claudel. In light of the poet's totalitarian concept of theater and his fascination with the principles of the Japanese dramatic idiom, it is not surprising that his creative instincts extended into the realm of music. He moved in artistic circles that included writers, actors, and musicians; he not only understood the power of "abstract" music over the human psyche, he was keenly aware of its dramatic potential as well. His musical contributions to *Jeanne au Bûcher*, conceptual and specific alike, remain as much a part of this oratorio's history and genesis as does Honegger's score. In the ongoing search for truth in the arts, the study of indigenous forces that helped shape art and give it relevance outside the purview of its medium is essential to an understanding and evaluation of its subsequent application. On a superficial level *Jeanne d'Arc au Bûcher* appears anachronistic, clichéd, and perhaps altogether irrelevant to today's audiences. But put in the context of the circumstances surrounding its poetic origins, its unusual collaborative aspects, and its conception as a fully staged, costumed opera-oratorio, it becomes again the dynamic, inspirational, and rewarding work of art it was always meant to be.

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Notes

[1]Darius Milhaud, *Notes Without Music*, trans. by Donald Evans and Arthur Ogden, ed. by Rollo H. Myers and Hubbert Weinstock (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 251. Milhaud acted as Rubinstein's emissary in this mission.

[2]In her 1971 book *Joan of Arc in History, Legend, and Literature* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget), Ingvald Raknem has compiled an exhaustive list of literary works on Joan of Arc dating from 1581.

[3]Claudel freely availed himself of these accounts out of personal interest, but they are also the source of many of the names and events found in the oratorio.

[4]Published in *Mémoires improvisés de Paul Claudel*, cited in Michael deCossart, *Ida Rubinstein*, Liverpool Historic Studies, no. 2 (Great Britain: Liverpool University Press, 1987), p. 189.

[5]Felix Aprahamian, "Honegger's Joan," *Music and Musicians* 19 (February 1971): 20-21.

[6]To the best of my knowledge, the only critical analysis of Claudel's *Jeanne au Bûcher* poem is Moya Laverty's " 'Jeanne d'Arc au Bûcher' and its place in the work of Claudel," published in *Claudel: A Reappraisal*, ed. by Richard Griffiths (London: Rapp and Whiting, 1968).

[7]Michael DeCossart, *Ida Rubinstein*, Liverpool Historic Studies, no. 2 (Great Britain: Liverpool University Press, 1987), pp. 189-90. Here the complete description of this vision can be found.

[8]Aprahamian, "Honegger's Joan," p. 20.

[9]Arthur Honegger, *I am a Composer* (London: Faber & Faber, LTD, 1966), p. 110.

[10] Marcel Landowski, Honegger, cited in Geoffrey Spratt, *The Music of Arthur Honegger* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1987), p. 255.

[11] Arthur Honegger, "Collaboration avec Paul Claudel," *Nouvelle revue français* (Numero spécial, September 1955): 557.

[12] Ibid., p. 558.

[13] Milhaud, *Notes Without Music*, p. 44.

[14] The original set designs and costume sketches for the Paris premiere in 1950 are by Yves Bonnat, and are housed in the collection of the Paris Bibliothèque de l'Opèra.

[15] For his production of *Christophe Colomb*, cinematic images were actually projected on a screen visible to the audience throughout the performance.

[16] Jacques Petit and Jean-Pierre Kempf, *Claudel on the Theatre*, trans. Christine Trollope (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1972), p. xvii.

[17] Honegger, *I am a Composer*, p. 96.

[18] Paul Claudel, "Sur Jeanne d'Arc," *Cahier de Poésie* (Neufchâtel: Eds. de la Baconnière, 1942), p. 36. (My translation)

[19] Petit and Kempf, *Claudel on the Theatre*, p. 60.

[20] David Bancroft, "Claudel on Wagner," *Music and Letters* 50 (1969): 439-52.

[21] Paul Claudel, "Modern Drama and Music," cited by Petit and Kempf, *Claudel on the Theatre*, p. 83-84.

[22] Honegger, quoted in Spratt, *Music of Arthur Honegger*, pp. 255.

[23] Pascale Honegger confirmed the following to me in a letter: ". . . you will find, sadly, nothing special in the correspondence between Claudel and Honegger. Everything was decided in conversation between the two men who lived in the same city." — July 1989

[24] Honegger, *I am a Composer*, pp. 78-79.

[25] Ibid., p. 81. **CJ**