

Berklee College of Music

Les Six and Their Music

An Incidental Partnership

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History of Music in the European Tradition MHIS-P203-006
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Mar/09/2017

Les Six is an group of six French composers who performed and published under the same name. In post WWI France the six composers whom shared an appreciation for the music of Satie and the ideas of Cocteau gathered weekly at a local pub where they entertained themselves and enjoyed the company of many influentials and artists of the avant-guard Paris. After a joined performance at the Lyre Palette on April fifth in 1919 and a news paper publication by Henri Collet comparing the six composers to the Russian Five, they became known as “Les Six”. The composers have distinct musical style partook in creating a new French music style free from the influence of German music. Although their partnership was informally forged by the influence of Cocteau the composers took advantage of it publishing piano books and performing concerts featuring the six composers.

Georges Auric (1899-1983) was one of the founders of the group together with Durey and Honegger. The aesthetic of his music is contemporary to Poulenc and often resources to repetition and motion inducing rhythms, similar to 1920’s the futurism style. Auric composed a large number of film scores for Avant Guard films. **Works:** “*Prélude*” (1919, piano piece); “*Le 14 Juillet*” (1921, overture from *Maniés de la Tour Eiffel*); “*Les Matelots*” (1924, dance music for orchestra); “*Cinq Bagatelles*” (1925, four hands piano piece); “*La Belle et Avenant*” (1946, film score for *La Belle et La Bête*); “Where is your heart” (1952, film score for *Moulin Rouge*).

Arthur Honegger (1892-1955) son of Swiss parents, he studied violin with R.C. Martin then moved to Germany to study at the Zürich Conservatory and eventually moved to Paris to study at the *conservatorie* where he met Auric, Durey and Poulenc. His musical style is considered to be the most different from the

other members of Les Six due to its seriousness and strong German influences.

Works: “*Sarabande*”, H 26 (1920, Piano piece); “*Paques a New York, C’est a cette heure-ci*” H 30 (1920, String quartet); “*Sonate pour Violon Seu I*” (1940, Cello Sonata); “*Le delphinium*” (1940, Song); “*Symphonie pour cordes*” (1941, Symphony); Symphony No.4 “*Deliciae basiliensis*” (1946, Symphony).

Louis Durey (1888-1979) joined the group for a small period of time and distanced himself from Les Six after feeling limited by Cocteau’s ideas. Durey studied piano, harmony, counterpoint, fugue and solfège with Léon Saint-Requier but was self taught in composition. His music is often atonal, polyphonic and heavily influenced by Schoenberg and Stravinsky. **Works:** “*Romance sans paroles*” Op. 21 (1919, piano piece); “*Le printemps au fond de la mer*” (1920, piece for voice and small orchestra); “*Deux études*” (1921, piano piece); “*Nocturne*” Op. 40 (1928, piano piece); “*L’Automne 53*” (1953, piano piece); “*Sonatine, Op 25*” (1979, piano and flute).

Germaine Tailleferre (1892-1983) studied at the Paris Conservatoire where she met Auric, Milhaud and Honegger and studied composition with Koechlin and Ravel. She joined the group as the only female member after Satie took an interest in her composition. Her music ranges from light piano pieces to highly orchestrated film scores. It is also highly influenced by the music of Ravel. **Works:** “*Pastorale, Enjoué*” (1919, piano piece); “*Jeux de plein air*” (1917, piece for two pianos); “*Le marchand d’oiseaux*” (1923, Ballet); “*Piano Concerto No. 1*” (1924, piano and orchestra); “*Deux valse*” (1928, piece for two pianos); “*Le bel ambitieux*” (1955, chamber opera).

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) the most known of the six learned piano with his mother until the age of fifteen when he started studying with Ricardo Viñes. He was then introduced to Satie, Auric and even Stravinsky who helped him publish his first works. His music is mostly simplistic, light and choral with melodic emphasis and inventive orchestration. **Works:** “*Les biches*” FP 36 (1924, ballet); “*Mélancolie*” (1940, piano piece); “*Violin Sonata*” FP 119 (1943, violin and piano); “*Cello Sonata*” FP 143 (1948, cello and piano); “*Élégie*” FP 125 (1959, two pianos); “*Clarinet Sonata*” FP 184 (1962, piano and clarinet).

Darius Milhaud (1892-1974) started his musical education at his local town of *Aix-en-Provence* but then moved to Paris to study at the *Conservatoire* where he befriended other members of Les Six. In 1917 he traveled to Brazil where he worked at the French embassy and drew strong influence from samba rhythms of popular Brazilian music. His music is often atonal with rich rhythms and a range of light and heavy music. **Works:** “*Mazurka*” (1914, piano piece); “*Les Machines Agricoles*” (1919, aria); “*Le Boeuf sur le toit*” (1920, ballet); “*La Fugue du Massacre*” (1921, ballet); “*Scaramouche*” (1937, two pianos); “*Suite Française*” (1944, orchestra suite).

“Le Bœuf sur le toit” Op. 58 (1920, Darius Milhaud): This piece initially written for the Charlie Chaplin film *Cinéma-fantaisie* was turned into a ballet premiered at *Théâtre des Champs-Élysées*. I couldn’t escape prominence of Brazilian music evident by the playful syncopated melodies and light playful orchestration with lots of percussion and street-parade like use of wind instruments. The piece was pleasantly nostalgic to listen to and easy going, never taking itself too seriously.

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Their music, which had scandalized and delighted the city decades before, had now taken on the evocative quality of a soundtrack, a sonic portrait of an era that was one of the most vibrant in the cultural history of Paris. Les Six in later years: From left to right, Darius Milhaud, Georges Auric, Arthur Honegger, Germaine Tailleferre, Francis Poulenc, and Louis Durey. Seated at the piano, Jean Cocteau. "Les Six" (pronounced [le sis]) is a name given to a group of six French composers who worked in Montparnasse. The name, inspired by Mily Balakirev's *The Five*, originates in two 1920 articles by critic Henri Collet's in (*ComÅ“dia*, see Bibliography). Their music is often seen as a reaction against both the musical style of Richard Wagner and the impressionist music of Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel.