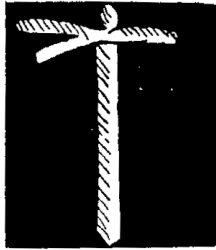


“WE ARE SEVEN”

A reply to the article by M. Emile Vuillermoz in the February Review

BY LEIGH HENRY



HE article “The Legend of the Six,” by the estimable M. Vuillermoz, arrests my attention. Legends interest Celts, not being of the humdrum which intrigues the matter-of-fact Teutonic mind. A legend always has an interior spiritual significance which academics and bibliophiles generally miss in poring over externals of historic or ethnological interest. Again, legends have the fascination of incorporating truths often obscured by more historic records.

So it is with the legend discovered by M. Vuillermoz, for whose work in other departments of musical creation and criticism I have a long-felt and unqualified admiration. Madoc, the ancient Welsh voyager, died of heartbreak under the scoffing of those who scouted his story of a land beyond the western waters. Atlantis was a seaman’s bluff until science commenced to modify scepticism. Jules Verne was a fabricator of what we may term projected legends in the seventies; today we exist without sense of the extraordinary in a world of aeroplanes, submarines, marconigraphs, broadcasters.

Legends have close kinship to nursery-rhymes and nursery-rhymes have much in common with some verses of Wordsworth. I have taken my title from a rhyme made more than necessarily detestable to most school children. Why? I will make it plain. It is not merely that I regard most habituated musical opinion as being on an infantile plane; I have too much respect for the soundness of child-instincts.

M. Vuillermoz expresses admiration for the strategy of the six young composers in exploiting the attitude of daring which, he

affirms, has been used to impose on much of Europe and America. The victims include musicians such as Satie, Roussel, Vines, Rubinstein, Bathori, etc. One must therefore reciprocally acknowledge his own clever assimilation of that attitude in his downright attack. Hence my heading.



Before the advent of the Six, (to give them a title bestowed by one outside the group), French modernities were represented by those whose progressiveness was relative to immediately precedent phases of technique,—excepting the rarely penetrative genius of Debussy. This element was profitable to the critic, progressive or reactionary. It enabled him to exploit his erudition as a specialist, initiate in the "how-it's-done," which is the century-old backbone of academic mystery.

With the tendencies of the Six erudition was somewhat non-plussed. They cut out much. A penetration into spiritual essentials—if one may use a fusty phrase suggestive of suburban seances—became necessary. Debussy, whom I adored and still reverence, and Ravel, who appeals to me immensely as clear, witty personality and musician, were modernists, (disgusting label), of a type permitting the preservation of those habitual sentiments towards the "artistic" which had been sanctioned by the conventions of centuries. The converted—those who sit on the fence until public approval of innovations is clear—could merely vary their jargon in affirming the courage of other people's convictions.

The Six have not these appealing qualities to a predominant degree. They are not "poetic," "literary," "dramatic," or "soulful" musicians, though I would scarcely apply these epithets to Debussy and Ravel either. They are young people with the lurch of youth, feeling for the sentimentality of musical habit the raucous ridicule always felt by healthy youth for things where age clings to invitated emotion,—the feeling of such things as Kipling's "Stalky & Co." Youth is not effusive, as age is; it feels more directly, with the

intensity of novel experience; it expresses itself bluntly, without frills. Here, though I hate to contradict so eminent a critic as M. Vuillermoz, is at least one common characteristic of the Six, in individually varied degrees. Post-war youth, in Europe at least, has seen its flower squandered, to salvage with blood and agony the paunchy incapacity of age. It has beheld the exposure of the giant myths of European culture and civilisation. It is sceptical, determined to get beneath mere phrases and sentiments, to eschew illusion, no matter at what cost of illusion. May not this, at least as much as any blatant desire for publicity, account for what M. Vuillermoz, like myself still susceptible to the influence of an earlier generation, terms the "blasphemies" of the Six?



Turning to the actual music of the Six, while the essential difference between the personalities comprising the group must be admitted, there are traits of similarity born of common impulses and convictions. M. Vuillermoz asserts that "Artistically there is no Group of Six, no doctrine of the Six, no music of the Six," bringing into this an implied comparison with the memory of the Russian Nationalist Five, and further asserting that "They, (the Six), were six composers of very diverse tendencies and contrary temperaments." He accepts the Russian Five as a group; where does he discern the unity of tendencies, similarity of temperament, correspondence of musical convictions among them? Today the publication of Moussorgsky's original score of *Boris Godounov* reveals the conflict of temperament between him and Rimsky-Korsakov, who imposed unwarrantable "corrections" of a semi-academic type on a probably less erudite and proficient, but more spontaneous creative method. What is there essentially in common between a Cui and a Borodine?

De facto, as a common element of Russian folk-melody underlay the derivation of the creative impulse of the Five, so, in the music of the Six, is a common element of contemporaneous popular melody,—what Jean Cocteau terms "the folk-music of

today." They have an assertive, whistle-at-the-street-corners tune-fulness, no more excluding the indulgence of personal preferences in given works and phases than did the folk-feeling of the Russians, yet shared by all. They are "tunny" composers, in contradistinction to the "thematic" type of manufactured melodists cultivated through German technical dogmas since the joyous days when Haydn, Mozart, and their like were spontaneously and fluidly lyrical.

Another common characteristic of the Six is that which must be compared to the use of flat colour — *matt* colour — in painting. Ravel can produce daring harmonic innovations and many things which, for those who misapprehend the classicism of his work, constitute the "modernity" worshipped by suburban coteries. Yet invariably his work has something of the luxuriantly sentimental feeling which approaches a kind of chiaroscuro in paint. In a word, what is difficult for M. Vuillermoz and others of his and my generation to realize is that with Ravel there is always a spiritual element dependent on associations of the immediate musical past, almost what one must term that of the *fin-de-siecle*, were that term not infested with a certain implied debility. He has retrospective moods which are not those of the self-consciously emergent-into-a-new-century type of the Six. And the wit of a Ravel, or even a Debussy, differs as much from that of the Six as does that of, say, a Whistler or a Wilde, from a Cocteau, Mencken, or McAlmon. Here the Six are at least traditional, since there is more that is truly Gallic in the guffaws of a Rabelais than in the cerebral gymnastics of the nineteenth century humorists.



The "scandal" in the stand of the Six against Debussy and Ravel may only be such for pontiffs and pundits. Youth today feels convincedly many things scandalising the sentiments of the elders. What we have to realize is that every decade in music means a fresh generation. Things march acceleratedly today. I am attracted by the works of Auric, Durey, Honegger, Milhaud, Poulenc and

Tailleferre in varying degrees. While I comprehend their reaction against Debussy and Ravel,—Stravinsky even years ago drastically indited the “evasiveness of impressionism,”—and see it as an inevitable expression of new currents of feeling dominating contemporary youth, I cannot deny my own sentiments towards the older musicians, purely those of generation, created by the place which they occupy in my personal musical experience and development.

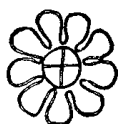
Before the Six, decades of preoccupation with the fastidious, the introspective, with moods rather than direct sensation, had disposed French musicians towards subjectivity and preciousness. Lazare Saminsky, in speaking of Ravel as “the true inheritor of the Rameau and Couperin traditions,” unwittingly puts his finger on the essential inner indecisiveness of Ravel. For Couperin and Rameau represent as opposite poles of conception, impulse, and artistic direction as do Bach and Beethoven correspondingly. In both cases the first musician was a purist, conceiving and creating in purely musical terms; in both cases the latter musician complicated and weakened the force of his inspiration by extra-musical preoccupations. Ravel’s mixed impulses always produce deflections of clarity, mar the purpose of his expressive direction. I dare affirm that, despite huge differences of idiom, due to intervening centuries, there is more of the spontaneous spirit, conceptual outlook, and melodic clarity of Couperin in some work of the Six,—such as even the naïve piano pieces of Poulenc,—than in the *Tombeau de Couperin* of Ravel, invested with the secondary sentiments of the antiquarian.



The true fore-runners of the Six, however, were not the eighteenth-century composers. Their tradition, with all due respect to M. Vuillermoz, has to be sought spiritually in Rabelais, to some extent in Villon, and in certain popularists such as Beranger. Poetically their modern correspondence came in Guillaume Apollinaire with his doctrine of “healthy vulgarity.” So the immediate musical ancestry of the Six is found in Chabrier,—designated

in some characteristic works, a "pot-house" musician by those who make an epithet of what is really in relation to conventional inspiration, a compliment. For, between two types of houses for pots, the pot-house has evolved more originality than the conservatory.

Erik Satie has also played his part in the genealogy of the Six, even where some of the Group would prefer to disavow this deflectedly, as they did with Debussy. There is musical, as sculptural material which itself contains inherent, intrinsic terseness of expression, and other which is diffuse in substance. Ravel can write something of a few bars; but the substance is imbued with sentiment rendering it anything but concise in feeling. Satie has at least influenced the Six towards substance producing the spiritual correspondence to acid flavour,—pungency which has inherent concision,—and there are agreeable, refreshing acids as well as the reverse.



M. Vuillermoz suffers from the idea that the real "modernist" must be revolutionary, another myth affecting the essentially academic mind, from Marxian Socialists onwards. The true modern may evolve as his surrounding conditions, imperceptibly. Take the descriptions of the six composers as outlined by M. Vuillermoz. If we have "Milhaud, a temperament classic and scholastic, *but possessed of a truculent instinct for brutal gaiety and popular inspiration,*" surely true critical insight should discern a need for analysing this apparent contradiction for its spiritual significance. Again, "Durey,—an amiable and gracious talent, but extremely timid and as removed as possible from any revolutionary spirit." There is the revolution of a Froebel in education, and of the "Terror" in eighteenth-century France. One must question M. Vuillermoz's derivation of Poulenc. Debussy plays a part, not always caricatured, but developed in those very traits of comedy and caricature wherein Debussy himself, as in the late piano "Pre-

ludes," seemed to feel premonitions of the fresh spirit and criticism of his own earlier sentimental habitudes. Equally with Debussy, however, Poulenc owes to Stravinsky,—notably in the Sonata for four hands; and surely even M. Vuillermoz will not question Stravinsky as an advance in spirit and substance on the impressionists.

M. Vuillermoz speaks of the Six as imposing only on amateurs. Albert Roussel, by whom an article appreciative of the Six appeared in 1919, is a *rara avis* in this category. Henri Clouard, Felix Delgrange, Jane Bathori, Ricardo Vines, Arthur Rubinstein, and Henri Collet also figure strangely there. Myself, being a natural snob, I am rejoiced to find myself among the amateurs, much of my life having passed in vain effort to glean intelligence from professionals unable to see past blinkers of technical precedent and prejudice.



The weakness of M. Vuillermoz's attack is its concentration on comparative externals, with little penetration into influences more profound. Certain revolutionarism the professionally critical and academic minds admit. It is in the accepted procedure of abstract technics. Thus we have the professors of modernity, externally garbed in the unprecedented; beneath, the same old Adam, so dully, masculinely intellectual as to have no Eve to excuse its blunders. As has been said by a writer in *Musical Opinion*—Mr. Blom—in self-conscious "modernity" there is "a belief that all that is required to cause a revolution in the world is to be harmonically new, that an uncommon harmonic background will avert anyone's attention from the fact that neither melody nor rhythm have received similar attention, to say nothing of that indefinable quality behind the mere notes, which reveals the composer's mentality." In the last phrase is the main essential. The Six can claim at least to have brought into French music fresh trends of rhythm and melody—something of the "healthy vulgarity" necessary after over-preciousness. M. Vuillermoz fails to comprehend how this outweighs

more systematic developments. Life can produce systems; systems cannot incubate life.

Mr. Vuillermoz has established the Six more than any direct propaganda on their part. He has made of them a legend instead of a contemporary trend evinced in a group; and in the classicality of all legends they must necessarily participate.

