

Les Six

Les Six were a group of six French composers who were friends around the year 1920. They were young at the time, and they shared a lot of ideas about music. The composer Erik Satie called them "Les Nouveaux Jeunes", but then a man called Henri Collet called them "Les Six" in an article he was writing, and that name was always used for them after that. In their music they tried to be different from Richard Wagner and other composers of Romantic music and different from Debussy and Ravel who had been writing Impressionistic music. They also wanted to write in a simple way instead of using complicated rhythms such as those of Stravinsky or twelve tone music like Arnold Schoenberg. Many of their pieces were quite short. They liked strong, masculine music, especially jazz.

It was really only in 1920 that all six composers were together. They had all been inspired by Jean Cocteau and Eric Satie. By 1921 Louis Durey had already left the group. Les Six continued to be associated with the style of French music from around the 1920s. They still remained friends, and used to visit a bar known as "La Gaya" which became *Le Boeuf sur le Toit* (The Ox on the Roof): the title of Milhaud's ballet. The group published an album of piano pieces together called "Album des Six". Five of the members worked together on the music for Cocteau's work *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*

Members

Georges Auric (1899–1983) Auric was a child prodigy. He composed a lot of music from the age of 10, but most of these early works he destroyed later. He grew up in Montpellier. In 1913 his parents moved to Paris so that he could study at the Paris Conservatoire. He studied with the composer Vincent D'Indy at the Schola Cantorum.

By the time he had joined Les Six he had already become a composer with a strong, personal style of writing. His music is often energetic and aggressive.

Auric wrote ballet music for Diaghilev. When Jean Cocteau started making motion pictures at the beginning of the 1930s Auric began writing film music. He wrote soundtracks for a number of French and British films, and then for Hollywood movies, too. *The Song from Moulin Rouge* made it to the hit parade.

In 1962 he gave up writing for movies when he became director of the Opéra National de Paris and then chairman of SACEM, the French Performing Rights Society. Auric continued to write classical chamber music, especially for wind instruments, for the rest of his life.

Louis Durey (born Paris, 27 May 1888; died Saint-Tropez, France, 3 July 1979) was a French composer. He was the oldest, but probably the least well-known of the Les six. He was the son of a businessman. He had no idea that he wanted to be a composer until he heard the opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* by Claude Debussy. He was then already 19 years old. He taught himself how to compose.

He became a member of Les Six in 1920. However, he did not take part in the music they wrote together in 1921 called *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*. This made Jean Cocteau very annoyed.

He wrote a lot of music during his life, but there were many years when he wrote nothing. He composed songs, chamber music and choral works.

Arthur Honegger (10 March 1892 - 27 November 1955) was born in Le Havre, France and lived a large part of his life in Paris. His most popular piece of music is an orchestral work

called *Pacific 231*, which imitates the sound of a steam locomotive.

He studied harmony and violin in Paris until his parents moved to Zürich, Switzerland, when he studied at the Conservatory there. He then went back to Paris to study with Charles-Marie Widor and Vincent d'Indy. He wrote a ballet *Le dit des jeux du monde* in 1918.

In the early 1920s Honegger became famous with the "dramatic psalm" "Le Roi David" ("King David"), which is still often sung by choirs. He wrote a lot of music between the wars, including the oratorio *Jeanne d'Arc au bûcher*, one of his best works. It tells the story of Joan of Arc.

During World War II Honegger could not leave Paris. He joined the French Resistance. He continued to write very serious music, including four symphonies (numbers 2-5) and some religious music.

Honegger loved trains. As a student he had spent some time travelling to Paris twice a week by train from Le Havre. His popular orchestral work *Pacific 231* describes a train on the Canadian Pacific Railway. It was an early piece, written in 1923.

In 1947 Honegger suffered a severe heart attack, and after that he composed little. A second heart attack caused his death eight years later in Paris.

Honegger's music is different to that of the other members of Les Six, partly because Honegger liked the Romantic music of Wagner, Strauss and Reger. His music is tonal but with numerous strong dissonances. His musical style was also influenced by the music of Bach.

Darius Milhaud (born Marseille, 4 September 1892; died Geneva 22 June 1974) He is one of the most important French composers of the 20th century. He wrote more than 400 compositions. His music is often influenced by jazz and polytonality (music in more than one key at once).

Milhaud's family was Jewish. He grew up in Aix-en-Provence. When he was seven he learned to play the violin. He loved the music of Claude Debussy, whom he met once. Milhaud studied in Paris at the Paris Conservatory where he met Arthur Honegger and Germaine Tailleferre who were also to become members of Les Six. He studied composition under Charles-Marie Widor and harmony and counterpoint with André Gédalge. He also studied privately with Vincent d'Indy. He taught himself to play the piano. In Paris he was able to listen to music by a lot of great composers.

After a close friend was killed in World War I he decided to go to Brazil. He worked there for nearly two years, deciphering codes. He liked the sounds of the jungle. These sounds were to have an impact on his music. The other great influence was jazz, which he heard in 1922 in New York.

Milhaud returned to France but in 1940 he had to emigrate to the United States because the Nazis were arresting Jewish musicians. In America he gave lectures.

He suffered from rheumatoid arthritis for most of his adult life and by 1948 he was in a wheelchair. He still continued to travel, and to teach, for as long as possible. Probably his most famous student was Dave Brubeck.

Milhaud's most popular works include *Le Boeuf sur le Toit* (ballet), *La création du monde* (a ballet for small orchestra with solo saxophone, influenced by jazz), *Scaramouche* (for Saxophone and Orchestra, also for two pianos), and *Saudades do Brazil* (dance suite).

Francis Poulenc (7 January 1899 in Paris – 30 January 1963 in Paris) composed music in many different forms: song, chamber music, oratorio, opera, ballet music and orchestral music. His music is easy to enjoy at first hearing: it is much simpler than the music of many other composers who were writing modern music at the time. At first the music critics did not think he was a serious composer, but later people realized the importance of his music. He is

the greatest writer of French song since Faure.

Poulenc came from a rich family. His father had a large pharmaceutical business. His mother, an amateur pianist, taught him to play the piano.

Poulenc wanted to study music at the Paris Conservatoire after his school years, but the death of both his parents changed his plans. Poulenc wrote his first compositions for his teacher. He began to get his works performed, and Stravinsky helped him to get them published in London. He continued to compose while he was doing his military service, and became a member of Les Six. He was asked by Diaghilev to write ballet music for *Les Biches*. He composed his *Concerto for Two Pianos* and the *Organ Concerto*.

Poulenc spent some periods of his life composing and other periods performing. He made a series of broadcasts on French radio. He composed a great deal of music during the 1950s. He died suddenly of a heart attack in 1963.

Poulenc was an excellent pianist and he wrote a lot of music for the piano, especially during the 1930s. He liked to create blurred effects by using the sustaining pedal a lot. Some of his best piano writing is in the accompaniment to his songs.

Poulenc's early chamber music often uses jazz ideas. He wrote several sonatas for various instruments. He liked writing for wind instruments. His *Piano Sextet* is for piano and five wind instruments.

He wrote several works for orchestra as well as music for the stage and choral music. His *Gloria* is often performed by choirs. Children like his *Story of Babar the Elephant*. It is for a storyteller and piano. Jean Françaix made an arrangement for an orchestra.

Germaine Tailleferre (born Saint Maur Des Fossés, France, 19 April 1892; died Paris, 7 November 1983) was a French composer. She studied piano with her mother at home, composing short works of her own and then began studying at the Paris Conservatoire. There she met Louis Durey, Francis Poulenc, Darius Milhaud, Georges Auric and Arthur Honegger. She won several prizes at the Conservatoire.

In 1925, she married Ralph Barton, an American caricaturist, and moved to Manhattan, New York. She stayed in the United States until 1927 when she and her husband returned to France. They divorced shortly afterwards.

Tailleferre wrote many of her most important works during the 1920s, including her 1st Piano Concerto, The Harp Concertino, the Ballets "Le Marchand d'Oiseaux" (the most often performed ballet in the repertoire of the Ballets Suédoises during the 1920s) and "La Nouvelle Cythère" which Diaghilev had asked her to write for his ballet company.

In the 1930s she composed the Concerto for Two Pianos, Chorus, Saxophones and Orchestra, the Violin Concerto, the Operas "Zoulaïna" and "Le Marin de Bolivar", and her masterwork, "La Cantate de Narcisse", which she wrote with Paul Valéry. Her work in film music included "Le Petit Chose" (The Little Thing).

When World War II started she had to escape across Spain to Portugal and from there to America. After the war, in 1946, she returned to her home in France where she composed a lot more music, much of which was not published until after her death. She was accompanist at a children's music and movement class. She wrote shorter pieces towards the end of her life because her arthritis made writing difficult.

Tailleferre carried on composing until a few weeks before her death in November 1983.

Les Six (-1 - Durey) Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel (Complete ballet)

Philharmonia Orchestra directed by Geoffrey Simon

- *Overture (14 July)* - Auric
- *Marche nuptiale* - Milhaud
- *Discours du General* (Polka) – Poulenc

- *La Baigneuse de Trouville* – Poulenc
 - *La Fugue du Massacre* – Milhaud
 - *La Valse des Depeches* – Tailleferre
 - *Marche funèbre* – Honegger
 - *Quadrille* – Tailleferre
 - *Ritournelles* – Auric
 - *Sortie de la Noce* – Milhaud.
- Bridal market - Milhaud•
 - The General's Speech (Polka) – Poulenc
 - The Bathers of Trouville – Poulenc
 - The Fugue of the Massacre – Milhaud
 - The Waltz of the telegrams – Tailleferre
 - Funeral March – Honegger
 - Quadrille – Tailleferre
 - Ritournelles (The ritournelle is a 17th-century dance in quick triple time. 'Ritournelle' is the French equivalent of the Italian musical term 'Ritornello')- Auric
 - End of the Wedding - Milhaud.

Auric	Ouverture for orchestra Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra & Antal Dorati;
Durey	Trio for Oboe, Clarinet and Bassoon Arundo-Donax Ensemble
Honegger	Pacific 231 Symphonic Movement Danish National Radio Orchestra & Neeme Jarvi
Milhaud	La Boeuf sur le Toit Op58 Ulster Philharmonic Orchestra & Yan Pascal Tortelier
Poulenc	Movements Perpetuels Jascha Heifitz Violin, Brooks Smith Piano
Tailleferre	Concertino for harp and piano Gabriella Bosio harp, Cristina Ariagno piano
Poulenc	Sextet for piano and wind quintet (II Divertimento) Gothenburg Wind Quintet

Les Six, left to right: Francis Poulenc, Germaine Tailleferre, Louis Durey, Jean Cocteau, Darius Milhaud, Arthur Honegger. Sketch of Georges Auric on the wall behind them.



Les mariés de la tour Eiffel (*The Wedding Party on the Eiffel Tower*) is a ballet to a libretto by Jean Cocteau

The story of the ballet is somewhat nonsensical:

The new couple have a wedding breakfast on Bastille Day (July 14) at a table on one of the platforms of the famous tower. A guest makes a pompous speech. When a humpbacked photographer bids everyone to "watch the birdie," it appears that a telegraph office suddenly springs into existence on the platform. A lion comes in and eats one of the guests for breakfast and a strange figure called "a child of the future" appears and kills everybody. Nevertheless, the ballet concludes with the end of the wedding.

When asked what the ballet was about, Cocteau replied: "Sunday vacuity; human beastliness, ready-made expressions, disassociation of ideas from flesh and bone, ferocity of childhood, the miraculous poetry of everyday life."

On 29 July 1923, in a letter, Francis Poulenc described the work as "toujours de la merde ... hormis l'Ouverture d'Auric" ("yet more shit ... apart from Auric's Overture").⁴

Ouverture, per Orchestra, from 1932, Auric even throws in some explicit chromaticism. Yet it is all part of a soup and just when you think you know what he's doing, he veers off in a surprising direction.

In this piece, you can see why Georges Auric would be a natural as a film composer. He has so many tools available to him. And he is fearless. Of course, this piece was written just about at the time that he became focused on film. But before that, he wrote quite a lot for the theater and ballet. But Auric does show just what an arbitrary group Les Six was. On a technical level, they aren't much alike. They weren't generally friends. But there is something about all their work that seems to bind them together.

Durey Trio for Oboe, Clarinet and Bassoon

The Trio for Oboe, Clarinet and Bassoon was written in 1938

He wrote mostly for the piano.

Honegger Pacific 231 Symphonic Movement

written in 1923. 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." It is one of his most frequently performed works.

The popular interpretation of the piece is that it depicts a steam locomotive, an interpretation that is supported by the title of the piece. Honegger, however, insisted 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 when describing locomotives, call this arrangement 2-3-1) after it was finished

He wrote 5 symphonies, 3 concerti, Ballet, Opera, operettas and some chamber and piano music.

Milhaud *Le Bœuf sur le toit*, Op. 58 (English title, ***The Ox on the Roof: The Nothing-Doing Bar***) is a surrealist ballet, which was in turn strongly influenced by Brazilian popular music. The title is that of an old Brazilian tango, one of close to 30 Brazilian tunes quoted in the composition.

Its transformation into a ballet (Pantomime Farce) was the making of the piece, with a scenario by Jean Cocteau. There is no real story to speak of, but a sequence of scenes based on music inspired by Brazil, a country in which the composer spent two years during World War I. The stage set is that of a bar frequented by a number of characters: a bookmaker, a dwarf, a boxer, a woman dressed in men's clothing, a policeman who is decapitated by the blades of an overhead fan before he is revived, and a number of others. The choreography was deliberately very slow, in marked contrast to the lively and joyful spirit of the music.

He was the most prolific of the six with compositions in every branch of the classical genre.

Poulenc *Mouvements perpétuels* is a short three-movement suite for solo piano premiered in Paris in December 1918, when Poulenc was aged 19 and a protégé of Erik Satie. The suite was an immediate success with public and performers, and it remains one of the composer's most popular works.

The suite takes about five minutes in performance. The commentators Marina and Victor Ledin write, "Each of the three pieces ends inconclusively, leaving the music unresolved, to linger in our minds". Poulenc described them as "ultra-easy", and compared them to a brisk stroll by the Seine

Tailleferre *Concertino for harp and piano 1952*

1. Allegretto
2. Lento
3. Rondo

Poulenc *Sextet for piano and wind quintet* The Sextet has earned a place in Poulenc's canon as one of his most popular works, and in the right interpretive hands the work exudes French wit as well as a degree of emotional depth. Poulenc wrote the three-movement work in 1932, scoring it for flute, clarinet, oboe, bassoon, horn, and piano; he revised it in 1939. The piece offers a mix of elegant, deceptively simple motives, rhythmic vitality, and playful harmonic turns in a virtuosic framework.

In three movements -- Allegro Vivace, **Divertissement**, and Finale -- the sextet lasts just over 15 minutes in performance. The first movement opens with a fast, toccata-like statement that is obviously indebted to Stravinsky's neo-Classicism. The second movement, marked Andantino, begins with an oboe melody that is passed off to other instruments and developed before returning to the oboe at the conclusion. This symmetry is matched by a slow-fast-slow classical structure. The prestissimo Finale is a modified rondo in which rhythmic and lyrical sections are present in equal measure, with an intense conclusion. The Sextet was first performed in Paris in December 1940.