

Review

Resonating Reflections: A Critical Review of Ethnosymbolic Dynamics in *Les Six's* Music Nationalism Movement

Xuewei Chang ¹, Marzelan Bin Salleh ^{1,*} and Jifang Sun ²

¹ Music Department, Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur 59100, Malaysia; s2164294@siswa.um.edu.my

² Institute of Musicology, Humanities Faculty, University of Bern, 3012 Bern, Switzerland; jifang.sun@students.unibe.ch

* Correspondence: marzelan@um.edu.my

Abstract: *Les Six* and their mentors stirred a debate of French nationalist music in the early 20th century. However, this movement faced serious criticism and mockery from various quarters and eventually fell apart amid challenges. This critical review explores the ethnosymbolic dynamics within the nationalism music movement of *Les Six*, and drawing upon ethnomusicological perspectives, the study examines how their compositions reflected and resonated with French national identity and cultural heritage. By analyzing primary sources, scholarly literature, and musical compositions, this article meticulously uncovers the chain reactions generated in the process of constructing national identity and cultural identity within this movement by examining the French societal backdrop, musical traditions, as well as the relationships and attitudes among relevant figures in this movement. The conclusions highlight the multifaceted nature of ethnosymbolism in their work, shedding light on the complexities of national identity construction through music.

Keywords: ethnosymbolism; nationalism; *Les Six*; French music; ethnomusicology; cultural heritage



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1. Introduction

A. D. Smith (2002, pp. 53–71) defines a nation as a human population occupying a historic territory, sharing myths, memories, a single public culture, and common rights and duties for all members. Gellner (1997, pp. 13–14) presents nationalism as a political principle rooted in cultural similarity, arguing that the legitimacy of authority among people stems from shared culture. However, this perspective may have oversimplified the complex realities of diverse societies. Said (1991) critiques nationalism's reliance on reworking the past and reclaiming cultural or political territories, cautioning against an excessive focus on identity politics, which could sometimes hinder cooperation. B. R. O. Anderson (2006, pp. 37–47) explored the relationship between print capitalism and imagined political communities, offering new perspectives on nation and nationalism. While insightful, his approach may have overlooked other important factors such as colonialism or global influences. Hobsbawm (1992) examined the evolution of the modern state in *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*, detailing changes around the French Revolution and their impact on political systems, society, and ideology. His analysis provides valuable insights into historical shifts in concepts of the nation and nationalism. The initiation of the age of nationalism is signaled by the concentration of an individual's utmost loyalty to their perceived nationality.

Göran (2002, pp. 151–62) describes national identity as a “top-down project”, where the official definition of this identity is based on different cultural and ethnic identities within a region defined as a nation. In other words, despite the cultural differences among races within a country, ethnicity becomes the adhesive that unites different regions. Differentiated from national identity, cultural identity is often perceived as a “bottom-up” concept, encapsulating the interconnectedness between the state and culture. Göran

suggests two scenarios for the establishment of this cultural identity: one involves the formation of inherent cultural identity that predates the establishment of modern society, and the other occurs through cultural exchanges, aligning with personal preferences and the outcome of natural selection. While this binary classification seems to simplify the complex issue of ethnic identity, the inherent cultural identity exhibits strong stability over time, witnessed by its long historical presence. Conversely, the cultural identities resulting from cultural exchanges or personal preferences introduce variability and can lead to friction or even contradictions between national and cultural identities.

[Kirshenblatt-Gimblett \(1991\)](#) emphasizes the importance of cultivating a distinct national culture to enhance international influence, with art serving as a strategic means of preserving national identity and showcasing cultural heritage. Music is recognized as a pivotal factor in identity formation, serving as a tool for individuals to define themselves within a specific group. Göran's observation highlighted the importance of music in shaping individual and collective identities, providing a means to align with certain groups and differentiate from others ([Göran 2002](#), p. 162). For instance, Fado, a traditional Portuguese music genre, is known for expressing feelings of longing, nostalgia, and saudade. It is closely tied to Portuguese identity, reflecting the country's history and cultural sentiment ([Elliott 2010](#); [Shepherd 2011](#)). Reggae music, as another example, particularly associated with Jamaican culture, has played a crucial role in expressing the Rastafarian movement's identity, and artists like Bob Marley used reggae to spread Rastafarian beliefs and values, creating a global identity for the movement ([Savishinsky 1994](#)).

While scholars assert that music influenced by nationalism is often considered to bear negative characteristics associated with this ideology ([Bohlman 2004](#), p. 19), it is undeniable that the nineteenth-century nationalist movement brought remarkable prestige and attention to the folk traditions of various regions. However, when discussing nationalist music in France, the influence of mainstream impressionist music and historical variables often obscures the topic. There is another musical movement that emerged shortly in the early twentieth century carrying the banner of nationalism ([de Médicis 2005](#)). This movement was led by a composition group known as *Les Six*. They aligned their musical aesthetics with the nationalist aspirations of the spiritual leader Jean Cocteau and sought to expand their influence through a series of promotions against the influences of Wagnerism, to usher in a new era for late-impressionist France. Nevertheless, in contrast to the early 19th-century nationalist music movements, it encountered significant controversy and critique within French society from its inception as a musical collective. Ultimately, following a brief period of collaborative artistic endeavors, it hastily disbanded.

The interplay between music and national identity has long been a subject of scholarly inquiry, with *Les Six*'s nationalist music movement standing as a compelling case study in this discourse. As a group of French composers active in the early 20th century, *Les Six* played a pivotal role in shaping the cultural landscape of their time.

This article aims to delve into the ethnosymbolic dimensions of *Les Six*'s nationalist music movement, seeking a comprehensive understanding of the connections between their musical aesthetics and the construction of French national identity. Drawing upon perspectives from ethnomusicology and sociocultural studies, the research explores the intricate and complex relationships between music, culture, and nationalism. By analyzing primary sources, scholarly literature, and musical compositions, it sheds light on the complexity and multifaceted nature of the interplay between artistic expression and national identity formation. Ultimately, this critical review aspires to contribute to the scholarly discourse on music, nationalism, and cultural identity. Examining *Les Six*'s nationalist music movement through an ethnosymbolic lens offers new insights into the complexities of national identity construction and the enduring legacy of one of the most influential musical movements of the 20th century.

2. Traditions and Musical Trends in Early Twentieth-Century French

Like Herder's contribution to German literature, French priest Henri Grégoire also advocated for the linguistic unification of the nation for political purposes, aiming to merge every citizen into a national community and simplify mechanisms to facilitate the operation of the political machinery (Burke 2013). Furthermore, Rousseau's works, symbolizing liberty, equality, and the rights of man, were printed as pamphlets and widely circulated among the public after his death. In this historical context, the iconic French national anthem, *La Marseillaise*, was created and became a rallying cry during the French Revolution. *La Marseillaise* is a nationalist musical masterpiece widely recognized by the French people, expressing the fervor of the new era, and echoing the passion of the French for their homeland, sung continuously since 1792 (Weber 1976, p. 439).

France has its own folk music tradition, however, when this tradition had the chance to be recognized and rediscovered, it was the 19th century. In the early twentieth century, Joseph Canteloube adapted and composed a set of songs *Chants d'Auvergne* based on folk songs from the Auvergne region in South Central France, which consists of five volumes, with a total of 27 folk songs. There are 21 songs among them released by NAXOS in an album Joseph Canteloube: *Chants d'Auvergne*, see Figure 1. Canteloube spent thirty years collecting, organizing, and composing these songs (1924–1955). He firmly believed:

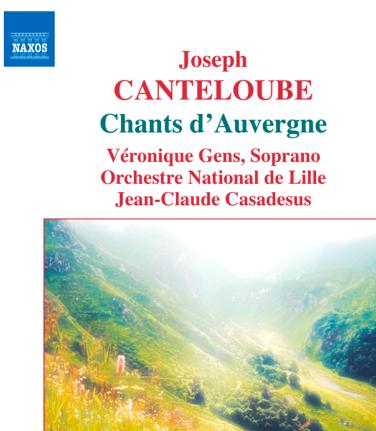


Figure 1. Joseph Canteloube: *Chants d'Auvergne*, 2004, released by NAXOS.

Ignoring its form, folk songs often rise to the level of the purest art in emotion and expression, if not in form¹.

Canteloube's inspiration for folk music was probably influenced by his composition teacher Vincent d'Indy, who was a composer and educator enthusiastic about combining French folk traditions with classical music forms. Apart from Canteloube, a group of young composers, including Déodat de Séverac, Raoul Laparra, Paul Ladmirault, Charles Bordes, and Raoul de Castéra, were similarly influenced by d'Indy. They shared a common musical belief, embraced other musical forms with a more open and freer mindset, and dedicated themselves to integrating French folk songs with classical music, preserving folk songs, and regional traditions (R. L. Smith 2001).

Mentioning mainstream music in early twentieth-century France inevitably involves discussing two opposing yet influential music organizations: Société Nationale de Musique (SNM) and Société Musicale Indépendante (SMI). This dynamic relationship shapes the discourse of mainstream music in France. SNM is an ancient French music organization founded in response to the nationalist sentiments after the Franco-Prussian War. In its early days, the SNM banned all music by non-French composers and dedicated itself to promoting the works of French composers like Saint-Saëns, Chabrier, Franck, Fauré, Dukas, and Debussy. Vincent d'Indy, a prominent composer, as mentioned earlier, once led the organization. However, during his tenure, there were some changes in the strict societal atmosphere, and a new trend of Germanic nationalism began to be accepted by many

composers. When Vincent d'Indy assumed the presidency of the SNM, he reaffirmed conservative French musical principles, rejecting anything avant-garde or not aligned with French musical aesthetics. Ravel's *Rapsodie Espagnole* faced severe criticism from the SNM, and Koechlin's *Vers la voûte étoilée* was rejected by vote, Ralph Vaughan Williams, along with two other students of Ravel, saw their works rejected by the SNM for review (Duchesneau 1994). In 1910, amid a series of conflicting situations, Ravel announced his withdrawal from the SNM along with some avant-garde composers and critics like Gabriel Fauré, Charles Koechlin, and Florent Schmitt, collectively denounced the conservative musical ideology of the SNM. They called for a social environment where different genres and forms of music could be fully expressed, encouraging young artists and their new art. Based on these principles, they formed SMI (Nectoux 1975). This letterhead from the Société musicale indépendante is from a letter Gabriel Fauré wrote to Debussy, see Figure 2.



Figure 2. Société Musicale Indépendante (SMI), Letterhead paper, 1909, National Library of France (BnF) (ark:/12148/cb39807165j).

3. French Nationalism: *Les Six* Movement

3.1. The Formation of *Les Six*

During the heated debate between SNM and SMI over whether to preserve tradition or embrace innovation, another influential force emerged. Jean Cocteau, a renowned French poet, playwright, novelist, designer, and filmmaker associated with the avant-garde and Dadaism, vehemently protested Wagnerian influences in his book *Le coq et l'arlequin*. For the same reason, Cocteau accused Debussy of deviating from the direction of French music, claiming that Debussy had fallen into the traps set by Germans and Russians (Cocteau and Auric 2009, p. 28). In his essay, Cocteau passionately advocated for pure French music originating from France, rejecting any admixture of French-Russian or French-German styles, even if inspired by Mussorgsky, Stravinsky, Wagner, or Schoenberg. Cocteau explicitly opposed Wagner, Debussy, and the ideals of Impressionism, he even expressed his views on Stravinsky's music, claiming that *The Rite of Spring* was a new example of dramatic mysticism, a wildly organized work that stimulated our nerves. Cocteau metaphorically referred to Wagner, Stravinsky, and Debussy as "gorgeous octopuses" from which anyone approaching would find it challenging to break free². In contrast, Cocteau lavishly praised another French composer, Erik Satie, a pioneering master of *Les Six*, for providing a bright path where everyone could leave their mark freely. Cocteau opposed the overly vague, mist-like expressiveness of the impressionists and the excessive, redundant ornamentation, advocating for a return to simple and pure melodic lines. Cocteau critiqued Debussy's music as "Debussy played in French, but he used the Russian pedal"³. Cocteau employed nationalist means to caution against foreign imports, using cultural symbols to align his ideals more closely with nationalism. In *Le Coq et l'Arlequin*, while there are brief mentions of positive external influences, these references are insufficient to offset the strong and exclusionary nationalist undertones. Overall, the text tends to emphasize nationalism, and any positive mentions of external influences are not enough to mitigate this dominant nationalist stance (de Médicis 2005). Cocteau's advocacy for Satie indicates a deliberate effort to shape a new image of French music, challenging the long-standing identity within the mainstream music community in France. However, Cocteau's divisive challenge to the

symbol of French mainstream music requires significant effort and is destined to receive more criticism and condemnation than support and praise.

To realize his vision of French music aesthetics, Cocteau supported it with practical actions. Despite the exclusivist spirit in his musical advocacy, his circle was always teeming with various types of artists and musicians. Cocteau maintained good connections with many composers, including Stravinsky and young composers at the Paris Conservatory. Before the publication of *Le coq et l'arlequin*, Cocteau collaborated with Satie and Picasso on the ballet *Parade*, which premiered on 18 May 1917, sparking a series of scandals that drew the attention of many young composers. On 6 June 1917, Auric, Durey, and Honegger organized a tribute concert for Satie at the studio of the painter Émile Lejeune, known as Salle Huyghens. Satie referred to these young composers as *Les nouveaux jeunes* (New Youth). Upon Honegger's suggestion, Milhaud was included in this group, and Poulenc was introduced to Satie and Auric by the Spanish pianist Ricardo Viñes (Kelly 2017, p. 2). Although Germaine Tailleferre's works did not appear on the promotional poster for this concert, as an outstanding student at the Paris Conservatory, she had early interactions with Georges Auric, Arthur Honegger, and Darius Milhaud in the classroom. They often came together to share their creative ideas and discuss philosophical aspects of music (Shapiro 2011, p. 191).

In January 1920, French composer and critic Henri Collet, who had just taken over the music section of *Comœdia*, introduced a strange and fascinating movement in two articles (Collet 1920a, 1920b). The leaders of this movement were Darius Milhaud, Georges Auric, Louis Durey, Arthur Honegger, Francis Poulenc, and Germaine Tailleferre, see Figure 3. Collet pointed out that the commonality among this group was their philosophical guidance in composition by Jean Cocteau. These articles formally announced the birth of *Les Six*. This creative ensemble brought together some of the youngest composers of France at the time, who met when they were around 20 years old, with Auric being the youngest among them. These composers, from different genders, regions, and social backgrounds, forged a rare friendship on the benches of the Paris Conservatoire in the early years of World War I. Collet's articles were likely influenced by Cocteau's suggestion, as Cocteau mentioned these young composers who received good guidance from Satie in a letter to Collet. Cocteau inquired whether Collet had read his *Le Coq et l'Arlequin* and advised him to have face-to-face contact with these composers. Subsequently, on Thursday, January 8, on Gailhard Street, Collet had the first meeting with the six musicians. This meeting, entirely organized by Cocteau, though it is unclear what they discussed, resulted in Collet publicly declaring the formation in *Comœdia* on 16 January 1920. Collet's articles provided *Les Six* with considerable media exposure but also added pressure. They had to consider themselves representatives of a trend in French music. The sudden media coverage and lavish praise caused significant unease and contradictions among the members of *Les Six*. Before delving into more detailed research, let us review some of the experiences between *Les Six* and their mentors, which will help us make a more accurate assessment of their nationalist path.



Figure 3. *Les Six* in the 1920s: Jean Cocteau (at piano), Darius Milhaud, Georges Auric, Arthur Honegger, Germaine Tailleferre, Francis Poulenc, and Louis Durey.

3.2. The Members of *Les Six*

Georges Auric grew up in a musically rich environment and began his creative journey at a young age. At the age of fourteen, a fortuitous encounter introduced him to one of Erik Satie's Sarabandes, captivating him profoundly. He wrote a praising article about this experience, which was published in *Revue française de musique* (Shapiro 2011, p. 114). Considering the booklet *Le Coq et l'Arlequin* was an intimate testimony dedicated to Auric by Cocteau, Auric composed a song cycle *Huit Poèmes de Jean Cocteau* as a tribute, featuring a piece *Hommage à Erik Satie* dedicated to Satie (Shapiro 2011, p. 119). Auric's artistic growth was rapid, and during his studies at the Paris Conservatoire, Maurice Ravel and Albert Roussel took a keen interest in him, generously praising his musical expression and potential (Brevignon 2020, p. 34). In 1927, Auric, along with his former colleagues Poulenc and Milhaud, had firmly established themselves among the elite composers in France.

Louis Durey was the eldest member of *Les Six*, his musical talents were essentially self-developed, heavily influenced by Wagnerian operas, and his atonal musical style was inspired by Alban Berg (Brevignon 2020, p. 36). Durey did not initially meet the other members at the Paris Conservatoire, instead, he encountered them indirectly through various exhibitions, concerts, and program productions. His composition *Carillons* made a lasting impression on Maurice Ravel, who recommended this young composer to his publisher. Upon learning that Durey intended to arrange *Carillons*, Ravel volunteered to provide the necessary assistance (Brevignon 2020, p. 43). Louis Durey was one of the more solitary figures in this group. In 1921, during a controversy over protecting Ravel's reputation, Durey departed from *Les Six*, expressing a sense of indignation.

Arthur Honegger, a Swiss composer born in France, spent most of his life in France. At the Paris Conservatoire, he met Darius Milhaud, who introduced him to Debussy and Ravel, as well as music cultures beyond Paris, including Stravinsky, Schoenberg, and Bartók. Honegger is considered the most unstable member of *Les Six*. Shortly after the group's formation, he openly admitted a preference for serious, simple chamber and symphonic music (Shapiro 2011, p. 162). He disliked Satie's music and embraced German Romantic aesthetics, creating discord with Cocteau's vision of French nationalism in musical form and architectural materials (Shapiro 2011, p. 159). Compared to Satie, his deeper influences come from Debussy, Strauss, and the atonal music of Schoenberg (Milhaud 1923). His works, such as *Quatre Poèmes* and *Trois Poèmes de Paul Fort*, demonstrate Debussy's influence on harmony and symbolism in poetry. Additionally, he passionately translated Schoenberg's harmonic theory, *Traité d'harmonie* (Shapiro 2011, p. 161).

Darius Milhaud was born into a Jewish family and successfully entered the Paris Conservatory in 1909. During his time in Paris, he was exposed to the music of Mussorgsky, Ravel, and Berg. Interestingly, witnessing the scandal caused by the premiere of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* in Paris did not prevent him from considering Stravinsky as the greatest composer of the century (Shapiro 2011, p. 189). Milhaud maintained a close connection with the SMI, evident from his frequent participation in SMI performances. Furthermore, Ravel suggested that Milhaud consider having his *Sonate pour violon et piano* performed by the SMI. In terms of his relationships, Milhaud consistently displayed a respectful attitude toward the musicians around him. He visited Debussy to better understand and perform Debussy's works, demonstrating great humility and respect for the artist who was facing significant physical pain. Poulenc also referred to Milhaud as the most genial of friends (Shapiro 2011, p. 217).

Another notable aspect of Milhaud's life is his deep admiration for Brazil. From 1917 to 1919, he served as the secretary to the French ambassador Paul Claudel to Brazil. During his two years in Brazil, Milhaud was strongly influenced by Brazilian popular music. In a publicly published article, he expressed his love for Brazil and its vibrant and imaginative music. Milhaud composed a suite *Saudades do Brasil* based on folk dances from different regions of Rio de Janeiro, expressing his boundless love and longing for the country. Upon returning to France, Milhaud swiftly embraced the fashion trends in Paris led by Cocteau, gaining rapid fame with the publicity from Henri Collet's articles.

At the home of pianist Marcelle Meyer, Satie discovered Tailleferre through a set of double piano pieces *Jeux de plein air*. He was captivated by the clear melodies, engaging counterpoint, and mysterious Eastern hues in her music. Satie joyfully referred to Tailleferre as his “musical daughter” and included her in the ranks of *Les Six* (Shapiro 2011, p. 263). During this time, there were hints of another informal mentor in Tailleferre’s musical journey. Introduced by violinist Hélène Jourdan-Morhange, Tailleferre had the opportunity to visit Le Belvédère, a Ravel’s estate in Montfort-l’Amaury. Ravel provided Tailleferre with informal guidance and even encouraged her to participate in the competition for the Prix de Rome (Brevignon 2020, p. 96; Shapiro 2011, p. 248).

Francis Poulenc did not enter the Paris Conservatory but chose to study music with the Spanish pianist Ricardo Viñes and the renowned French composer Charles Koechlin. This decision provided him with more opportunities to engage with some of the prominent musicians in Paris at that time, and his encounters with Satie and Auric took place at Ricardo Viñes’ home. As for Milhaud, Poulenc was an early admirer of his fame and held deep admiration for him. However, their chance meeting occurred on a friend’s tennis court, highlighting the serendipity of their connection (Shapiro 2011, p. 216).

Poulenc held great reverence for the music of Debussy and Mozart, considering Debussy’s music as essential “oxygen” in his life. His composition *Rapsodie nègre* infused with modernist elements faced criticism from the conservative composers at the Paris Conservatory. Despite the opposition, Poulenc’s efforts earned him the appreciation of figures like Alfredo Casella, Ravel, and Stravinsky. Stravinsky recommended the work to his publisher, leading to its publication in 1919. Thus, *Rapsodie nègre* became Poulenc’s first published work, marking a significant step in his career.

4. Attitudes, Relations, and Contradictions

4.1. In Relation to Their Mentors

The connection between *Les Six* and their mentor Cocteau was not as tight as one might think. Poulenc and Auric had the closest relationship with Cocteau, being his most influenced students. However, conflicts arose between them at times, such as Cocteau’s disappointment when Auric failed to mention him as the creator of *Parade* in an article for *Littérature* and his anger at Auric for refusing to compose music for his short play *Le Pauvre Matelot* (Brevignon 2020, p. 64; Shapiro 2011, p. 124). Milhaud and Honegger, on the other hand, explored more diverse forms of composition, extending beyond chamber musical works, which conflicted with Cocteau’s depiction of a concise and simple ideal. As for Tailleferre and Durey, it is evident that they were independently influenced by Satie and Ravel, often facing conflicts in choosing between the two in their exploration of musical styles.

Before settling in Paris, Satie was a relatively unknown composer, often on the move to evade debt. Fortunately, in 1911, his work was discovered by Ravel and Debussy, significantly improving his situation, and gaining him prestige among young composers (Orledge 2001). Subsequently, Cocteau noticed his work, and gained more recognition, especially after the scandal of the ballet *Parade*. However, Satie, despite regular musical activities, never achieved significant artistic acclaim in his lifetime. His attitude toward his young disciples, particularly towards Auric, Poulenc, and Milhaud, changed over time (Shapiro 2011, p. 92).

In April 1921, Satie expressed his perspective at a conference in Brussels:

From an aesthetic point of view, the six belong to the new spirit, but limited to some members, not all... For me, the new spirit is, first and foremost, a return to classical forms—with modern sensitivity. Among the six, you will find this modern sensibility in George Auric, Francis Poulenc, Darius Milhaud. As for the other three of the six: Louis Durey, Arthur Honegger, Germaine Tailleferre, they are purely impressionist (Brevignon 2020, p. 92).

This statement divided the members of *Les Six* into two opposing groups, indicating the ideological differences that led to a split within the group. It also reflected Cocteau’s

question of whether neoclassicism or impressionism better represented French music and how to reconcile potential contradictions between them. Cocteau and Satie, however, did not seek to reconcile these contradictions but rather to evaluate the ideal characteristics of French music according to their conceptualization. Unfortunately, these ideal characteristics were gradually eroded by various trivialities.

In addition, the famous incident of *Le Roi David* exacerbated the division within *Les Six*. In May 1921, Honegger hastily completed the commission for *Le Roi David* and premiered it in June at the Jura Theater in Switzerland. The work unexpectedly received high praise from the public and critics, earning Honegger valuable acclaim (Hines 2006). However, in a letter to Clarel, Poulenc described *Le Roi David* as a formulaic, outdated exercise for the Prix de Rome:

It is 30 years out of date; it is damned Wagnerism, very Kraut-Swiss, a ridiculous type of polytonality⁴.

Meanwhile, Milhaud commented that *Le Roi David* would definitively establish Honegger's name, as it comprised clichés, classroom fugues, developed themes, chorales, and prefabricated formulas, allowing people to recognize themselves in it and cry "sublime"⁵. Critics of *Les Six* argued that Honegger's *Le Roi David* had betrayed the collective enterprise of his colleagues in form and demanded his expulsion from *Les Six* (Kelly 2017, p. 36). The dual impact of internal conflicts and external pressures had led to fractures within the group.

4.2. In Relation to Claude Debussy

Claude Debussy was a proud asset to France, with a reputation closely tied to the nation and politics. He served as a member of the SNM for a long time and received the Legion of Honour in 1903. Philosophically, Debussy, despite being influenced by Wagner, did not embrace Wagnerism, as Cocteau described. In a January 1913 article, he expressed his view on Wagner:

Wagner, if I may be permitted to express myself with the pomposity befitting him, was a beautiful sunset that was mistaken for a dawn (Trezise 2003, p. 46).

Debussy also exhibited disdain for Strauss' music, but his criticism was more moderate compared to many of his contemporaries, without reaching the extreme of chauvinism. He actively advocated for the revitalization of French music, warning composers of his time against a negative attitude towards French traditions, stating that they had reached a dangerous edge (Lesure and Rolf 2019, p. 321). In his writings, he fondly remembered the delicate and charming character of Rameau's *Castor et Pollux*, reaffirming the virtues of clarity, precision, and simplicity in the tradition of French music. He criticized Gluck for leading French music in the wrong direction (Lesure and Rolf 2019, p. 176). Debussy's later years were spent in pain and turmoil. Afflicted with cancer and enduring the traumas of war, his anger at Germany's conduct during the war was expressed unreservedly in his two-piano *En blanc et noir*. Debussy passed away in March 1918 amid German bombings in Paris before the war's end. His death was perceived by many as a sacrifice for the nation, associating his values of national music with the image of France, leaving a lasting impression on the public.

The period following World War I, commonly referred to as the interwar years or the Roaring Twenties, witnessed significant cultural and artistic transformations across Europe, particularly in France. In the aftermath of the war and the resulting disillusionment, the avant-garde movement emerged with the aim of challenging established norms and pushing the boundaries of art. This era marked the ascent of movements such as Dadaism and Surrealism, embracing nihilistic values, rejecting traditional beliefs, and seeking to dismantle idols and established conventions. The avant-garde artists of this time refused all traditional norms and beliefs, engaging in the destruction of idols and rejecting established traditions and conventions. Instead, they embraced anti-art, irrationality, absurdity, non-humanity, and abstract experimentation (Gillmor 1983). The musical aesthetics of Cocteau

and Satie during this period reflected this societal reality, as they, through their delicate efforts and continuous promotion, demonstrated a series of anti-authoritarian tendencies.

Cocteau's leadership of *Les Six* marked an assault on impressionism, as they sought to distance themselves from the influences of Wagnerism and Russian music on Debussy. Shortly after *Les Six* publicly announced their formation, Auric made a provocative statement about their predecessor:

Having grown up in the middle of the Wagnerian debacle and having begun to write among the ruins of Debussyism, imitating Debussy seems to me today to be nothing more than the worst form of necrophagy ([Kelly 2017](#), p. 24).

This statement triggered strong reactions from the public and many renowned musicians, especially those who held Debussy in high regard. In response to the prolonged criticism from the public, Milhaud eventually offered a gentle reply, he acknowledged the violent reaction of the younger generation of composers to what they perceived as outdated aesthetics, also explained that Debussy was an idol for their generation, and it was the presence of such a great figure that could prevent Wagnerism from continuing to spread in Paris. Milhaud expressed this sentiment with the following words:

No doubt, nothing could have been strong enough to resist it if the deeply human genius of our Debussy had not come, assimilating without danger this foreign food. Indeed, it was thanks to it that Debussy was drawn away from Wagner and that he was able to realize his work, entirely built upon sensibility, tenderness, and love ([Milhaud 1923](#)).

Milhaud defended his colleagues by clarifying that their animosity was not aimed at Debussy personally, but rather was a critique of his inclination towards Wagnerian and Russian influences:

But the Russian trap was set some years after when the Debussy school became fascinated by the orchestral technique of Rimsky-Korsakoff. The adorable subtlety of Debussy's writing (perfect in his case, because he possessed a wonderful sense of criticism and a sensitive nature) became the source of the movement called "Impressionism" which, combined with Rimsky's influence, led French music into a blind alley, where useless complications, the search for rare and delicate sonority instead of pure melody, caused a reaction which, too, was Russian in the *Le Sacre du printemps*, by Igor Stravinsky ([Milhaud 1923](#)).

On 15 January 1920, the French authorities officially announced that Ravel was awarded the French Legion of Honor. However, Ravel adamantly refused to accept the award, and some scholars believe that Ravel was expressing protest against the Prix de Rome incident of 1905 ([Nichols 2011](#), p. 206). Satie, on the other hand, remarked:

Ravel refuses the Legion of Honor, but his music accepts it ([Kelly 2013](#), p. 56).

Such comments targeting this renowned artist stung many supporters of Ravel. Tailleferre and Durey from *Les Six* responded vehemently to this accusation against an artist, expressing their support and loyalty to Ravel. Also, Ravel was the first to discover Durey's talent and exerted considerable effort to promote Durey's works. Satie's attitude toward Durey and Tailleferre fueled anger, eventually leading Durey to write a letter announcing his voluntary departure from this group. In the letter, Durey countered:

In an era when one cries loudly for French music, in my opinion, no composer is more qualified to embody this than Maurice Ravel. Reserve, clarity, and simplicity are its main qualities ([Brevignon 2020](#), p. 97).

Following this incident, the fracture within *Les Six* had solidified. In January 1922, just two years after announcing the group's formation, Henri Collet released another paper formally declaring *Les Six* bankrupt. Collet pointed out that behind the group of now five individuals who had formed *Les Six*, there was a whimsical mahout with casual command, and these young people did not always fully understand his whims but followed him with

their fingers and eyes ([Collet 1922](#)). In this article, he stated that the group had successfully deceived most music critics and publishers over the past years, however, this group is compelled to dissolve due to certain issues. Milhaud expressed his regret in a letter, hoping that the group could remain united while preserving individual aesthetic preferences, but this appeal evidently proved ineffective. Milhaud explained that there is nothing a collective aesthetic among them, individuals within their group enjoy complete freedom to choose their creative inspiration according to their own temperament and personal taste, and *Le Coq et l'Arlequin* is not considered their guiding principle ([Brevignon 2020](#), p. 108).

4.3. In Relation to the Second Viennese School

It is evident that *Les Six* showed a strong interest in various foreign styles of innovation, such as American jazz, salon music, and Brazilian popular music, and extensively incorporated these styles into their compositions. Regarding modernist music, specifically the twelve-tone music established by the Second Viennese School, they also demonstrated a high level of enthusiasm and openness. Starting from 1915, Milhaud had requested that Auric bring back scores of the Second Viennese School from Switzerland, eventually becoming a devoted supporter of Schoenberg's cause. Auric considered *Moses and Aaron* as an immortal masterpiece by Schoenberg and performed melodies from *Pierrot Lunaire* with the singer Maria Freund. In his memoirs, he expressed his love for Webern's music. Auric also translated Schoenberg's *Traité d'harmonie*. Poulenc and Milhaud visited Arnold Schoenberg in Mödling together, and during this visit, Milhaud received personal annotations from Schoenberg on *Five Orchestral Pieces Op. 16*. Louis Durey was also influenced by the Second Viennese School, paying homage to a melody from Schoenberg's *Das Buch der hängenden Gärten* in his composition *L'Offrande lyrique for soprano and piano*. This piece was performed by soprano Marie-France de Montaut, accompanied by pianist Germaine Tailleferre, another member of *Les Six*, at the Vieux-Colombier theater.

In 1913, Milhaud and Jean Wiéner organized the French premiere of Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, and on 14 December 1922, they again promoted works from the Second Viennese School in Paris. This included Webern's *Five String Quartets* and Berg's *Four Piano Pieces*. As we know, although World War I had ended, tensions persisted among nations over post-war interests. Due to Germany's failure to fulfill war reparations as stipulated in the Treaty of Versailles, French and Belgian troops entered the Ruhr region of Germany to force compliance. The relationship between the two countries became tense once again. Charles Trenet, the director of the musical *Le Messager*, advocated for a return to wartime policies in response to German publishers' boycott. He proposed banning performances of non-public domain works from Germany and Austria, declaring that French publishers would cease selling any music published in Germany if the boycott against French music continued ([B. Kelly 2017](#), p. 28).

Seizing this opportunity, critics of *Les Six* harshly criticized their political leanings. In an article, Émile Vuillermoz linked national identity with political contradictions, labeling the young composers as traitors to France. He emphasized that *Les Six* was not only destroying Debussy, a nationally acclaimed musician in France and worldwide but also inventing a new national musician for another country's benefit ([B. Kelly 2017](#), p. 28).

The nationalist fervor of the French Music Defense League is evidently tied to the fate of the nation. Representing the cultural sector's attitude and historical responsibility towards the war invasion, they demonstrated a patriotic zeal with strong political undertones. Emphasizing the protection of national culture, they aimed to maintain the uniqueness and purity of French musical culture. We witness a rare joint declaration between SNM and SMI. They sacrificed personalistic motives for the satisfaction of national desires, highlighting loyalty to the country by refusing external cultures during times of national crisis, affirming their national identity. On the other hand, the actions of *Les Six* manifest a series of anti-traditional or anti-official intentions. While cautioning against equating Webern with Germany, the actions of *Les Six*, in the context of a relatively stable national identity, seemingly do not deliberately avoid suspicions of such associations. They did not

consider their actions as betraying patriotism, rather, they rejected chauvinism. Despite their bold approach, they chose to remain loyal to France in terms of national identity while transcending French cultural identity. This phenomenon aligns closely with Taruskin's assessment of twentieth-century neonationalism, where there is no longer explicit exclusivity. In the hands of neonationalists, folk music becomes a valuable resource for creative breakthroughs, reflecting a more inclusive and open-minded attitude. This is reminiscent of Taruskin's characterization of Stravinsky's international modernism as catalyzed by neo-nationalism (Taruskin 2001).

5. Discussion: Neo-Nationalism or Modernism

As mentors of *Les Six*, both Cocteau's *Le Coq et l'arlequin* and Satie's musical works, while emphasizing a sense of national identity, did not provide a specific, distinctive cultural symbol tailored to maintain revolutionary friendship among the members of *Les Six*. Similarly, Satie did not establish a unique cultural symbol in his musical compositions to denote national identity. Indeed, they attempted a fragile possibility of polytonality⁶. Emphasizing their identity, the use of polytonality to highlight a nationalist stance rooted in French identity became another key aspect of the defense of *Les Six* (de Médicis 2005). Indeed, all members of this group attempted to use polytonal techniques in their compositions, with Milhaud delving deeper into the study of polytonality. In this context, polytonality is not merely a matter of musical technique but also a way to express cultural uniqueness and national identity. Milhaud staunchly chose polytonality as his lifelong pursuit, striving to imbue this technique with the tone of French nationalism. He connected the French music tradition, which values melody, with the natural scale, binding the chromatic scale with neotonism⁷.

However, alongside those innovations including atonality, modality, twelve-tone technique, complex time signatures, and so forth, polytonality emerged as a widely experimented compositional technique within modernist music in the early twentieth century (Salleh and Razali 2023). While polytonality, like atonality, became a universal technique in modernist music composition, it faced unique challenges within the framework of nationalist symbolism, lacking inherent specificity. From the perspective of modern music ideals, polytonality represents a rejection of traditional nationalism in the sense that it disrupts the conventional modes of musical expression. However, polytonality does possess elements of nationalism in its intrinsic compositional logic, as it does not fundamentally alter tonal characteristics. While this inclusivity does not necessarily preclude its alignment with nationalist ideals, it inherently cannot become the exclusive cultural symbol of a nation.

Émile Vuillermoz, in an article dating back to December 1921, directly rejected this cultural symbol of *Les Six*. He refused to acknowledge the group's use of polytonality as a stylistic characteristic of French music and achieved this by tracing the historical roots of this technique. He emphasized that polytonality did not originate from *Les Six*, but rather from the works of composers such as Strauss, Stravinsky, Koechlin, and Casella (Casella and Baker 1924). Throughout history, polytonality has been present in the development of music, with implications seen from the Renaissance period with Orazio Vecchi to the Baroque master J.S. Bach, and to the classical era with Mozart and Beethoven, all hinting at the potential for polytonal music. In a modern sense, polytonal techniques are not exclusive to France. The application of polytonality can be traced earlier in the works of American composer Charles Ives across the Atlantic, as seen in *Three Places in New England* (1903–1914) and *Holidays Symphony* (1904–1913). Ives is considered one of the first composers to employ polytonality in composition (Whittall 2001).

6. Conclusions

Les Six, as a movement opposing the Debussy school, embodies a complex and idealistic path within the French music tradition. However, contradictions emerged as they initially attacked French mainstream figures like Debussy and Ravel, leading to mistakes in identifying potential allies and enemies, betraying the sentiments of the French people.

Moreover, their openness to foreign music makes their national identity fraught with contradictions. Rather than emphasizing their national identity, *Les Six* seemed to prioritize their group identity. The actions of *Les Six* demonstrate this, as they sought connections with their mentors, even if it meant confronting the entire mainstream music culture.

From the perspective of ethnosemantics, it is crucial to recognize that pure nationalism does not exist. The diversity between national identity and cultural identity makes group identity multifaceted. Regardless of whether their music aesthetics are considered open or conservative, from the perspective of national identity, we see them as belonging to France. Despite the criticism they faced, we perceive them as French composers with an open attitude toward foreign cultures within the diverse musical traditions of France. From the perspective of cultural identity, we need to consider two aspects: Firstly, we cannot deny that they also maintained a love for French musical traditions, emphasizing a return to the clear, simple lines and melodies of the Baroque period. They expressed respect for the French predecessor, Rameau. This reflects the stability of the inherent cultural identity that formed before the establishment of a modern national identity. Secondly, their open attitude toward foreign music, including Schoenberg's atonal music, Brazilian popular music, and American jazz, demonstrates the instability resulting from the process of cultural exchange and adaptation to personal preferences and natural selection.

In the brief period of their collaboration, the artistic upheaval caused by *Les Six* in Paris seems insignificant compared to their innovative contributions to French music. If it were not for Cocteau and Collet's vigorous promotion, their friendship might have lasted longer without the controversies, but it could have also kept these composers from entering the public eye.

As Watkins (1994, pp. 285–97) suggests, artistic creation is always influenced by complex phenomena such as orientalism, primitivism, and modernism, which complicate the concept of national identity. Similarly, Silver (1989, p. 208) argues that blaming Wagnerism for the corruption of French culture is unsatisfactory. Instead, a deeper investigation into the historical origins of Romanticism in French culture could provide a more comprehensive critique of both French and German culture and thought. Therefore, it is challenging to make an accurate judgment on this movement, given that the development of twentieth-century music was marked by fragmentation and marginalization. Moreover, using nationalist music as a slogan might lead to further marginalization in a country like France, which has a long-standing mainstream musical tradition.

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Notes

- 1 This text comes from the booklet notes written by Keith Anderson for the album Joseph Canteloube: *Chants d'Auvergne*. Original text: "Les chants paysans s'élèvent bien souvent au niveau de l'art le plus pur, par le sentiment et l'expression, sinon par la forme" (K. Anderson 2004).
- 2 Original text: "Wagner, Stravinsky et même Debussy, sont de belles pieuvres. Qui s'approche d'eux a du mal à se dépester de leurs tentacules" (Cocteau and Auric 2009, p. 28).
- 3 Original text: "Debussy a joué en Français, mais il a mis la pédale russe" (Cocteau and Auric 2009, p. 38).
- 4 Original text: "c'est vieux de 30 ans, c'est wagnérien en diable, très boche-suisse, ridicule comme polytonie" (Collaer 1996; Kelly 2017, p. 19).

- 5 Original text: “c'est Le Roi David qui établira définitivement la gloire d'Arthur parce que, l'œuvre étant faite de clichés et d'exercices de classe de fugue et de thèmes développés et de chorals et de formules toutes faites, les gens s'y reconnaissent et croient au sublime” (Collaer 1996; Kelly 2017, p. 19).
- 6 When Collet posed a question about the musical aesthetics of *Les Six*, Cocteau responded: “They take the complexities of polytonality as a point of departure eventually to arrive at simplicity”. He superficially addressed Collet's inquiry with polytonality, ultimately leaving the intricacies to the members of *Les Six*: “At last, melody may escape its psalmody past without sacrificing pure French prosody. *Les Six* know their language.” (Roy 1994, p. 201; de Médicis 2005).
- 7 Diatonism and Chromaticism are the two poles of musical expression. One can say that the Latins are diatonic and the Teutons chromatic. Here are to be found two different points; they are entirely opposed, and their consequences are verified by history (Milhaud 1923).

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