

**Criticising Modernism; A glance at  
Parisian Music in the years of Debussy,  
Stravinsky and Les Six**



Parisian Street Scene, Avenue Montaigne (19thc. French School) by  
19th Century French School

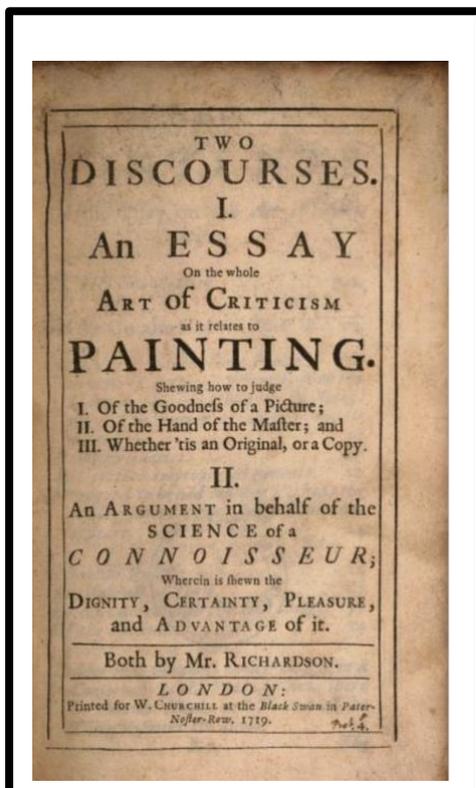
**Essay question: "To what extent can the music of the Debussy, Stravinsky, and Les Six, be said to grow out of general cultural developments and attitudes in the city where it was conceived?"**

# Criticising Modernism; A glance at Parisian Music in the years of Debussy, Stravinsky and Les Six

*“An artist can be imitated; the critic is inimitable, and priceless. How could you imitate a critic, I wonder? In any case, the attempt would be pointless. We have the original, and that is enough for us”.*

-Erik Satie, “A Eulogy of Critics”<sup>1</sup>

Even though criticising someone or something is probably almost like a human instinct that dates so long back that even the historical record would be inefficient to determine, the system of criticism was developed in the early 18th century by British artist, collector and one of the most famous art critics of English Enlightenment period, Jonathan Richardson, through his work called *An Essay on the Whole Art of Criticism as It Relates to Painting and An Argument in Behalf of the Science of a Connoisseur* (Britannica, 2021).



Front cover of *An Essay on the Whole Art of Criticism as It Relates to Painting and An Argument in Behalf of the Science of a Connoisseur* (1719) by Jonathan Richardson, digitized by Google

<sup>1</sup> **Eulogy of Critics** (1918) is the text of a lecture Erik Satie delivered at the Théâtre du Vieux Colombier; during the time, he was sentenced to eight days in prison and fined 1000 francs for insulting a music critic (Satie Exhibition, 2011).



Self-Portrait, 1733

Jonathan Richardson, English, 1665–1745

Oil on canvas

31.5 x 27.6 cm (12 3/8 x 10 7/8 in.) frame: 45 x 41 x 5.5 cm  
(17 11/16 x 16 1/8 x 2 3/16 in.)

Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase, Surdna  
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Later in the mid-18th century, German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten gave a philosophical place to the discipline of aesthetics through works such as *Aesthetica* and thus introduced new criteria for critical judgment by drawing a line between moral understanding and aesthetic approach to art (Britannica, 2021). Nevertheless, as it also mentioned on Britannica, towards the end of the century, in 1790, Immanuel Kant's *Critik der Urteilkraft* (which can be translated into English as *Critique of Judgment*) also included a possible attempt to respond to one of his earlier proposals regarding the difference between the beautiful and sublime, later has started to play a critical role in 20th-century formal criticism (Britannica, 2021). Following the dominant influence of 18th-century criticism, when the term 'modernism' which rooted in the word 'modern' has started to be applied to aesthetic ideals and creative thoughts (Calkins, 2010, p. 12), the scepticism towards arts regarding their quality, meaning and value, which forms the basis of art criticism, reached its peak in the early and middle 19th century. As Leon Botstein put into words, "Art was being debased by those who sought to celebrate and exploit the spiritually corrupt

aspects of modern life, including trade, industry and journalistically manipulated public opinion" (Botstein, 2001).

As Leon Botstein put it, "Wagner himself used the term 'modern' in 1849 as an epithet directed against Meyerbeer as a way of characterizing grand opera's cheap concession to popular and philistine taste" (Botstein, 2001). Then, how do we define modernism, which has caused a great division among scholars for many years of its polysemy?

Modernism has been used to define anything new, current or up to date in its most general sense. In this pursuit of 'new', Albright defends that while the reason of emerge for modernism is to test the "limits of aesthetic construction", a modernist's objective is to "find the ultimate bounds of certain artistic possibilities" (Albright, 2004, p. 11).

*"We cannot prevent a river from flowing"*

-Jean Cocteau, speaking of the evolution of modern music in his book,  
*Le coq et l'arlequin*

As Darius Milhaud indicates in his article, the music itself has been transforming and developing alongside everything and everyone in our world. And according to him, the speed of this change is so high that "some listeners and critics cry out that a revolution has come, and halt in the middle of the road" (Milhaud, 1923). According to Botstein, after Bauselaire's use of the term 'modern' in his work *The Painter of Modern Life* in 1863 regarding it to which also meant as a defence for Wagner's use of the word as defining the future's art (which in a way can probably be perceived as a possible early connection to the

‘futurism’ that was launched in 1909 by the Italian poet Filippo Tommaso with his “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism” published on the Paris newspaper, *Le Figaro*), " the term came to signify, in a positive sense, a revolutionary avant garde that rejected historical models and confronted directly the overwhelming character of the new in contemporary life by penetrating beyond the surface of modernity" (Botstein, 2001).

Yet, it has caused intense conflicts that have cut across disciplines throughout the years that Russian linguist Roman Jakobson once expressed, “I try not to use even Modernism, because what is Modernism, it depends on who writes it and at what moment" (Jakobson, [1979] 1985), while Rosemary Wakeman stated that, “In reality, there is no such thing as “modernity” or “modernism” in general; nor is there a clear dichotomy between tradition and progress” (Wakeman, 2004).

Although there was such scepticism towards this newly emerging and increasingly popular term, ‘modernism’, which got all the fine arts of the period under its effect, it assumably signified a much more pronounced metamorphosis than the earlier periodical changes that happened in the art world. Apparently, the new aim was to draw a much more distinct line between the past and the new. If it was, then what was the distinction of this newly emerging concept? Even though there might be numerous answers to such questions, the mentioned difference is probably rooted in the radical and intense social changes that happened during the corresponding period, especially in Europe, such as industrialisation and changing economic balances (e.g., the rise of capitalism).

At the beginning of the 20th century, right after the outbreak of the First World War, people's perceptions of war and civilisation began to change radically, witnessing the unprecedented brutality and destruction of this war that was

supposed to end all other wars. Therefore, people started to feel deceived by the powers in the governance. This result inevitably destroyed the belief systems of cultures and dragged the artists of the time to a period that would later be written in books as the modernist period, questioning the existing (and almost rejecting the traditional) and seeking the new by offering artists a space to experiment.

*“Modernism refers to a global movement in society and culture that from the early decades of the twentieth century sought a new alignment with the experience and values of modern industrial life. Building on late nineteenth-century precedents, artists around the world used new imagery, materials and techniques to create artworks that they felt better reflected the realities and hopes of modern societies”* (TATE, n.d.).

Although the term modernism encompasses many different interpretations, one cannot frankly understand the phenomenon of modern art without knowing the artistic movements that blossomed on French soil and formed artistic expression in every branch of art.

One might ask, why France? While the short answer to such a question is its culture, the comprehensive answer comes from the country's turbulent but intellectual and artistic past, where it has been leaving its stamp on music, architecture, art, and literature since the times of Charlemagne<sup>2</sup>.

As also mentioned by Brittney, after the French Revolution of 1848, the wave of 'Realism' in the 1850s sparked as a reaction to Romanticism, which had dominated French literature and art with its exotic subjects and extreme emotions since the late 18th century (Brittney, 2021). Following this sharp transition started by realists who aimed to portray "everyday life in a naturalistic manner", as TATE

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<sup>2</sup>**Charlemagne (c.742-814)**, also known as Karl and Charles the Great, was a medieval emperor who ruled much of Western Europe from 768 to 814. In 771, Charlemagne became king of the Franks, a Germanic tribe in present-day Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and western Germany (History, 2019).

describes, a new ambitious movement called 'impressionism' arose in the 19th century, which focused more on pleasurable aspects of social life, the natural world, landscapes, and cityscapes (TATE, Realism, n.d.).

Although the first appearance of the term 'impressionism' is linked to David Hume's philosophical system in the first half of the 18th century (Byrnside, 1980), the impressionist approach to fine arts first began to develop in France in the late 19th century as an extension of the Avant-garde movement. It was undoubtedly an outcome of the increasingly popular 'rejecting the traditional and seeking the new' mentality among the artists.

The impressionist approach in the fine arts was a radical art movement formed around the artist's immediate impression of a moment or a scene. The principal desire of the impressionists was to portray the world as they experienced it and so as it is, rather than sticking to the conventional (e.g., imaginary and therefore perfect landscapes), by mainly focusing on the use of light and its reflection.

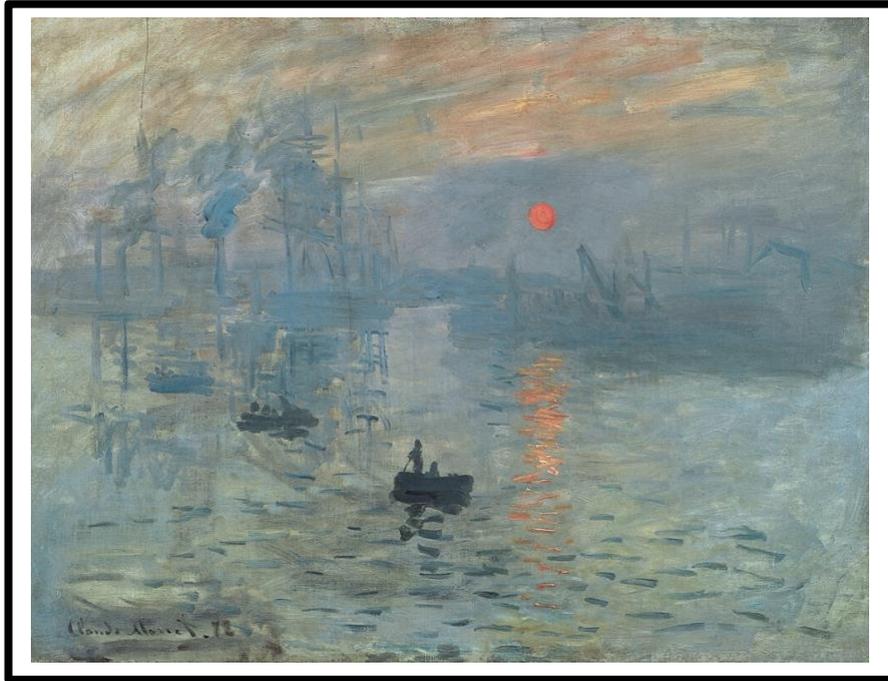
Even though determining an exact origin date of a concept or a term is not an easy assignment, according to Jann Pasler, the first one to name the painters of the First *Impressionist Exhibitions*<sup>3</sup> held in 1874 as 'impressionists' was the French politician and art critic Jules-Antoine Castagnary (Pasler, 2001). In this review of Castagnary, he described the possible purpose of the impressionists as "...they do not render a landscape, but the sensation produced by the landscape".

On the other hand, according to Robert Earl Mueller, the term 'impressionist' itself was used for the first time again in 1874 by the French

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<sup>3</sup> **Impressionist Exhibitions** were held as eight different exhibitions organised by the painters of the so-called Impressionist group in Paris between 1874 and 1886. The first one of these Impressionist exhibitions took place in the spring of 1874, led by artists such as Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro, and Paul Cézanne.

playwright, painter, and art critic Louis Leroy in the French magazine *Le Charivari*, to target the same artists, to mock their works; especially Monet's impressionist work called *Impression Sunrise* (Mueller, 1954).



*Impression Sunrise* (1873)  
by Claude Monet

*“Impression – I was certain of it. I was just telling myself that, since I was impressed, there had to be some impression in it...and what freedom, what ease of workmanship! Wallpaper in its embryonic state is more finished than that seascape”.*

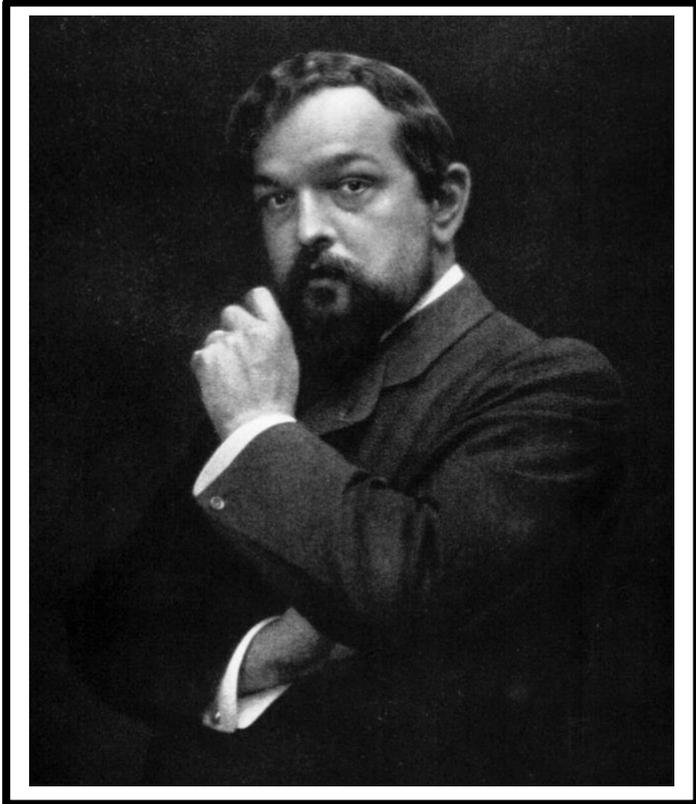
-Louis Leroy, review about Monet's *Impression Sunrise*,  
*Le Charivari*, 1874

Even though the general purpose of impressionists was to depict their paintings (especially landscapes) in a realistic way possible, for the time's audience, this art still looked bizarre with all the messy and short brush strokes.

Therefore, it was way away from being 'acceptable'. Even during the fourth Impressionist Exhibition held in 1879, the French art historian and critic Henry Havard commented: "I confess humbly I do not see nature as they do, never having seen these skies fluffy with pink cotton, these opaque and moiré waters, this multi-colored foliage. Maybe they do exist. I do not know them." (Nesic, 2018).

On the other hand, the attempts to adapt principles of impressionism formed by painting into music had resulted in various approaches, just as the process of adaptation of modernism into the arts by different artists in general. In musical meanings, the term impressionism was not clear as it was in the painting; therefore, it has generally been presented by analogy with the modern French painting of the period. For instance, during the efforts to interpret the period's music, many writers tried to associate musical creations with painting concepts such as colour and light. Even Claude Debussy, whose name is one of the mostly encountered names among the French impressionist composers of the period, considered the word 'impressionism' as "a term which is as poorly used as possible, particularly by art critics." (Schmitz, 2010, p. 13). In supporting the same argument, Maurice Ravel, who was another leading figure of the period, expressed that he rejected considering Debussy an impressionist since the term impressionism itself is "a term borrowed from a sister art, which had very little application to music . . ." (Seroff, 2011). Nevertheless, it probably would not be wrong to state that the impressionism concept in music did not emerge until Debussy's music, as Byrnside also claims in his article (Byrnside, 1980). The first apparent connection of Impressionism with Debussy's music happened with his work, *Printemps* in 1887. Ironically enough, the response from the Académie des Beaux-Arts committee, to which he sent the score, could be considered muchly similar to the critiques Monet faced with his work, "Impression Sunrise".

As the report follows: "*His feeling for musical color is so strong that he is apt to forget the importance of accuracy of line and form. He should beware the vague impressionism which is one of the most dangerous enemies of artistic truth.*" (Vallas, 1933, pp. 42-43).



Claude Debussy (1862-1918),  
*Image: The Edvard Grieg Archives/Bergen Public Library, Norway*

As a result of the turbulent French Revolution period (1789-1799), which negatively affected the environment, the awareness of environmental problems increased exponentially, and as can be seen from the poetry of the period, the understanding of 'keeping the environment untouched' became widespread. Still, by the late 19th century, France had experienced tremendous social and economic changes, especially following the years of the *Paris Commune*<sup>4</sup> that happened as

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<sup>4</sup> **Commune of Paris**, also called **Paris Commune**, **French Commune de Paris**, (1871), “insurrection of Paris against the French government from March 18 to May 28, 1871. It occurred in the wake of France’s defeat in the Franco-German War and the collapse of Napoleon III’s Second Empire (1852–70)” (Britannica, Commune of Paris, 2022).

a reaction to the outcomes of the Franco-Prussian War<sup>5</sup>. (This war had a particularly devastating effect on Debussy's childhood, as his father was imprisoned for his role in the commune.)

With the 'Belle époque'<sup>6</sup>, which overlapped with the end of the renovation of Paris, in which Georges-Eugène Haussmann transformed Paris from a run-down city into a contemporary city, preserving its history, modernism really came to the city.



Paris, during the *Paris Commune* of 1871

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<sup>5</sup>**Franco-German War**, also called **Franco-Prussian War**, (July 19, 1870–May 10, 1871), war in which a coalition of German states led by Prussia defeated France. The war marked the end of French hegemony in continental Europe and resulted in the creation of a unified Germany (Britannica, Franco-German War, 2021). According to many historians, the **Franco-Prussian War** is arguably the most foolish war in French history, resulting in the humiliation of Napoleon III. After Napoleon's resignation in September 1870, Prussians laid siege to Paris, which was the biggest downfall of the city since the Vikings. The economic gap between the poor and the rich became significantly large, and many citizens were at the threshold of famine.

<sup>6</sup>**Belle époque** (according to the Dictionary); “the period (1871–1914) between the end of the Franco-Prussian War and the outbreak of World War I, characterized by relative peacefulness in Western Europe and by marked advances and productivity in the arts, literature, technology, etc” (Dictionary, n.d.).



The long, straight avenues that continue to dominate Paris (pictured here around 1870) were a key feature of Baron Haussmann's rebuilding plans. Photograph: Alamy/ The Guardian

Assumably, one of the main reasons why the Impressionist musical works were criticised on the same criteria as their painting works was probably the Paris itself, which was their common source of inspiration. During the late 19th century to mid 20th century, Paris, where Debussy lived and worked, was viewed as the central cultural heart of the Western world, with its power to attract artists and intellectuals from all over the world; in other words, it was an international meeting point for artists. While the new Paris filled the canvases of artists such as Monet and Renoir, Debussy painted in his music the contrast between the liveliness of the newly built streets and the serenity of the medieval Notre Dame Cathedral; he was a musician and who painted music. In this sense, as a possible reply to the committee's critique of Debussy's work, if the environment an artist lives in is 'vague', how would an expressive composer not portray this vagueness in their work?

Another significant art movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was the 'neo-classicism'. Even though the prefix 'neo' often carries a cynical implication regarding the classical features, neoclassicists had a different view of rationality than the impressionists. Unlike the expressionist freedom in impressionism, they placed many rules and restrictions on artists. They were mainly influenced by the Roman and Greek themes and aimed much 'perfect' brush strokes on the canvas. Igor Stravinsky is undoubtedly one of the most influential composers to come across when it comes to Parisian neo-classicism in music, and according to Stephen Welsh, Stravinsky's *Symphonies d'instruments à vent* (Wind Instrument Symphonies) is the work to which the musical term 'neo-classicism' is applied (Welsh).



Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971),  
c. 1920. G. L. Manuel  
Freres—Hulton  
Archive/Getty Images

Although Stravinsky and Debussy did not meet until Stravinsky arrived in Paris for the first performance of *The Firebird* by the Russian Ball in 1910,

Stravinsky had already familiar with the beauty of Debussy's music he heard some in St. Petersburg during his apprenticeship years (White, 1962). Debussy attended the rehearsals of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* at the Theatre des Champs-Elysees in 1913, (only a year before the First World War) which made Stravinsky think that he was whole-hearted about his work. However, as White mentions, Debussy had reservations. As White quoted, just after the outbreak of the First World War<sup>7</sup>, talking to Ernest Ansermet, Debussy said: "You know how much I admire *Petrushka*, but *The Rite* disturbs me. It seems to me that Stravinsky is trying to make music with non-musical means, just as the Germans apparently pretend to be able to make beef steaks out of sawdust" (White, 1962, p. 3).

Arguably, one of the main differences between Stravinsky and Debussy was their approach to what can music convey. As much as his name appeared under the title 'impressionist' significantly, Debussy's works also offered plenty of features belonging to another foremost art movement of the period, 'symbolism'. Contrary to impressionism, as Tate describes, symbolism was a movement that supported the expression of an idea over the realistic description of the natural world. Unlike the Impressionists, Symbolists (e.g., Charles Baudelaire, Gustave Moreau, Stéphane Mallarmé) were more individualistic in the purpose of escaping from reality by expressing personal dreams (TATE, n.d.). Similarly, to Neo-Classicism, Symbolists often borrowed their themes from Greek mythology as well as fantastical creatures and worlds (Myers, 2007).

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<sup>7</sup> During the First World War, France was not in a very active position in terms of war but rather in a position that welcomed thousands of refugees who came to Paris every day from the east of France (Marcadet, 2015).



Gustave Moreau (1826-1898),  
*Oedipus and the Sphinx* (1864)

Not so different from many other composers, Debussy was highly critical of himself. As Emmanuelle Piedboeuf as he quoted musicology professor François de Médicis, "Debussy's musical language marked the era of modernity from "his constant concern with originality [and from] the fact he was always looking forward... Debussy's music does not have strict boundaries" (Piedboeuf, 2012). In this case, I believe one might assume that just like the turbulent environment in Paris during the time, Debussy's music was also on varying bases and ideas.

On the other hand, Stravinsky's opinions on expressing something with music were much stricter; in his autobiography, he wrote: "For I consider that music is, by its very nature, essentially powerless to express anything at all, whether a feeling, an attitude of mind, a psychological mood, phenomenon of

nature, etc... Expression has never been an inherent property of music" (Stravinsky, 1962, p. 53).

Undoubtedly, music sounds coming from almost every street in the Paris streets in the late 19th century experienced an intense a cut-back in the early 20th century because of the wartime, with the closing down of almost all large musical organisations. Alongside the chaos and destruction, four years of war also carried a new attitude into the art world. This was an attitude towards movements such as impressionism, symbolism, and their softening approach towards the world, which can be explained by the recently witnessed brutality of the world and humanity. As Vera Rašín put it, " There was a desire to return to firm outlines in art, a desire to strip it of the superfluous ornament with which they said it had become bedecked". According to Rašín, the post-war period became a period in which artists tended to depict the everyday world in their works with "terseness and clarity" (Rašín, 1957). This newly emerging spirit may be observed in Cocteau's ballet "Parade", Satie's music, or Picasso's works.



Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), *Guernica* (1937)

*'Guernica' is a powerful political statement created by Picasso as an immediate reaction to the Nazi's devastating casual bombing practice on the Basque town of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War.*

In light of this reaction to the heavy romance of Wagner and Strauss, a group of six young and ambitious musicians (Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, Arthur Honegger, Georges Auric, Louis Durey, and Germaine Tailleferre) called 'Le Six' was among the most encountered names of the time.



*Les Six*

Even though their goal in order to create something new is similar to Debussy's, they were also against his lush orchestration style and much closer to Stravinsky's neo-classicism. While previous French musicians such as Debussy were all influenced by Parisian culture and social and economic issues, Le Six was much bolder in wording because of its freedom to reject previous modernistic art movements, including symbolism.

Le Six mostly followed Satie's linear conception of music, which helped them bring the classicism back by getting the French music out of the harmonic 'craziness' of the past quarter-century. As Rašín put it, "The works of the group were kept short, and all pretentiousness was avoided" (Rašín, 1957, p. 167).

According to Pasler, any gradual acceptance of artistic movements such as 'impressionism' showed the middle class's desire to share in the old elite's lifestyle (Pasler, 2001). In this case, I believe Les Six's insistent rejection of the 'pretentiousness' was almost like a reaction to the Parisian bourgeois and its fancy lifestyle, which also could be considered an embrace of the working class. For some music writers, such as Rašín, Le Six's music, which escaped excess, ornaments, and non-musical meanings, was a "much-needed breath of fresh air in the stuffy, over-heated atmosphere of French music of the time" (Rašín, 1957, p. 167).

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