

THE LEGEND OF THE SIX

BY EMILE VUILLERMOZ



THE musicians of France have learned, somewhat to their surprise, that musical circles in America have been the victims of a jest which, perpetrated on our boulevards, hardly seemed destined to travel beyond Paris. I refer to the amusing adventure of the group of young musicians who decided to charge into the struggle for life as a gang and see if organization would not offer the same advantages in artistic bouts as in football. My reference is to that small circle of young people who, employing on the Continent all the devices and daring of the kind of publicity reserved till now for the New World's mercantile products, have launched a commercial firm on the market, entitled "The Six."

As long as these amiable young people were content to amuse us with their more or less witty pranks, no one felt called upon seriously to oppose their little game. But, emboldened by the success of their audacious enterprise, "The Six" have undertaken an international propaganda so dishonest and so mannered that one can no longer accept philosophically a hoax which has ceased to be inoffensive.

A recent lecture series by Mr. Darius Milhaud in several American universities has paved the way for an attempt at colonization against which we feel it our duty to protest out of consideration for the dignity of your musical circles as well as of our own.

It has been the commercial cleverness of the "Group of Six" to claim the honor of fighting as the advance guard of contemporary musicians. Their strength lay in popularizing the legend that they represented the newest and the most daring tendencies in art today. Excellent strategy! The courage and disinterestedness of the pioneer always arouses the sympathy

of liberal spirits. And, on the other hand, the history of music has so often recorded the masses' ingratitude to the apostle and the prophet, that a halo immediately descends upon the head of any artist who pretends to bring to his contemporaries the revelations of a new gospel.

A cry to the astonished world: "We are six young artists, convinced, enthusiastic! We believe that the moment has come to bring a new ideal into the world! We aim to advance a stage beyond our ancestors! Here is the new music, the new method, here is an unpublished technique and a new notation, here is a harmonic and orchestral system all new! We are the new French music. Judge us!" By such means they assured themselves in advance of international sympathy. And under such circumstances it was quite evident that no one would dare take the responsibility of hindering the course of these explorers.

The truth, however, is quite different. The American public should be informed of the origin of this club where publicity takes rank above art.

Messrs. Honegger, Milhaud, Durey, Poulenc, Auric, and Miss Germaine Tailleferre were friends who, meeting by chance one night at the home of a musical critic, decided to form a friendly little circle, with no intention of artistic propaganda. In memory of a famous Russian group, "The Five"—and it was here that the first misunderstanding arose—the critic called these young people "The Six," deplorably misleading to the public, but infinitely profitable to the newcomers. The group of friends immediately became a "school," a party, a bloc representing a definite political bias.

They were six composers of very diverse tendencies, and contrary temperaments. No two of them had similar musical convictions.

Honegger is a traditionalist in music, whose artistic heredity is clearly Swiss and German, forceful, abounding and generous, a good pupil of Florent Schmitt and Richard Strauss. Beside him there is Milhaud, a temperament classic and scholastic, destined by nature to formal composition, but possessing a truculent instinct for brutal gaiety and popular inspiration which forced him systematically to re-shape his writing to fit his theories. Durey has an amiable and gracious talent full of

ingenuity and charm, but extremely timid and as removed as possible from any revolutionary spirit. This is equally true of Poulenc, who makes vain efforts to divert his frankly Debussyan inspiration by caricature and triviality. Auric, the youngest of all in years and in tendency, has composed so little that it is impossible to estimate him fairly. And then there is Miss Tailleferre, a charming Conservatoire student type, lacking positive personality, lacking any deep originality, but who develops, with a certain feminine dexterity, in an environment where nothing seems to compel restraint.

These six companions, determined to strike boldly at public opinion, began, therefore, to indulge in some noisy demonstrations. They proclaimed loud blasphemies against the masters of the preceding generation. They affected a profound disdain for a certain Debussy and a certain Ravel, at the same time claiming as patron saints the most unexpected people, such as Ambroise Thomas (!) and Erik Satie. Then, with the co-operation of several cubist painters, a few poets of a small coterie, and some amateurs, they gave a series of concerts and performances definitely staged for charlatanism and scandal. They systematically affected the whistle as a symbol. The immediate result was to give the credulous masses the impression of an effort in art bold and novel. Thus the stamp of "The Six" was quickly established.

This misunderstanding endured for two seasons, and it is only today that the public, a trifle confused, perceives that it has been misled. Artistically there is no "Group of Six," no doctrine of "The Six" no music of "The Six." Erik Satie, their patron saint and *menager*, has recently been impelled to publish the following statement: "As regards 'The Six,' I must admit that as a group they have ceased to exist. There is no longer a 'Group of Six.'" He adds, moreover, that in his opinion, three of these musicians, Honegger, Durey, and Germaine Tailleferre, never were qualified to be part of the association. And, to conceal the absurdity of this pitiful end of a bluff that serious musicians had never ceased denouncing, Erik Satie is now trying to launch a "School of Arcueil," made up of four young men who have not yet completed their studies. But the joke has been exploded for all time.

It is necessary to set forth these matters in detail because the behavior of "The Six" may have created dangerous illusions

among willing listeners in foreign countries. Here are six musicians among whom none is really devoid of talent, but not one of whom has the right to the revolutionary label which they all claim. Some of them are even fundamentally reactionary and retrograde. Because they have brandished a red flag, a certain public has given them confidence, but this is due to a destination illegally inscribed on their banners. Not one of these young people has brought a new element into the art of music, as is the case with Stravinsky or Schönberg, authentic revolutionaries, whose artistic contribution is solid and palpable. A few members of this little club, now forever dissolved, will some day perhaps achieve fame, but it will certainly not be through the formula announced in their manifestos.

In affirming that they had supplanted the Debussies and Ravels, whom they dismissed as "pre-war composers, hoary with age," and that their group represented the new modern ideal, they blandly concocted a whole category of delusions. The simple, unenlightened amateurs, who till then comprehended nothing of the subtleties of our true masters, learned with delight that they were privileged to neglect them, and were thus enabled to "jump a class." Outside of this group of ingenuous listeners, however, our young people have deceived no one, and today they see themselves forced to plunge into the musical whirlpool each as an individual, with the humiliation of a moral defeat, and the disgrace of having begun their careers with a gesture truly lacking in dignity.

