

## Paris, Satie and Les Six

- **Erik Satie** (1866-1925) studying Erik Satie helps us to understand other events in Paris in the 1920's. Like most Frenchmen in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, Satie was passionately anti-German. Although he studied music at the Paris Conservatoire from age 13, his rebellious nature put him at odds with the conservative administration of the Conservatoire. He was interested in anything unusual, such as Rosicrucianism (a group interested in occult and medieval mysticism). He supported himself playing in cabarets in *Montmartre*. Met Debussy while still in his 20's, but saw what Debussy was doing musically and thought he was on wrong path. Satie was interested in Diaghilev's experiments, collaborated with people like **Pablo Picasso** and **Jean Cocteau**. Satie's most important contribution was possibly not his music itself, but his influence over other musicians: Debussy, Ravel, and Les Six. Still, his music is interesting to study:
  - His most famous piece is ***Trois Gymnopédies*** (1888), originally for piano solo; later Debussy orchestrated 1st and 3<sup>rd</sup> movements. These are in impressionistic style and use modes instead of major or minor scales; they also employ modal cadences.
  - Satie enjoyed the cabaret style. Example of song with Cabaret roots: ***Je to veux*** (c. 1900):
    - Cabaret style would influence some of Les Six, also Alban Berg.
  - Satie soon turned to **neoclassicism**. Began to study counterpoint at age 40; from then on, economy of style and simplicity became very important. His pieces always had witty associations, e.g. whimsical or absurd titles as well as silly directions that were parodies of impressionist style.
  - Some later works are **multi-media** efforts, collaborations of visual arts and dance with music, e.g. ***Parade*** (1916-17) is very fragmentary, incoherent.
- **Formation of Les Six:** Cocteau was sponsoring a scenario called ***Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*** (Weddings at the Eiffel Tower, 1920). Piece is important because 6

composers were invited to collaborate on the score (one declined - Durey). Satie was the “spiritual leader” of Les Six

- **Members of Les Six:** Darius Milhaud; Francis Poulenc, Louis Durey, Germaine Tailleferre, Georges Auric, Arthur Honegger
- Les Six were anti-Wagner (or anything German), but also anti-Debussy and impressionism. They embraced Cocteau’s philosophy of anti-romanticism. Les Six began with Satie’s cabaret style as a point of departure, added jazz and neo-classicism in varying amounts.
- **Darius Milhaud (1892-1974):** very prolific, most highly trained of any of Les Six.
  - **Musical details:** often liked to use **polytonality**; classic example is ***Le Boeuf Sur Le Toit*** (1919): piece combines South American tunes, rhythms, and some instruments with polytonality and cabaret style.
  - His masterpiece: ***La Creation du Monde*** (1923), a ballet depicting creation of world from African Folk Legends. Piece uses jazz instrumentation, and blue notes and swing rhythms such as he heard in Harlem.
- **Francis Poulenc (1899-1963):** often paired with Milhaud stylistically, but there are differences between them.
  - Poulenc had great gift for lyrical melody. Wrote ~135 songs; lyricism also found in his operas (***Dialogues of the Carmelites, The Human Voice***), religious choral works (***Gloria, Stabat Mater***), and even chamber music, e.g. ***Sextuor, Trio*** (both with Piano and Winds).
  - Another side of his personality (associated with Satie and Cocteau) comes out in ***Le Bal Masqué*** (1932): a song cycle with chamber ensemble for accomp. Texts are **surrealist** poetry: another art and lit movement, influenced by psychoanalysis, based on expression of imagination uncontrolled by reason and seeking to suggest activities of subconscious mind whether in dreams or awake. It has been suggested that surrealism is associated with hallucinations from taking certain drugs. In visual arts, **Salvadore Dali** is main figure, exemplified by

his painting [Persistence of Memory](#). Poetry also reflects non-reasoning quality and has repulsiveness for shock value

- Many other songs had much more appealing lyrics, e.g. **Banalités** (1940). Poetry is by **Guillaume Apollinaire**, one of Poulenc's favorite poets, father of literary branch of Surrealism.
- Poulenc turned to opera and sacred music later in life; in addition to his two operas in 50s he wrote religious works including the **Gloria**.
- One other member of Les Six, Arthur Honegger will be discussed later in this course in context of Futurism