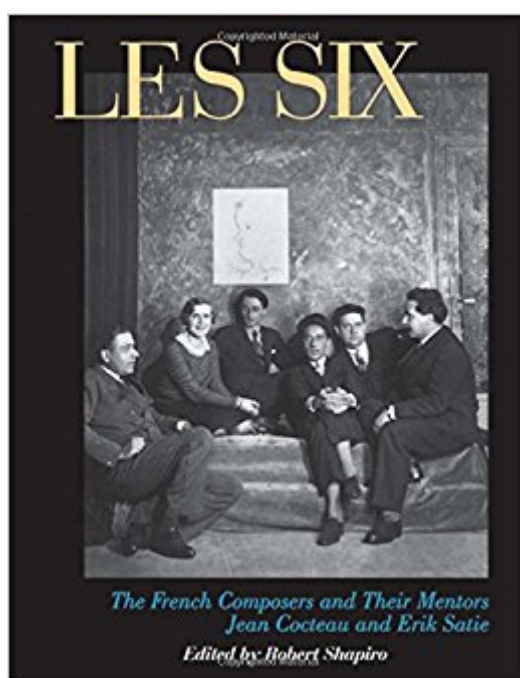


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A Les Six Compendium: French Composers Milhaud, Poulenc, Auric, Durey, Honegger, Tailleferre (Peter Owen Modern Classic)



Synopsis

`Les Six' were Francis Poulenc, Georges Auric, Louis Durey, Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, and Germaine Tailleferre, all respected in music circles, but under the aegis of Cocteau, they found themselves moving among a whole new milieu. The likes of Picasso, Ren Clair, Blaise Cendrars, and Maurice Chevalier all appear in the story along with key figures of the Dada and Surrealist movements. But the story of Les Six goes on long after the heyday of Bohemian Paris: the group never officially disbanded and their spouses, descendents and associates are still active, ensuring that the remarkable legacy of this unique group survives.

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Customer Reviews

Robert Shapiro is a well-respected expert on the 20th century French *École* and has written a previous book on the subject: *Germaine Tailleferre: A Bio-Bibliography*, and contributed articles to *Music of the 20th Century Avant-Garde: A Biocritical Sourcebook*.

Robert Shapiro is an accomplished researcher and historian who has become the 'go to' expert regarding the life and times of the French group Les Six. This book is very comprehensive and is a must read for all music lovers. Bravo.

Whenever I attended a concert featuring one the composers comprising Les Six / Group of Six,

being Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, Arthur Honegger, George Auric, Louis Durey, and Germaine Tailleferre, with "Les Six" being mentioned in program notes, I become curious about why and how such a cluster came about, whether they were assigned that designation by some critic or whether it was more internal. This edited book by music historian and biographer Robert Shapiro, who contributes most of the essays, will answer nearly everything any classical music fan would like to know. All these French composers were indeed chums, and while their particular music differed in experimental or conservative approach, they were dedicated to a new French direction that countered both fuzzy Impressionism and elongated Wagnerian and formal European styles. Most of their pieces at the start tended toward short chamber works. Their godfather was iconoclast Erik Satie and their Muse was Jean Cocteau. The book gives much biographical information along with music analysis. The back material is a treasure trove: besides notes, a chronology, the bibliographical sources, a listing of all their compositions, a thorough discography, a listing of their concerts between 1916 and 2001, and annotated reviews of some old magazine and newspaper articles and published letters describing concerts and premieres. I was already very familiar with Milhaud (who taught at nearby Mills College, where he instructed jazz pianist Dave Brubeck) and enjoyed the wit and charm of Poulenc, but I mainly desired to know more, well, anything about Tailleferre. A woman composer in the music world at the time was a rare bird and surely the victim of prejudice. Her story, as the others, is insightful. The interaction and relationships of these musicians amongst themselves and with artists and dramatists and intellectuals are well described by Shapiro. This book will be of interest to classical music fans and historians. It filled a huge gap in my appreciation of these composers.

This is as good an overview of "The Six" as you will find, but I still think there are areas where it could be better. On the whole, the book seems to be done up in a "textbook" style, with very dry analysis---which seems odd to me when you are describing musicians who were trying to break away from stereotypes. I wish the book had given a better picture of the cultural upheaval in Paris near the time of WWI-- which seems to be the point and place where modernism first took hold. There is no discussion of the legacy of The Six, just a pass on that with a few lines about "still being evaluated, yet to be determined..." I know of at least one composer, Martinu, who traced his development to Paris and The Six. There also could have been more about Jean Cocteau and his importance to both the visual and musical arts. Some color-- maybe some paintings from the period---would have been nice. These were colorful composers, but the book is dull black and white. Most of the readers who seek out this book will probably have their favorites among the

number, and mine are Honegger (the 'architect', and the one who created a couple of great 20th century symphonies), and Poulenc (who seemed to be far and away the cleverest, most elegant, melodic, and fun--and was called the "French Prokofiev"--yes, that must be why I love him). All the major milestones, both musical and historical, are covered scrupulously... for each composer, and the group as a whole. But the best way to understand the group is to listen to the music, of course.... and it wouldn't have hurt for the publishers to have included a representative cd.

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