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# Anti-Debussyism and the Formation of French Neoclassicism

MARIANNE WHEELDON

In 1919 Jacques Rivière, the new editor of *La nouvelle revue française*, wrote to Igor Stravinsky asking him to contribute to the journal. Rivière suggested not only a topic—Stravinsky’s ideas on contemporary music—but also a possible perspective, by outlining the review’s aesthetic agenda: “I intend to direct the attention of the *Revue* to the anti-impressionist, anti-symbolist, and anti-Debussyst movement, which becomes more and more clear and seems to take the form and force of a counter current.”<sup>1</sup> As Rivière’s statement reveals, the “counter current” he observed possessed neither a name nor a positive attribute, but was defined entirely in negative terms: it was against impressionism, against symbolism, against Debussyism.<sup>2</sup> A second letter from Rivière to Stravinsky reiterates the invitation, this time mentioning Debussy specifically: “If the desire arose to write something not on yourself, but on others—Debussy, for example, or contemporary Russian music, or any other subject—think of me and do not forget that our pages are always open to you.”<sup>3</sup> Stravinsky never accepted Rivière’s offer to write for the journal, but in reviewing his correspondence almost twenty years later he commented on these letters, noting “how quickly fashion had turned against Debussy in the year after his death.”<sup>4</sup>

1. Letter of April 6, 1919, quoted in Dufour, *Stravinski et ses exégètes*, 143: “J’ai l’intention de diriger l’attention de la Revue sur le mouvement anti-impressionniste, anti-symboliste et anti-debussyste qui se précise de plus en plus et semble vouloir prendre la forme, et la force, d’un contre courant.” Unless otherwise acknowledged, all translations are my own.

2. In the postwar period both “Debussyism” and “impressionism” were used pejoratively: “Debussyism” referred to the prewar musical avant-garde and specifically to Debussy and his followers, whereas “impressionism” referred to a general aesthetic in music and the arts. Thus when “anti-impressionism” was used in discussions of music it cast broader aspersions, while “anti-Debussyism” was much more targeted in its critique. Although “Debussyism” was the more common term during Debussy’s lifetime and in the immediate postwar years, “impressionism” could be and was often substituted for it.

3. Letter of April 21, 1919, quoted in Dufour, *Stravinski et ses exégètes*, 152n22: “Cependant, si l’envie vous prenait d’écrire non plus sur vous-même, mais sur les autres, sur Debussy par exemple ou sur la musique russe contemporaine, ou sur tel autre sujet, pensez à moi et n’oubliez pas que nos pages vous sont toujours ouvertes.”

4. Stravinsky and Craft, *Conversations with Igor Stravinsky*, 57.

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This postwar sentiment of artistic rejection, especially with regard to the recently deceased Debussy, was crucial for the beginnings of neoclassicism but is often overlooked in musicological accounts. Much of the literature on neoclassicism focuses either solely on Stravinsky or on the Stravinsky-Schoenberg polemic that emerged in the mid-1920s. Yet both approaches tend to omit from consideration certain conditions that were essential for the earliest formation of the concept: the former neglects Stravinsky's engagement with the aesthetic priorities of postwar Paris and the avant-garde music scene in which he found himself after his emigration,<sup>5</sup> while the latter ignores the fact that many of the themes that would later crystallize under the banner of neoclassicism were first developed in opposition not to Schoenberg's music but to Debussy's. Recognizing the role of anti-Debussyism in the emergence of neoclassicism is necessary if we are to understand the initial impetus that catalyzed the movement and established its compositional priorities, instrumentation, and aesthetic. Rather than viewing neoclassicism as the first utterance of a new musical aesthetic synonymous with Stravinsky, this article presents it as the culmination of years of aesthetic debate that swirled around the issues associated with anti-Debussyism.

The sheer amount of ink spilled on the topic of anti-Debussyism testifies to its importance as a matter of musical concern, one that elicited comment from the major critics and composers of the period: literary figures Jacques Rivière and Jean Cocteau; Stravinsky and the more outspoken composers of Les Six (Georges Auric, Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, and Francis Poulenc); music critics and early supporters of Les Six Paul Collet and Paul Landormy; music critics and defenders of Debussy, including Charles Koechlin, Louis Laloy, and Émile Vuillermoz; and Russian émigré music critics and influential early writers on Stravinsky Boris de Schloezer and Arthur Lourié.<sup>6</sup> Retracing the threads of anti-Debussyist debate between 1919 and 1923—the year in which the term “neoclassicism” was first applied to Stravinsky—highlights important aesthetic preoccupations that were integral to the emergence of the neoclassicist aesthetic. Indeed, as this study argues, the prevalence and intensity of anti-Debussyist discourse was inextricably

5. A notable exception is Scott Messing's study, which is immersed in the contexts of the Parisian musical avant-garde, exploring the various expressions of *nouveau classicisme* in French music prior to the war and tracing the emergence of neoclassicism after the war; see Messing, *Neoclassicism in Music*. His etymology of neoclassicism in the immediate postwar years, however, leads him to art periodicals, where the term was employed in relation to the visual arts prior to its reappearance and redefinition as a descriptor for music in 1923. The present article intends to supplement Messing's study, tracing anti-Debussyist aesthetics in music during the crucial period (1919–1923) before neoclassicism was redefined.

6. Throughout this article I give priority to the published criticism and correspondence of the period rather than to retrospective accounts—autobiographies, biographies, or memoirs—published decades later. Thus it is not the clarity of hindsight that I seek to explore but the confusion of the moment, as critics and composers grappled to come to terms with and take ownership of the emerging musical aesthetic.

linked to the beginnings of neoclassicism: the backlash against the predominant musical aesthetic of the prewar years ran parallel to the emerging aesthetic of the postwar years, so much so that the prose and practice of anti-Debussyism can be seen to blend into the first formation of neoclassicism.

In reexamining the music criticism and compositions of the immediate postwar period, this article also hopes to shed light on the specific musical concerns that may have motivated Stravinsky's early neoclassical manner. Several scholars have observed that Stravinsky's neoclassicism arose at a crucial juncture in his personal life, the point at which he realized that a return to Russia as he knew it was impossible and that his émigré status of the war years was to become permanent. Tamara Levitz foregrounds Stravinsky's cultural dislocation in her discussions of neoclassicism, considering how artistically and intellectually Stravinsky had to come to terms with his status as a Russian composer working in France. From this perspective, neoclassicism is seen to represent "the desire to assimilate" and the need to "translate his life into French after his emigration."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Jonathan Cross speaks of the "continually shifting musical 'homes' [Stravinsky] occupied" and the personae he adopted "in order to project himself into the cultures in which he found himself," all of which can be "read as a concerted effort at assimilation."<sup>8</sup> If, as these scholars have observed, Stravinsky's neoclassicism represented a desire to assimilate culturally, this article speculates upon what that assimilation might have entailed musically. Viewing Stravinsky's oft-cited first neoclassical work, the Octet for Wind Instruments of 1923, through the lens of anti-Debussyism offers one such perspective, providing a cultural context, an aesthetic program, and a community of composers besides Stravinsky who were exploring similar concerns in their music.

Yet reinstating anti-Debussyism in the early history of neoclassicism raises a further question—namely, what became of this influence in subsequent years? Perhaps one reason that current narratives of neoclassicism omit its anti-Debussyist beginnings is that their chronologies pick up in the mid- to later 1920s, when its importance was waning. In fact, the relationship between the two terms "anti-Debussyism" and "neoclassicism" can be seen to be inversely proportional. As soon as the moniker "neoclassicism" entered into musical discourse, discussions of anti-Debussyism ceded their position of primacy in French musical life. This article examines the route through which anti-Debussyism, once central to debates on postwar musical aesthetics, gradually receded from the critical discourse. Schoenberg's growing presence on the international scene was crucial in this respect, as it compelled French writers to reconsider the recent musical past and to reshape it in accordance with current concerns. Consequently, narratives of neoclassicism evolved to incorporate Schoenberg into their cast of characters, moving

7. Levitz, *Modernist Mysteries*, 312.

8. Cross, "Stravinsky in Exile," 16, 7.

from a single-minded anti-Debussyism to imagining a dual heritage for neoclassicism—where anti-Schoenbergian and anti-Debussyist arguments commingled—and ultimately reaching a point where the figure of Schoenberg displaced that of Debussy entirely as the foil against which positions were staked.

What this reveals above all is that “neoclassicism” was a relational term, deriving much of its meaning from the way it was positioned against a series of imagined antagonists in composers’ and critics’ discourse.<sup>9</sup> Up to the mid-1920s this negative counterpart was Debussy or, more accurately, the perceived negative influence of Debussyism. Beginning in the mid-1920s writers tended to cast Schoenberg in this role. The fact that one antagonist could be exchanged so readily for another suggests that the adversary against which neoclassicism was defined was to some extent mutable. But the translation from anti-Debussyist to anti-Schoenbergian rhetoric was not without its repercussions. Musical attributes initially purported to counteract the clichés of Debussyism were transferred wholesale to negate Schoenberg’s influence, which in turn complicated descriptions of the nascent neoclassicism. Taking into account the ways in which anti-Schoenbergian rhetoric was overlaid upon an existing anti-Debussyist discourse reveals an important source of these inconsistencies. Furthermore, it also highlights the way in which the anti-Schoenbergian sentiment that emerged in the mid-1920s both drew upon and displaced the earlier anti-Debussyist one, leading to the erasure of anti-Debussyism from histories of neoclassicism.

### From Debussyism to Anti-Debussyism

When Rivière noted a burgeoning anti-Debussyist sentiment in his letter to Stravinsky of 1919, what he refrained from mentioning was the fact that he was in no small part responsible for its creation. Six years earlier his review of Stravinsky’s *Le sacre du printemps* had influenced two writers, Jean Cocteau and Boris de Schloezer, whose publications in the postwar years would play a decisive role in shaping anti-Debussyism and neoclassicism respectively.<sup>10</sup> Cocteau readily acknowledged that *Le sacre* overturned his aesthetic views, but it would appear that Rivière’s review of Stravinsky’s work had just as powerful an effect on him as the composition itself. On November 5, 1913, Cocteau wrote to Rivière, “I haven’t yet

9. The concept of relationality has gained prominence in recent years as a critical lens through which a number of themes central to music studies (identity, style, aesthetic ideology, etc.) may be reappraised. For one treatment of the subject, see Born, “For a Relational Musicology.” Pierre Bourdieu’s conceptualization of the “field of cultural production” as a relational space remains a key point of reference; see Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*.

10. Richard Taruskin has argued that Rivière’s writings also influenced Stravinsky and were a potential catalyst for the composer’s emerging neoclassicism: Taruskin, *Stravinsky*, 2:988–95.

had the pleasure of meeting you, but why hold oneself back? *Never* have I read a critical article more *beautiful* than yours on *The Rite of Spring*. I admire you and feel I must let you know.”<sup>11</sup>

What seemed to attract Cocteau to Rivière’s article was as much his representations of Debussyism as his observations on Stravinsky. For in addition to describing the choreography and significance of *Le sacre*, Rivière’s review presented a comparative musical analysis, identifying what he perceived to be new in Stravinsky’s work and contrasting it with Debussyism, then the predominant aesthetic of the Parisian musical avant-garde. Rivière focused on two facets of their music, orchestral timbre and melody, but by far the largest part of his discussion was devoted to the former. When describing what he called “the Debussy sound” he waxed lyrical about its “aura” and “halo,” characterizing its orchestral timbres as “shimmering rays,” a “vaporous trembling,” and “the floating of a thousand vague harmonies.” In contrast, Stravinsky’s timbre represented the complete negation of that sound: “it is stripped of all aura, it has lost that halo which we have become accustomed to seeing wrapped about orchestral music.” When Rivière described Stravinsky’s timbre for what it was rather than what it was not, he characterized it as “definite” and (quoting Stravinsky himself) “dry” and “clear.”<sup>12</sup>

Rivière also attempted to describe the inner workings of the two composers’ respective soundworlds. Debussy’s sound was “a mass, a compact fire which casts its rays,” spreading itself in allusions. Whereas this orchestral timbre enveloped the listener all at once, in “the form of a puff of wind [or] a complex sensation full of perfumes,” Stravinsky’s was a “system of movements, of distinct and definite voices,” which always remained “well detached [and] thoroughly disengaged.”<sup>13</sup> To all intents and purposes Rivière was comparing his perceptions of Debussy’s harmonic textures with those of Stravinsky’s linearity, but writing for the literary audience of *La nouvelle revue française* he did not use these terms, simply describing what he heard. With regard to their melodic writing, Rivière believed that Stravinsky’s displayed “an amplitude, an ease” that was entirely lacking in Debussy’s melody, which “hardly moved,” “crept along flat,” and expressed itself through “tiny exquisite inflections, by going up or down a half-step.” In one of the few comparisons that conveyed an explicit value judgment Rivière noted that Stravinsky’s melody had “lost that timidity and that over-aristocratic reticence which was beginning to make me impatient.”<sup>14</sup>

11. Quoted in Pasler, “New Music as Confrontation,” 148n26 (Cocteau’s emphasis).

12. Rivière, “Le sacre du printemps,” quoted in Bullard, “First Performance,” 2:270–72.

13. Quoted in Bullard, “First Performance,” 2:274–75.

14. Quoted *ibid.*, 2:275–76.

Rivière's review of *Le sacre* and especially his characterization of Debussyism would prove essential to the shaping of Cocteau's ideas, all the more so as it is doubtful whether the aspiring author was familiar with Debussy's aesthetic or even with the major currents of contemporary music. Prior to 1913 Cocteau's musical tastes ran to the conservative. As Jann Pasler has observed, his family's subscriptions to the Opéra and the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire would have introduced him to the music of the past, as opposed to venues such as the Opéra-Comique, the Concerts Colonne, or the Société Nationale de Musique, where new music (including Debussy's) was performed.<sup>15</sup> Cocteau's first venture for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, the scenario for *Le dieu bleu* of 1912, would not have helped to inform his musical tastes, as he collaborated on it with Reynaldo Hahn, a leading salon composer rather than one associated with the avant-garde. And although Cocteau reviewed two stage productions with music by Debussy in this period—*Le martyr de Saint Sébastien* (1911) and the Ballets Russes production of *L'après-midi d'un faune* (1912)—these writings neglected to mention the composer: Malou Haine notes that Cocteau's review of *Le martyr* revolved entirely around the contributions of the lead dancer Ida Rubinstein, while his review of *Faune* likewise concentrated solely on Nijinsky, neither of these publications including even an acknowledgment of Debussy's contribution, let alone an appreciation of his music.<sup>16</sup>

Rivière's review, therefore, in combination with the premiere of Stravinsky's *Le sacre*, would appear to have performed the important function of bringing Cocteau up to date, providing him with a crash course in contemporary musical aesthetics. It may even have served as a model for the way a nonspecialist could engage with and write about modern music—yet another reason why it resonated so strongly with Cocteau. Rivière (like Cocteau) was neither a professional music critic nor a trained musician yet was able to convey the details of Debussy's and Stravinsky's respective aesthetics through his formidable literary gifts, eschewing all technical description and creating instead evocative metaphors for their music. His example may have encouraged Cocteau, who had been fashioning himself as a "critique chorégraphique" in this period,<sup>17</sup> to consider contemporary music as a field for further exploration.

Five years later, with the publication of *Le coq et l'arlequin* (1918), Cocteau had developed strong opinions on the subject of new music and Debussy in particular, opinions that can be seen to adapt many of Rivière's earlier descriptions of Debussyism. The major difference between the two

15. Pasler, "New Music as Confrontation," 142–45. Pasler notes that subscriptions to the Opéra and the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire accurately reflect the Cocteaus' social standing as a wealthy bourgeois family.

16. Haine, "Claude Debussy," paragraphs 2–9.

17. *Ibid.*, paragraph 5.



writers lay in their modes of expression. Contrasting Debussyism to *Le sacre*, Rivière's tone was comparative as he enumerated what he perceived to be the differences between the reigning and emerging musical aesthetics of 1913. In comparing the two tendencies he remained largely evenhanded, being both a former advocate of Debussy's aesthetic as well as a recent convert to Stravinsky's. As he put it in 1913, "without violence, without ingratitude, but very clearly, Stravinsky is separating himself from Debussyism."<sup>18</sup> In Cocteau's hands, many of the same ideas assumed a different cast, as he transformed Rivière's poetic metaphors for Debussyism into pejorative statements and his musical observations on *Le sacre* into directives for contemporary composition. Thus, where Rivière had spoken in positive terms of the "atmosphere," "aura," and "delicious halo" of Debussy's timbre, Cocteau's declaration that "Debussy established once [and] for all the Debussy atmosphere" suggested that there was nothing more to be done in this direction. Where Rivière had rhapsodized about Debussy's orchestral timbres, describing them as a "flight of sounds," a "delicate vapor," and a "complex sensation of perfumes," Cocteau insisted, "Enough of clouds, waves, aquariums, water-sprites, and nocturnal scents; what we need is a music of the earth, every-day music."<sup>19</sup>

While Cocteau redeployed Rivière's descriptions of Debussyism as negative critique, he put Rivière's observations on Stravinsky's music to more positive use. Whereas Rivière had simply praised the "amplitude and ease" of Stravinsky's melody and the "distinct and definite voices" of his orchestral textures, Cocteau treated these qualities as models to be adopted: "In music, line is melody. The return to design will necessarily involve a return to melody." Likewise, whereas Rivière had cited Stravinsky's proclivity for the dryness and clarity of wind instruments over the too evocative strings, Cocteau turned this from a descriptive statement into a prescription: "We may soon hope for an orchestra where there will be no caressing strings. Only a rich choir of wood, brass, and percussion."<sup>20</sup> Taking Cocteau's linguistic operations into account, all the specifically musical directives found in *Le coq et l'arlequin* can be seen to derive wholly or in part from Rivière's article of five years earlier. Other scholars have noted the strong parallels between the two texts: Pasler states that Cocteau was "heavily influenced by the antiimpressionist argument in Jacques Rivière's review of *The Rite*," while Nancy Perloff puts it more strongly when she states that "Cocteau tended to lift words and even entire arguments from Rivière's discussion of Impressionism."<sup>21</sup> The similarity between the two texts did not go unnoticed

18. Rivière, "Le sacre du printemps," 707: "Sans violence, sans ingratitude, mais très nettement, Stravinsky se dégage du debussysme."

19. Cocteau, "Cock and Harlequin," 18, 19.

20. *Ibid.*, 17, 22.

21. Pasler, "New Music as Confrontation," 147; Perloff, *Art and the Everyday*, 11.



at the time, either, André Schaeffner writing in 1925 that many of the ideas of Cocteau's *Le coq et l'arlequin* were to be found in germ in Rivière.<sup>22</sup>

Matters of literary style notwithstanding, the substance of Rivière's and Cocteau's writings on Debussyism played an important role in redefining the way it was viewed by critics and composers. Both writers tapped into well-established discourses on the subject of Debussyism, but in describing what they perceived to be its main features they subtly transformed its original meaning. Critiques of Debussyism prior to the war were much more narrowly defined: they referred to a collection of harmonic and timbral innovations attributed to the composer and, more negatively, seen to pervade the compositions of his younger contemporaries. Harmonically, prewar Debussyism was summarized as a predilection for dominant ninths, parallel progressions, and whole-tone scales and their resultant augmented triads. But by the early 1920s critics and composers had expanded this handful of characteristic sonorities into what they deemed a pernicious harmonic emphasis, one that was responsible for the impoverishment of melody in recent French music. Likewise, the specific orchestral techniques that had become clichés of prewar Debussyism—harp glissandi, divisi strings, muted brass—were subsumed into the notion of a vague and nebulous soundworld, one that lacked clarity and construction.

Rivière's and Cocteau's recalibrations of Debussyism may simply have been a function of the fact that neither wrote about music in technical terms and that, by necessity, their respective metaphors and aphorisms were quite broad in their connotations. Yet their views of Debussyism gained traction, as many writers chose to elaborate upon this characterization rather than dispute it, a move no doubt motivated by the numerous obituaries and articles that attempted to summarize Debussy's career in schematic fashion after his death in 1918. Paul Landormy, for example, in his obituary for the composer, encapsulated Debussy's compositional approach in a single word, "verticalisme." In contrast to earlier periods of music, he stated, when the interest resided in the unfolding of the melodic line and was understood horizontally, "all the interest of Debussyst music consisted in its simultaneous agglomerations of sounds, which evaporated the moment they appeared, and were understood *vertically*."<sup>23</sup> Two years later, Paul Collet elaborated further when he stated that Debussy was still "horizontal" in the composition of his String Quartet (1893) and *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902), but thereafter "abandoned contrapuntal writing in order to assert the triumph of vertical or pure harmonic writing in his masterworks."

22. Schaeffner, "Jacques Rivière," 170n4: "On la relève dans le *Coq et l'Arlequin* de Jean Cocteau (éditions de la Sirène, 1918), dont maintes idées se retrouvent en germe chez Rivière."

23. Landormy, "Claude Debussy," 2: "Tout l'intérêt de la musique debussyste consistait dans les agglomérations simultanées de sons, qui s'évanouissent dans le moment même où elles naissent, et se lisent *verticalement*" (Landormy's emphasis).

Collet went so far as to claim that Debussy “deliberately suppressed melody in favor of harmonic succession” in these later works.<sup>24</sup>

A concomitant of the expansion in the meaning of “Debussyism” was an inversion of its musical priorities, and hence the beginnings of the new anti-Debussyism that Rivière noted in 1919. Indeed, it was precisely this oversimplification of the characteristics of Debussyism that allowed the postwar generation of composers and critics to overturn the musical priorities of the preceding generation. In the realm of harmony this inversion was a straightforward matter: as Landormy declared, “the return to counterpoint, in opposition to Debussyst verticalism, is one of the rallying cries of the young school.”<sup>25</sup> Collet concurred when he stated that “the revolution of ‘Les Six’ offers only a new use of the old *natural* principle of counterpoint.”<sup>26</sup> Some of the most insightful observations came from Debussy’s supporters, who quickly perceived that the musical values they had defended for the past twenty years were being overturned. Louis Laloy, for example, recognized the devaluation of Debussyst harmony by the composers of Les Six: “They prefer the dryness of intersecting melodies made up of rigid lines to the fullness of sonorities or, in technical terms, counterpoint to harmony.” But he also added that their counterpoint was far from traditional: “this counterpoint is extremely simple and basically consists of pedals, which cling stubbornly to a note despite the modulation of the other parts, or [involve] imitation at dissonant intervals, such as the diminished fifth and diminished octave.” Laloy concluded, “they use counterpoint to obtain perpetual dissonance, which they decorate with the harshest of sonorities.”<sup>27</sup>

The inversion of ostensibly Debussyst values continued apace in the realm of timbre. As cited above, Cocteau was influential in imbuing timbre with a pejorative sense when he characterized the “Debussy atmosphere” as blurred (“flou”) and indistinct (“vague”). In 1920 he announced its successful banishment in a preview article for a performance of Milhaud’s *Le bœuf sur le toit* when he listed recent compositions of Auric, Poulenc, Satie, and

24. Collet, “La musique chez soi” (February 20, 1920), 2: “l’auteur de *Pelléas* est encore *horizontal*”; “Ce n’est que par la suite que Debussy abandonna l’écriture polymélodique pour affirmer, en des chefs-d’œuvre, le triomphe de l’écriture verticale ou harmonique pure. . . . [Le style de Debussy] supprime délibérément la mélodie au profit des successions d’accords.”

25. Landormy, “Le déclin de l’impressionnisme,” 105: “le retour au contrepoint, par opposition au verticalisme debussyste, est un des cris de ralliement de la jeune école.”

26. Collet, “La musique chez soi” (February 27, 1920), 2: “La révolution faite par les ‘Six’ ne nous apporte de nouveau qu’un usage nouveau de l’ancien principe *naturel* du contrepoint” (Collet’s emphasis).

27. Laloy, “Le bœuf sur le toit,” 1–2: “Qu’à la plénitude des accords ils préfèrent la sécheresse de mélodies entrecroisées en lignes inflexibles ou, en termes techniques, le contrepoint à l’harmonie. . . . [I]ls usent du contrepoint pour obtenir de perpétuelles dissonances, qu’ils décorent de sonorités aussi crues que possible. Mais ce contrepoint est fort simple, et consiste essentiellement en pédales qui s’obstinent dans un ton malgré la modulation des autres parties, ou en imitations à des intervalles discordants tels que la quinte ou l’octave diminuées.”

Milhaud as examples of “the new music that comes after *blurred* music,” bringing with it a sound that he categorized as “*incisive music*.”<sup>28</sup> Laloy, reviewing the same concert, simply registered that “in the orchestra, brass instruments dominate,” and noted the overuse of “a new effect, the sliding trombone glissando,” all of which soon became “painfully monotonous.”<sup>29</sup> Émile Vuillermoz, summarizing the general tendencies in orchestration in 1923, observed that “instrumental hierarchies have for some time been overturned by a certain snobbism,” whereby “the percussion instruments, long humiliated by the almighty strings, have taken their brutal revenge on their aristocratic oppressors.” According to Vuillermoz, this reversal of orchestral priorities explained why “today’s composers . . . had to diminish the importance of the violins, which are always ready to introduce into a sonorous ensemble this sentimental element, voluptuous trembling, and languid sensuality.”<sup>30</sup>

While reactions to Debussyst harmony and timbre led to the most tangible musical results, Debussy’s broader aesthetic proclivities were also a target of postwar anti-Debussyism. Only a few concrete aspects of this aesthetic, however, could undergo a comparable inversion of value. When Cocteau complained of a “picturesqueness” and “exoticism” in music, for instance, together with a “Debussy-ist abuse of ‘precious’ titles,” the implication was that the simple excision of these elements would result in an anti-Debussyst aesthetic.<sup>31</sup> To achieve similar ends the composers of Les Six regularly availed themselves of popular music: by incorporating the everyday sounds of the circus, music hall, and fair, they attempted to deflate the perceived pretension of Debussyst aesthetics and bring it back down to earth. Auric acknowledged that audiences might be just as weary of the jazz band and circus as of cathedrals and sunsets, but the former were necessary to counter “the clouds and mermaids of Debussyism.”<sup>32</sup> These examples aside, critiques of Debussyst aesthetics tended to be more rhetorical than musical, and this rhetoric was rendered all the more injurious by its imprecision. Auric was outspoken in his disdain for Debussyst aesthetics, although he

28. Cocteau, “Avant ‘Le bœuf,’” 1: “Comme le Fox-Trot d’Auric, les Cocardes de Poulenc et les pièces montées de Satie, *Le Bœuf sur le Toit* est un merveilleux exemple de la musique nouvelle qui arrive après la musique à l’estompe: *La musique à l’emporte-pièce*” (Cocteau’s emphasis).

29. Laloy, “Le bœuf sur le toit,” 2: “Dans l’orchestre, ce sont les cuivres qui dominent; ces messieurs se sont avisés d’un effet nouveau, qui est un glissando du trombone à coulisse. . . . [C]ède bientôt à une pénible monotonie.”

30. Vuillermoz, “*Noces*—Igor Strawinski,” 71: “Un certain snobisme a bouleversé depuis quelque temps la hiérarchie des instruments. . . . [L]es instruments de la batterie, longtemps humiliés par la toute-puissance des instruments à archet, ont pris leur revanche brutale sur leurs aristocratiques oppresseurs. . . . Les compositeurs d’aujourd’hui . . . devaient forcément diminuer l’importance des violons, toujours prêts à introduire dans un ensemble sonore cet élément sentimental, ce frémissent voluptueux et cette sensualité languide.”

31. Cocteau, “Cock and Harlequin,” 11, 15.

32. Auric, “Théâtre des Champs-Élysées,” 224: “des nuages et des sirènes du debussysme.”

took care to mitigate the damage by separating his critique of the aesthetic from that of the composer himself: “One is not fair every day and I have tried to be fair with regard to Claude Debussy. That said, how does one express the mediocrity of all that arises from his aesthetic. . . . The entirety of music published in France over the last ten years—excluding the works of Debussy, Albert Roussel, and Maurice Ravel—sufficiently demonstrates a corruption of strength and a perversion of feeling perhaps without precedent.”<sup>33</sup> Poulenc likewise distinguished between the composer’s own music and that which he inspired: “Weary of Debussyism—I ADORE Debussy—weary of impressionism (Ravel, Schmitt), I desire a healthy, clear, and robust music, music as decidedly French as Stravinsky’s is Slav.”<sup>34</sup>

Despite the fact that Auric and Poulenc exempted Debussy from censure, their comments represented something of a hollow tribute to the composer: both professed a high regard for him but not for his aesthetic. When Poulenc stated his desire for a music that was “healthy, clear, and robust,” the implication was that Debussyism (and impressionism) represented exactly the opposite, something unhealthy, vague, and insipid. Auric similarly absolved Debussy’s works from criticism yet lambasted the mediocrity, perversion, and corruption of his aesthetic. A similar sentiment appeared in Milhaud’s writings when he described Debussy’s musical style as “perfect” for him but detrimental for French music as a whole.<sup>35</sup> In extolling the composer in this manner, they adopted a strategy that allowed them to be critical of the prewar avant-garde while remaining outwardly respectful of Debussy’s leadership position within it. This was not simply an aesthetic matter but also a pragmatic one. By declaring that Debussyism had led French music into an impasse, or, as Milhaud declared, “into a blind alley,”<sup>36</sup> they sequestered the prewar avant-garde from the future of French music, thereby effectively clearing a space for their own endeavors.

This redefinition of Debussyist aesthetics was not the work of Poulenc, Auric, and Milhaud alone. As in the case of the lexical transformations of Debussyist harmony and timbre, influential critics reiterated and reworked their views with varying degrees of nuance. Charles Koechlin, for example, noted quite accurately that young composers avoided at all costs “the refinements of the aesthete” and fought against what they perceived to be the

33. *Ibid.*: “On n’est pas juste tous les jours et j’ai essayé de l’être vis-à-vis de Claude Debussy. Après cela comment exprimer la médiocrité de tout ce qui relève de son esthétique. . . . L’ensemble de la musique publiée en France au cours de ces dix dernières années, si l’on en isole, avec celles de Debussy, les œuvres d’Albert Roussel et de Maurice Ravel, montre assez une corruption de la force et une perversion du sentiment peut-être sans précédent.”

34. Quoted in Landormy, “M. Francis Poulenc,” 2: “Las du debussysme,—j’ADORE Debussy,—las de l’impressionnisme (Ravel, Schmitt) je souhaite une musique saine, claire et robuste, une musique aussi franchement française que celle de Stravinsky est slave.”

35. Milhaud, “Evolution of Modern Music,” 548.

36. *Ibid.*

“degeneration of Debussyism.”<sup>37</sup> Landormy summarized the position of Les Six in stronger terms as a violent reaction “against all that which continues to seduce the composers of the preceding generation in the . . . art of Claude Debussy,” an art he described as “fluid, lifeless, and sometimes spineless, but of a captivating and unsettling charm.”<sup>38</sup> And Dominique Sordet seized upon this line of argument, omitting any distinction between Debussyism and Debussy and simply fashioning an ad hominem attack: “Debussy—unfortunately for music—proved to be contagious and left behind him, together with a wake of beauty, an immense backwash of disorder. The author of *Pelléas* is responsible for everything bad that has been produced for a quarter of a century.”<sup>39</sup>

Considered together, the critiques of prewar Debussyism highlighted three musical domains—harmony (or verticalism), orchestral timbre, and general aesthetic—that would form the basis of a postwar, anti-Debussyist reaction. Yet the three were delineated with varying degrees of specificity. The least clearly defined was the rejection of a Debussyist aesthetic, which postwar composers and critics considered to be overrefined and precious, vague and spineless, unhealthy and dangerous. A more specific distinction was drawn with the renunciation of a Debussyist orchestration, which was countered with a hard-edged sound made up primarily of wind instruments and percussion. Most precise of all was a total reorientation of contemporary composition under the auspices of counterpoint, in which one specific musical procedure was used to combat another—counterpoint versus harmony. This parameter received the most attention, in large part because it drew upon a long-established practice that was immediately recognizable and provided the most obvious means by which to take leave of a so-called Debussyist verticalism.

## The Practices of Anti-Debussyism

Many of the critiques of prewar Debussyism were ill defined, and it was left to the young composers of the Parisian avant-garde to flesh out a coherent anti-Debussyist practice, both in their published writings and in their

37. Koechlin, “Les jeunes et l’évolution musicale,” 211: “[Leur art] évite à tout prix les raffinements d’esthète. . . . [I]ls ‘luttent victorieusement’ contre ce qui leur semble la dégénérescence du debussysme.”

38. Landormy, “Le déclin de l’impressionnisme,” 103: “la réaction violente qui s’accomplit actuellement chez nos tout jeunes musiciens contre tout ce qui séduisait encore les compositeurs de la génération précédente dans l’art fluide, sans éclat, et parfois presque sans consistance, mais d’un charme si prenant, si troublant, qu’était l’art de Claude Debussy.”

39. Sordet, review of *Musiques d’aujourd’hui*, 2: “Debussy—malheureusement pour la musique—se révélait contagieux et laissait après lui, avec un sillage de beauté, un immense remous de désordre. L’auteur de *Pelléas* a sa responsabilité dans tout ce qui s’est fabriqué de mauvais depuis un quart de siècle.”

compositions. Study of the 1923 programs of the Concerts Jean Wiéner—the premier venue for contemporary music in Paris—reveals several ways in which such an anti-Debussyism could be cultivated. Figure 1 shows a poster advertising four upcoming concerts in Wiéner’s chamber music series.<sup>40</sup> The two programs of January 1923 went ahead as scheduled, offering first performances of compositions by Poulenc, Milhaud, and Auric alongside recent works by Satie, Tailleferre, and Stravinsky. The two concerts advertised for May 1923, however, never materialized.<sup>41</sup> As seen in Figure 1, the premiere of Stravinsky’s Octet was originally planned for the first of the May concerts and was to have shared the stage with Satie’s *Trois morceaux en forme de poire* and two recent chamber works scored for wind instruments: Auric’s *Caprice* and Poulenc’s Sonata for Clarinet and Bassoon. Later that month Stravinsky’s *Pièces pour clarinette* (1919) was to have appeared alongside the premieres of Honegger’s *Contrepoints* and Milhaud’s sixth string quartet.<sup>42</sup>

While these programs were never billed as manifestations of anti-Debussyism, they were nonetheless perceived as such, as is evident from the critical reception of the first concert. Two reviews demonstrate how critics shaped this event into a postwar commentary on the prewar avant-garde. Vuillermoz, for example, wrote, “It is said that impressionism is dead, that the technique of Fauré, Debussy, and Ravel is outdated, that the admirers of these musicians are doddering old men incapable of understanding the genius of young, budding stars. So be it. A day will come, says another publicity specialist, when a new technique will victoriously replace that of the impressionists and throw off backward Ravelists. But it is easy to see that this day has not yet arrived.”<sup>43</sup> In response to Vuillermoz, Auric also oriented his review in terms of the prewar avant-garde, in this instance offering an indictment of all that it represented: “If one pictures prewar musical stagnation, with so

40. Figure 1 is reproduced from Wiéner, *Allegro appassionato*, 52. A composer and pianist (and one half of the Wiéner-Doucet jazz piano duo), Jean Wiéner established a chamber music series that frequently performed the music of Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Webern, Satie, Milhaud, and Poulenc, and less frequently that of Auric, Honegger, and Tailleferre. Between 1921 and 1923 the Concerts Wiéner presented many important premieres, including the Parisian premiere of Schoenberg’s *Pierrot lunaire* on January 12, 1922, and the first concert performance of Stravinsky’s *Mavra* on December 26 of the same year.

41. Taylor, “*La musique pour tout le monde*,” Appendix B, provides the programs of the Concerts Jean Wiéner.

42. Some of these works were programmed in later concerts: Satie’s *Trois morceaux* were performed on June 2, 1923, as were Gounod’s Wind Quartet and Milhaud’s sixth string quartet. Poulenc’s Sonata for Clarinet and Bassoon was heard on June 5, together with Wiéner’s Suite, Stravinsky’s Three Pieces for Clarinet, and Honegger’s *Contrepoints*. The Octet was performed on November 7 at an all-Stravinsky concert. See *ibid.*

43. Vuillermoz, “Concerts Jean Wiéner,” 74: “On nous dit que l’impressionnisme est mort, que la technique de Fauré, de Debussy et de Ravel est périmée, que les admirateurs de ces musiciens sont des vieillards cacochymes incapables de comprendre le génie des jeunes gloires naissantes. Soit. Un jour viendra, en effet, comme dit un autre spécialiste de la publicité, où une technique nouvelle remplacera victorieusement celle des impressionnistes et déroutera les ravelistes attardés. Mais il est facile de voir que ce jour n’est pas encore venu.”



**CONCERTS JEAN WIÉNER**  
ADMINISTRATEUR : A. DANDELOT

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**THÉÂTRE DES CHAMPS-ÉLYSÉES**

Concerts **JEAN WIÉNER**

*JEUDI 4 Janvier 1923, à 9 heures*

**Erik SATIE - Fr. POULENC**

I. *La belle excentrique* ..... ERIK SATIE  
*l'Orchestre sous la direction d'André CAPLET*

II. i. *Mouvement Perpétuel* ..... FR. POULENC  
ii. *Nocturne n° 4* ..... ERIK SATIE  
iii. *Descriptions automatiques* ..... —

III. **SONATE** pour Clarinette et Basson ..... FR. POULENC  
**MM. CAHUZAC et HERMANS.** (1<sup>re</sup> Audition)

IV. **SOCRATE** ..... ERIK SATIE  
Drame en 3 parties pour voix et orchestre  
d'après les dialogues de Platon  
(traductions VICTOR COUSIN)  
**MADAME BALQUERIE.**  
*l'Orchestre sous la direction d'André CAPLET*

V. **SONATE** ..... FR. POULENC  
pour Cor, Trompette et Trombone (1<sup>re</sup> Audition)  
**MM. ENTRAIGUES, FOVEAU et TUDESQ.**

**THÉÂTRE DES CHAMPS-ÉLYSÉES**

Concerts **JEAN WIÉNER**

*LUNDI 29 Janvier 1923, à 9 heures*

I. *Sonate* ..... Germaine Tailleferre  
**Germaine TAILLEFERRE**  
**Robert SOETENS.**

II. *Le Chant du Rossignol* ..... IGOR STRAWINSKY  
**Le PLEVELA.**

III. *Sonatine* pour flûte et piano ... DARIUS MILHAUD  
(Première Audition)  
**Jean WIÉNER - Louis FLEURY.**

IV. *Sonatine* ..... GEORGES AURIC  
(Première Audition)  
**Jean WIÉNER.**

V. *Quatuor à Vent* ..... ROSSINI  
**La Société MODERNE D'INSTRUMENTS A VENT.**  
**MM. FLEURY, CAHUZAC, ENTRAIGUES**  
**et DHÉRIN.**

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**CONCERTS JEAN WIÉNER**  
*EN MAI 1923*

**1<sup>ER</sup> CONCERT**

I. *Caprice* ..... GEORGES AURIC  
pour instruments à vent (1<sup>re</sup> Audition)  
**La Société D'INSTRUMENTS A VENT**

II. **Morceaux en**  
**forme de poires** ..... ERIK SATIE  
**MM. Erik SATIE et Jean WIÉNER**

III. *Sonate* p<sup>r</sup> clarinette et basson . FR. POULENC  
**MM. CAHUZAC et DHÉRAIN**

IV. *Octuor* ..... IGOR STRAWINSKY  
pour instruments à vent (1<sup>re</sup> Audition)

V. *Quatuor* ..... GOUNOD  
pour instruments à vent  
**La Société MODERNE D'INSTRUMENTS A VENT**

**2<sup>ME</sup> CONCERT**

I. *Suite* (Violon et Piano) .... JEAN WIÉNER  
(1<sup>re</sup> Audition)  
**René BENEDETTI et Jean WIÉNER**

II. *Pièces*, pour Clarinette .... IGOR STRAWINSKY  
**M. CAHUZAC**

III. *Contrepoints* ..... ARTHUR HONEGGNER  
pour flûte, hautbois, violon  
et violoncelle (1<sup>re</sup> Audition)

IV. *Pièces* pour Violon et Piano **ANTON WEBERN**  
(1<sup>re</sup> Audition)

V. *6<sup>me</sup> Quatuor à Cordes* ... DARIUS MILHAUD  
(1<sup>re</sup> Audition)

VI. *Sonate* pour 2 pianos ..... MOZART  
**M<sup>me</sup> YOURS GULLER**  
**M. Jean WIÉNER.**

Figure 1 Poster showing the programs for the Concerts Jean Wiéner, January and May 1923



many poor plagiarists of Debussyist treasures and Ravelist jewelry, it is agreeable and charming to witness the road traveled and to throw a final farewell to those who lag behind.”<sup>44</sup> But what was articulated in these works that was so redolent of an anti-Debussyist aesthetic and a rejection of the prewar avant-garde? Examination of several of the compositions featured in these programs—Poulenc’s *Sonata for Clarinet and Bassoon* (1922), Honegger’s *Contrepoints* (1922), and Stravinsky’s *Octet* (1923)—in conjunction with the published pronouncements of those involved provides some insight into the way composers endeavored to put the prose of anti-Debussyism into musical practice.

In 1920, when Poulenc listed the common ideas of Les Six as “the reaction against vagueness, the return to melody, the return to counterpoint, precision, simplification,” he was simply listing the main musical attributes of anti-Debussyism.<sup>45</sup> Poulenc’s statement is notable for being one of the earliest to identify counterpoint as a compositional procedure prioritized by Les Six, but from a personal perspective its inclusion is surprising. Unlike his colleagues who had studied in the counterpoint classes of Georges Caussade (Auric and Tailleferre) and André Gédalge (Milhaud and Honegger) at the Paris Conservatoire,<sup>46</sup> Poulenc never attended this institution and had no formal training in either counterpoint or composition. But while in 1920 his emphasis on counterpoint may simply have been a reflection of the ideas of others, a year later it became more than mere rhetoric. At the end of 1921 Poulenc embarked on a series of private lessons with Charles Koechlin in order to acquire technical skills in harmony, counterpoint, and orchestration. His first sustained period of study occurred between November 1921 and July 1922, and included more than thirty-eight hours of instruction in two-part species counterpoint and Bach chorale harmonization.<sup>47</sup> Poulenc’s correspondence of this period repeatedly acknowledged the extent to which he had benefitted from these lessons. In September 1922 he wrote to Koechlin, “I cannot tell you how much my work with you this winter has made me more flexible, as much from the point of view of counterpoint as from that of harmony. I am now impatient to work with you on three and four parts very strictly, and on fugue. . . . My *Sonata for Clarinet and Bassoon* is finished. I am happy with it. Its counterpoint is sometimes quite entertaining.”<sup>48</sup>

44. Auric, “Les concerts,” 75: “Si l’on se représente la stagnation musicale d’avant-guerre, tant de pauvres pilleurs du trésor debussyste, de la bijouterie raveliste, il est plaisant et savoureux de mesurer le chemin parcouru et de jeter, aux retardataires, un dernier adieu.”

45. Quoted in Landormy, “Darius Milhaud,” 2: “la réaction contre le flou, le retour à la mélodie, le retour au contrepoint, la précision, la simplification.”

46. See Halbreich, *Arthur Honegger*, 26, 29.

47. See Orledge, “Poulenc and Koechlin,” 13–14, 16.

48. Poulenc, *Correspondance*, 175: “Je ne saurais assez vous dire combien mon travail d’hiver avec vous m’a assoupli, tant au point de vue contrepoint qu’harmonie. J’ai grande hâte

Yet when one examines the Sonata for Clarinet and Bassoon for evidence of this newly acquired contrapuntal facility it becomes apparent that Poulenc's conception of counterpoint is extremely broad. While his postwar sonatas put into practice many of the musical attributes of anti-Debussyism—instrumental textures stripped down to two or three lines, scored exclusively for wind instruments, and presented as absolute music in the genre of the sonata—their counterpoint might be more accurately described as essays in linearity or horizontalism.<sup>49</sup> In contrast to the precepts of species counterpoint—one of the subjects of his study with Koechlin—the instrumental lines of the clarinet and bassoon are rarely equal, presenting rather a clear hierarchy between melody and accompaniment. Instead of there being independent motion between the voices, the bassoon part is usually subservient to that of the clarinet, featuring successions of ostinati, and when the bassoon line does move it often parallels the clarinet. Of Poulenc's six sonata movements written in 1922 only one section briefly alludes to traditional counterpoint, in a short passage featuring imitation. In the third movement of the Sonata for Clarinet and Bassoon the bassoon drops its more customary accompanimental figurations to introduce a four-measure subject, which the clarinet then freely imitates at the interval of a ninth against a countersubject in the bassoon (see Example 1, mm. 41–47). These measures are striking for being so singular and so short-lived. Thereafter, the instruments move together in a descending pattern until measure 57, where the clarinet and bassoon resume their more typical homophonic texture, “cantando” and “en accompagnant” respectively. Poulenc's token tribute to imitative counterpoint indicates that, while he was undoubtedly aware of traditional contrapuntal procedures, they were not his primary concern. At this point in his career his conception of counterpoint was not predicated on the practices of a music-historical past, but was rather a carefully cultivated anti-Debussyism. His private and published writings of this period perhaps make this distinction clear. In a letter to music critic Paul Collaer concerning the latter's review of Satie's *Socrate*, Poulenc commented that he had “spoken too little of *Socrate's* *contrapuntal* reaction against *harmony*. It is here that we see the beginning of the horizontal music that will follow on from perpendicular music.”<sup>50</sup> Since one is hard pressed to find any evidence of counterpoint in *Socrate*, Poulenc's recognition of a “*contrapuntal* reaction” in this work had less to do with traditional contrapuntal procedures and more to do with what *Socrate* represented

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maintenant de faire avec vous du 3 et 4 parties très serré et de la fugue. . . . Ma *Sonate clarinette et besson* est finie. J'en suis content. Le contrepoint en est parfois assez divertissant.”

49. Poulenc's postwar sonatas include the Sonata for Two Clarinets (1918), the Sonata for Clarinet and Bassoon (1922), and the Sonata for Horn, Trumpet, and Trombone (1922).

50. Letter of May 15, 1920, in *Correspondance*, 107: “trop peu parlé de la réaction *contrapunctique* de *Socrate* contre l'*harmonie*. C'est là le commencement de la musique horizontale qui succédera à la musique perpendiculaire” (Poulenc's emphasis).

**Example 1** Poulenc, Sonata for Clarinet and Bassoon (London: Chester, 1924), mvt. 3, mm. 40–58 (the clarinet part is here notated at pitch). A sound recording of this example is included in the online version of the **Journal**.

40

Clarinet in B $\flat$

Bassoon

*f subito mf*

43

*f*

*mf*

46

*f*

49 *ra - len - tir peu à peu*

53 *rallentir encore* *silence*

*mf*

57 **Andante - Mouvt romance** ( $\text{♩} = 72$ )

*cantando*

*mf*

*en accompagnant*

vis-à-vis Debussyism. As Poulenc would later write in *Le ménestrel*, Satie's composition "surprised and moved us" in an era in which "music was still obscured by an entire arsenal of Debussyist and Ravelian procedures."<sup>51</sup>

Poulenc's characterization of Satie's *Socrate* is telling, as twenty years earlier the older composer had also looked to counterpoint as a means by which to reorient his musical path in the aftermath of *Pelléas et Mélisande*. According to Jean Cocteau, Satie had lamented after the opera's premiere that "nothing more can be done in this direction; I must search for something else or I am lost."<sup>52</sup> Satie's career path after *Pelléas* was certainly unusual and one can speculate about the degree to which Debussy's opera was the catalyst. After *Pelléas*'s first season Satie composed very little, completing only the *Trois morceaux en forme de poire* (1903). Then in 1905, at the age of forty and after a further year of struggling with composition, he made the startling decision to return to school, enrolling at the Schola Cantorum in the counterpoint classes that were a prerequisite of the composition program.<sup>53</sup> As a self-taught composer, Satie was undoubtedly prompted to make this decision by insecurities over his compositional training, insecurities that were perhaps compounded by the towering technical achievement of *Pelléas et Mélisande*. After seven years of study Satie drew on this newly acquired expertise in idiosyncratic fashion, in some instances offering "his own concepts of the chorale and fugue," but more generally displaying a "superior craftsmanship and a new linear approach."<sup>54</sup> Perhaps it was under the aegis of Satie, a generation later, that Poulenc followed a similar path. Confronted with the legacy of the recently deceased Debussy, Poulenc likewise turned to an intensive study of counterpoint in an effort to counter the aesthetics of Debussyism and its purported harmonic or verticalist emphasis.

While those members of Les Six who published their views on counterpoint agreed on its significance, it becomes evident that for each composer it signified something entirely different. For Honegger, counterpoint was neither a new endeavor nor a fresh aesthetic direction: rather, it was simply an integral and important component of his compositional training. He spent seven years in Gédalge's counterpoint class (1911–18), explaining in a letter to his parents that "at the Conservatory the composition class is

51. Poulenc, "Festival d'œuvres posthumes," 246: "Le langage si pur et si lumineux de cette œuvre, à une époque où tout un arsenal de procédés debussyistes et raveliens obscurcissaient encore la musique, nous surprit et nous émut."

52. Jean Cocteau, "Fragments d'une conférence sur Eric [sic] Satie (1920)" (1924), quoted in Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, 55.

53. After receiving his diploma in counterpoint in 1908 Satie continued to take composition classes at the Schola Cantorum until 1912, although he never completed the program. For Satie's program of study between 1905 and 1912, see Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, 81–104.

54. *Ibid.*, 95.

effectively the fugue class, since a fugue is part of the exam.”<sup>55</sup> Thus it comes as no surprise that in a letter of 1920 he reiterates the importance of counterpoint and, on this occasion, makes explicit its anti-Debussyist stance: “The musical direction I have taken is a reaction against what is called musical impressionism and is, in my opinion, a return to linear construction (contrapuntal) as opposed to harmonic construction.”<sup>56</sup>

Unlike Poulenc’s, Honegger’s notion of counterpoint hews closely to Bach, and in some cases resembles an exercise in stylistic imitation. In his *Trois contrepunts* (1922) the second movement “Choral” offers a near pastiche of Bach, and the simple adjustment of a few unprepared or unresolved dissonances would restore it to straightforward eighteenth-century counterpoint. The third movement of the same work, “Canon sur basse obstinée,” is more contemporary in its harmonic language, but even here the three upper instruments appear in strict imitation, Honegger maintaining and manipulating the same texture throughout the movement (see Example 2). In the first section (mm. 1–18) the English horn, violin, and piccolo present the first subject in turn at the same pitch, one measure apart, superimposed over an ostinato performed by the cello; the next subject (m. 7) retains this texture, but the instruments enter in imitation in reverse order; finally, the original subject and order return (m. 12) to close the first part of the ternary form. After a central, contrasting section (mm. 19–32) featuring a new subject, a new bass pedal, and imitation at the distance of two measures, the return of the opening material (mm. 33–48) repeats the imitative procedures of the first section but with all the entries occurring in reverse order. By comparison with Poulenc’s one brief allusion to imitative counterpoint, Honegger’s entire movement is relentlessly and strictly imitative throughout. As he acknowledged in 1920, “I have a perhaps exaggerated tendency to seek out polyphonic complexity. My great model is J. S. Bach.”<sup>57</sup>

In contrast, Auric and Milhaud couched their respective views of counterpoint in terms of the polytonality each was exploring in the early 1920s. Auric presents his conception as a “counterpoint of chords” (“contrepunt d’accords”) and, like Honegger, defines it in opposition to a now exhausted Debussyist “harmonic system”: “The miracle of a Debussy is that he revitalizes, incredibly rejuvenates the harmonic system and leads it in a direction such that, developed to its furthest limits, it can only erase itself in the face of a totally new system, where counterpoint and harmony will come together

55. Quoted in Halbreich, *Arthur Honegger*, 31.

56. Letter to Paul Landormy of August 3, 1920, in Honegger, *Écrits*, 34: “La directive musicale que je me suis tracée est une réaction contre ce qu’on appelle l’impressionnisme musical et qui est, à mon avis, un retour à la construction linéaire (contrapuntique) par opposition à la construction harmonique.”

57. Quoted in Landormy, “MM Honegger et Georges Auric,” 2: “J’ai une tendance peut-être exagérée à rechercher la complexité polyphonique. Mon grand modèle est J. S. Bach.”

**Example 2** Honegger, *Trois contrepoints* (Copenhagen: Wilhelm Hansen, 1926), mvt. 3, mm. 1–16. A sound recording of this example is included in the online version of the **Journal**.

**Presto** (♩ = 96)

The musical score is presented in four systems, each with four staves. The instruments are Piccolo (top), Violin, English Horn, and Violoncello (bottom). The time signature is 6/8. The tempo is marked 'Presto' with a quarter note equal to 96 beats per minute. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The score begins with a Piccolo part that is mostly silent, followed by a Violin part starting at measure 3 with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The English Horn and Violoncello parts also enter at measure 3, with the cello playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The score continues through measures 4, 7, and 16, showing complex counterpoint between the instruments.

## Example 2 continued

The musical score is presented in two systems, each containing four staves. The first system begins at measure 10 and the second system begins at measure 13. The notation is complex, featuring a variety of rhythmic patterns, accidentals, and phrasing slurs. The bass line consists of a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The upper staves show more intricate melodic and harmonic development, with some notes marked with 'x' or other symbols.

in an unexpected manner, each achieving complete freedom.”<sup>58</sup> Rather than focusing on the horizontal as a means by which to counter the vertical, Auric presents harmony and counterpoint as autonomous entities, no longer interdependent but henceforth able to function freely. In this regard Auric’s “counterpoint of chords” resembles Milhaud’s harmonic polytonality, in which chords of multiple tonalities could be superimposed, unencumbered by any consideration of their combination in the vertical dimension. But in the postwar years Milhaud began to foreground counterpoint in his polytonal

58. Auric, “La musique: quelques maîtres contemporains,” 76–77: “Le miracle d’un Debussy c’est qu’il renouvelle, rafraîchit incroyablement le système harmonique et le conduit dans une voie telle que, développé jusqu’à ses limites extrêmes, il ne pourra plus que s’effacer devant un nouveau système totalement neuf, où s’allieront d’une façon imprévue le contrepoint et l’harmonie, arrivés chacun à leur complète libération.”



compositions, moving from a harmonic polytonality to his own brand of contrapuntal polytonality: “Instead of superimposing chords, or series of chords, we have at our disposal melodies written in several keys that are superimposed through a play of counterpoint.”<sup>59</sup> This “play of counterpoint” became crucial, for in the absence of harmony as a rationale for the combination of voices in the horizontal dimension, Milhaud looked to contrapuntal procedures as a way of organizing and imparting logic to his compositional language. As Barbara L. Kelly observes, his “attachment to the fugue and canon as a vehicle for polytonality confirms his tendency to work systematically and to set in motion musical mechanisms, which are then worked out according to defined rules.”<sup>60</sup> Milhaud describes one such mechanism at work in his *Cinq études pour piano et orchestre* (1920): “The third *Etude*, ‘Fugues,’ consists of four simultaneous fugues, one for the wind instruments in A, one for the brass in D Flat, one for the strings in F, while the one for the piano is in two parts based on the notes common to all three keys and states the theme and answer of the fugue while the orchestral fugues provide the *divertimenti*, and *vice versa*.”<sup>61</sup> Despite its title Milhaud’s movement actually has less to do with fugue and more to do with an extreme experiment in polytonality, contrapuntal polytonality providing the means by which to sustain three keys simultaneously for the forty-eight measures of this short piece.

Regardless of its motivation—be it linearity, stylistic pastiche, harmonic or contrapuntal polytonality—counterpoint assumed a central position in the compositions of Les Six in the early 1920s. While the group is perhaps better known for its iconoclasm during these years, in works that incorporated popular music and humor, they also assiduously cultivated the genres of absolute music, and it is in these smaller chamber and orchestral works that one can more readily perceive how they attempted to put anti-Debussyst principles into compositional practice. Efforts to distance themselves from the prewar avant-garde on the one hand, and to place their individual imprint on these hallowed genres on the other, led the composers of Les Six to pursue what they perceived to be a radically different direction from their Debussyst predecessors: each work engaged the smaller chamber music genres, stripped down to the minimum number of (preferably wind) instruments, shorn of all descriptive titles, and emphasizing the role of counterpoint.<sup>62</sup>

59. Milhaud, “Polytonalité et atonalité,” 39: “Au lieu de superposer des accords ou des enchaînements d’accords, nous avons en mains comme élément des mélodies écrites en plusieurs tons et qui se superposent par un jeu de contrepoint.” For more on Milhaud’s transition from harmonic to contrapuntal polytonality, see Kelly, *Tradition and Style*, 147–68, and Médicis, “Darius Milhaud,” 587–90.

60. Kelly, *Tradition and Style*, 150.

61. Milhaud, *My Happy Life*, 91.

62. Kelly also focuses on the Parisian musical avant-garde in the early 1920s, considering Poulenc’s sonatas, Milhaud’s chamber symphonies, and Wiener’s concert series (1921–23). Throughout she foregrounds counterpoint—and more broadly, linearity—as a shared compositional

Such musical priorities shed light on Stravinsky's *Octet for Wind Instruments* (1923), which Richard Taruskin has described as "the composition with which the hard-core neoclassic phase is conventionally said to commence."<sup>63</sup> But the *Octet* can be described equally well as Stravinsky's engagement with the anti-Debussyist aesthetics then circulating within the Parisian musical avant-garde. This is perhaps not surprising, since Stravinsky found a congenial community among the "chic" gang of Cocteau, Satie, and the composers of Les Six.<sup>64</sup> While the choice of genre and instrumentation in the *Octet* cannot be attributed to anti-Debussyist aesthetics alone—indeed, the preference for wind instruments was also Stravinsky's—the prominent role given to counterpoint was unprecedented in Stravinsky's oeuvre.<sup>65</sup> The *Octet's* contrapuntal emphasis, in combination with its scoring for wind instruments, its use of small-scale forms, and its status as absolute music partook of the main elements of anti-Debussyism and accorded well with what the composers of Les Six were attempting to achieve in their inversion of Debussyist values.

For Stravinsky, as for Honegger, counterpoint clearly signaled Bach. Angelo Cantoni's analyses have convincingly demonstrated that the textures of the *Octet* are permeated with references to eighteenth-century contrapuntal procedures such as imitation, stretto, model-sequence, and characteristic instrumental figurations, especially those that resemble compound melody. Taking the contrapuntal manipulations of the opening theme of the *Allegro* as one such example, Cantoni shows how, following its initial presentation by almost the entire ensemble (Example 3a shows the first trumpet part), the theme is repeated in the first trumpet but now with stretto in the second trumpet (doubled an octave higher by the flute) at the interval of an octave and at a distance of two beats (see Example 3b). This is immediately followed by yet another contrapuntal procedure, this time model-sequence, using the opening eight notes of the main theme as the model (here with an ascending octave in place of the original seventh), which then sequences down by whole step twice (see Example 3c). Toward the end of the movement the return of the main theme gives rise to another sequential passage, appearing first in octaves in the two trumpets on E $\flat$ , then down a step in the

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concern of Satie, Les Six, Stravinsky, and their attendant critics. See Kelly, *Music and Ultra-Modernism*, esp. 154–62, 167–72.

63. Taruskin, *Stravinsky*, 2:1600.

64. See Stravinsky, letter to Ernest Ansermet, August 11, 1922, in Stravinsky, *Selected Correspondence*, 1:157. Poulenc's correspondence of 1922 also testifies to the growing friendship with Stravinsky. The two men shared compositions, discussed recent articles, and socialized (with Auric) when Stravinsky was in Paris; see Poulenc, *Correspondance*, 163, 168–69, 177.

65. Stravinsky's preference for wind instruments was acknowledged in print as early as 1913: "I have . . . avoided the over-evocative strings, representative of the human voice with their crescendi and diminuendi, and I have cast in the foreground the woodwinds, more dry, more distinct, less rich in facile expression, and for that very reason, more moving in my view": Igor Stravinsky, "Ce que j'ai voulu exprimer dans *Le sacre du printemps*," quoted in Bullard, "First Performance," 2:6 (Stravinsky's emphasis).

**Example 3a** Stravinsky, Octet (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1924), mvt. 1, mm. 42–48, trumpet 1. A sound recording of this example is included in the online version of the **Journal**.

**Example 3b** Stravinsky, Octet, mvt. 1, mm. 49–56, trumpets 1 and 2. A sound recording of this example is included in the online version of the **Journal**.

**Example 3c** Stravinsky, Octet, mvt. 1, mm. 57–65, trumpet 2. A sound recording of this example is included in the online version of the **Journal**.

second trumpet on D $\flat$  and then C, and finally in the first trombone on B $\flat$  (see Example 3d). The final appearance of the main theme repeats the opening stretto of measures 49–56 in the same instrumentation, the distance of one measure being created by rhythmic augmentation of the opening pitch (see Example 3e).<sup>66</sup> In this way Stravinsky displays a new contrapuntal treatment with each return of the opening theme to showcase his technical facility.

66. See Cantoni, *La référence à Bach*, 61, 73, 78. See also Taruskin's analysis of the Octet, which he describes as "a revival of certain aspects of the phonology and morphology of eighteenth-century music . . . but with constructive principles that bear the mark

**Example 3d** Stravinsky, Octet, mvt. 1, mm. 152–63, trumpet 2 and trombone 1. A sound recording of this example is included in the online version of the **Journal**.

152 Tpt. 2

158 Trb. 1

**Example 3e** Stravinsky, Octet, mvt. 1, mm. 167–75, trumpets 1 and 2. A sound recording of this example is included in the online version of the **Journal**.

167 Trumpet 1

167 Trumpet 2

171

While the presence of counterpoint in Stravinsky's Octet has been widely acknowledged, scholars have been less forthcoming as to the reasons for its appearance. Cantoni offers several hypotheses. One centers upon an article of 1921 by American critic Edwin Evans, which commented upon the "remarkable affinity between Bach and Stravinsky" and stated that Stravinsky was "becoming the Bach of today." Cantoni speculates that these flattering remarks "may have reached the ears (if not the eyes) of the composer, given his personal contact with the critic for almost ten years," and thus could have influenced Stravinsky's future development.<sup>67</sup> Another hypothesis points to the composer's close relationship with Swiss conductor Ernest Ansermet,

of Stravinsky's older neoprimitivist style": Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, 478–88, here 480.

67. Cantoni, *La référence à Bach*, 47: "il n'est pas improbable que cette affirmation soit parvenue aux oreilles (sinon aux yeux) du compositeur, compte tenu de son contact personnel avec le critique depuis presque dix ans."

whose regular programming of Stravinsky's music with the masterworks of the past "could have encouraged Stravinsky to confront 'past masters,' most notably Bach and Beethoven."<sup>68</sup> But if Stravinsky was sensitive to such critical commentary and concert programming, it stands to reason that he would be even more attentive to discourses circulating in his immediate musical context. Indeed, there is no need to look to an American publication or the concert programs of the *Orchestre de la Suisse Romande* to find a rationale for Stravinsky's embrace of counterpoint. It is far more likely that he was influenced by what was being written and performed around him in Paris following his emigration in 1921.

Other explanations also downplay the Parisian musical milieu in which Stravinsky found himself in the 1920s, preferring to see his stylistic development as proceeding from a trajectory already immanent in his earlier works.<sup>69</sup> This is true of narratives that center on the composer's transition from his Russian period to his neoclassical one. Cantoni, for instance, attributes the increasing prominence of counterpoint to a rejection of Stravinsky's Russian style that, by necessity, forced a new compositional direction: "In the *Octet* none of these 'ethnic' references is present, which implies a total renewal of the melodic writing."<sup>70</sup> Richard Taruskin summarizes the situation in a similar way, stating that "what was mainly noticed about the *Octuor* . . . was the renunciation of national character in favor of a musical Esperanto with a lexicon heavily laced with self-conscious allusions to Bach, the perceived fountainhead of 'universal' musical values."<sup>71</sup> But situating counterpoint within an incipient neoclassicism fails to get to the heart of why Stravinsky chose this procedure of all possible compositional procedures either to renounce his national character or to renew his melodic writing.

Rather than framing the question of Stravinsky's counterpoint by looking forward to the composer's neoclassical style, we might hearken back to an already fully fledged anti-Debussyism, which since 1920 had repeatedly valorized counterpoint as a means of countering an unhealthy verticalism in recent French music. From this perspective, Stravinsky's adoption of counterpoint simply engaged with the predominant aesthetic of the postwar musical avant-garde in Paris. The contrapuntal treatment of themes throughout the movements of the *Octet* consistently provided cues that prompted the

68. *Ibid.*, 49–50: "les choix des programmes de concert de l'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande réalisés par Ansermet . . . aient pu encourager Stravinsky à une 'confrontation' avec les 'maîtres du passés,' et en premier lieu avec Bach et Beethoven."

69. Maureen Carr's recent examination of Stravinsky's path to neoclassicism, for example, focuses on his compositional process through a detailed study of the sketches from the years 1914–1925. In order to shed light on his stylistic development she looks to contemporaneous experiments in literature and the visual arts, touching briefly upon possible parallels in Russian formalism, Russian futurism, cubism, and purism. See Carr, *After the Rite*, 7–34.

70. Cantoni, *La référence à Bach*, 61: "Dans l'*Octuor*, aucune de ces références 'ethniques' n'est présente, ce qui implique un renouveau total de l'écriture mélodique."

71. Taruskin, *Stravinsky*, 2:1607.

listener to attend to its melodic or horizontal dimension rather than its harmonic or vertical one. And such cues appeared to have been successful: after the first performance Roland-Manuel observed that Stravinsky had returned to “linear construction and thematic development,” no longer “under the aegis of Pergolesi” but “through the invocation of the God Bach,” while Nadia Boulanger noted the work’s “precise, simple, and classic lines,” adding that the score of the Octet would satisfy “enthusiasts of counterpoint, those who love to reread the old masters of the Renaissance and Johann Sebastian Bach.”<sup>72</sup> More than any other musical parameter it was this continued attention to the horizontal orientation of counterpoint that drew Stravinsky’s Octet into a dialogue with contemporaneous works by Poulenc, Honegger, Auric, and Milhaud, who used differing conceptions of counterpoint to achieve the same end.

If the contrapuntal style of Stravinsky’s Octet came as a surprise to audiences familiar with his Ballets Russes compositions, it was very much in accord with contemporary compositional practice for those more attuned to the Parisian musical avant-garde.<sup>73</sup> Comparison of the premiere of the Octet as originally planned and the premiere as it actually took place highlights the differences between these two Parisian musical worlds. The Octet was first performed on October 18, 1923, at the Paris Opera, where it was placed between two other premieres in the first half of the program, a symphony by “Polaci”<sup>74</sup> and Prokofiev’s Violin Concerto, the second half consisting of Beethoven’s *Eroica* Symphony. In this context Stravinsky’s intimate chamber work was dwarfed by the vast spaces of the opera house and the orchestral music with which it was programmed. Had the first performance taken place within the Concerts Jean Wiéner, as originally scheduled, Stravinsky’s chamber work would have fitted well with the other premieres featured in its programs, sounding very much of a piece with the anti-Debussyist and

72. Roland-Manuel, “L’Octuor de Stravinsky,” 25: “à la construction linéaire et au développement thématique. Mais le jeu qui se jouait naguère sous l’égide de Pergolèse, se poursuit maintenant sous l’invocation du dieu Bach”; Boulanger, “L’Octuor de Stravinsky,” 25: “lignes précises, simples, classiques. . . . [L]a partition de l’Octuor est de celles qui apportent cette satisfaction de l’esprit et des yeux que connaissent les passionnés de contrepoint, ceux qui aiment à relire les vieux maîtres de la Renaissance et Jean-Sébastien Bach.” For translated extracts from reviews by Roland-Manuel and Boulanger, as well as by Boris de Schloezer (who also invoked “Bach and the eighteenth-century masters”), see Messing, *Neoclassicism in Music*, 132–33.

73. Compare, for example, the reviews of the Octet’s premiere cited by Taruskin with those by Roland-Manuel and Nadia Boulanger cited above. Taruskin records the sense of shock experienced by many that evening and quotes Aaron Copland’s description of a “general feeling of mystification that followed the initial hearing” of the Octet: Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, 447. In contrast, Roland-Manuel and Boulanger, both of whom were fully cognizant of the developments of the Parisian avant-garde, expressed little surprise in their reviews.

74. The work in question is likely the Symphony in D by Bernardo Polazzi, an eighteenth-century Italian composer.

contrapuntally inclined compositions that were to have been performed.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, the presence of the Octet would undoubtedly have raised the aesthetic stakes of these concert programs. Unlike his younger colleagues, whose works represented student or post-student experiments in style, Stravinsky was already a celebrated figure in the musical world by this point, and his adoption of counterpoint was elevated by the experience and virtuosity of a composer twenty years their senior. Yet it was arguably in the context of Wiéner's chamber music series that Stravinsky's new contrapuntal emphasis would have made more sense.<sup>76</sup> In this work Stravinsky engaged with the anti-Debussyism of Les Six and specifically with counterpoint, the cornerstone of their aesthetic.

If in the Octet Stravinsky embraced the aesthetics of Les Six, he also participated in their mode of critical discourse in discussing it. While he was certainly no stranger to forthright self-promotion, his subsequent article on the Octet, of January 1924, bears the imprint of Cocteau's publications—*Le coq et l'arlequin* (1918) and the issues of *Le coq* (1920)—both in its anti-Debussyist rhetoric and in its emulation of the provocative, telegraphic manner in which Cocteau and Les Six often delivered their aesthetic pronouncements. Among other topics, Stravinsky reiterated his preference for the “rigidity of the form” provided by wind instruments as opposed to the warmth and vagueness of string instruments, and his belief that the “literary” and the “picturesque” had no place in music. Three declarations on the role of counterpoint in the Octet invoked the most crucial tenet of anti-Debussyism: “Form, in my music, derives from counterpoint. I consider counterpoint as the only means through which the attention of the composer is concentrated on purely musical questions. Its elements also lend themselves perfectly to an architectural construction.”<sup>77</sup> If, as Levitz has observed, Stravinsky had to “translate his life into French following his emigration,” the Octet and Stravinsky's subsequent essay on it provide some specific musical details of what that assimilation might have entailed. The fact that he retained the French term “Octuor” throughout the essay, despite the English translation of every other musical term, was not a mere oddity but most likely signaled the source of his new aesthetic direction. That aesthetic did not belong to a long-standing French musical

75. Stravinsky's decision to reschedule the Octet's premiere was due to the influence of Sergey Koussevitzky (the organizer of the Paris Opera concert) and the large fee he offered the composer for the Octet's first performance; see Walsh, *Stravinsky*, 371–72.

76. By the time Wiéner managed to schedule a performance of the Octet it appeared in an all-Stravinsky program, and the opportunity to situate it alongside other premieres of the Parisian avant-garde had passed. This concert took place on November 7, 1923, under Stravinsky's direction and included the *Histoire du soldat*, an aria from *Mavra*, the Octet, and the *Berceuses du chat*. See Stravinsky, *Selected Correspondence*, 1:169, and Taylor, “*La musique pour tout le monde*,” Appendix B.

77. Stravinsky, “Some Ideas,” 574, 577, 576.



tradition, but was of a much more recent vintage. In engaging the ubiquitous anti-Debussyism of postwar Paris, Stravinsky allied himself with the latest musical avant-garde. And one notable consequence of this engagement with contemporaneous musical priorities was the heightened presence of counterpoint, in both the Octet and Stravinsky's words about it.

## From Anti-Debussyism to Neoclassicism

It was within this context of anti-Debussyism that music critic Boris de Schloezer first introduced the term "neoclassicism." His article of 1923 represents a watershed moment, not only in providing the term and associating it with Stravinsky but, as Scott Messing has pointed out, in construing neoclassicism in a positive sense. Prior to 1923 the term had had a pejorative cast, being used to critique late nineteenth-century German composers' continued adherence to symphonic and instrumental musical forms.<sup>78</sup> Fully cognizant of its prewar derogatory sense, Schloezer proceeded tentatively when he associated Stravinsky with "what one could call neoclassicism, if the original meaning of the term had not been corrupted." He goes on to orient the various currents of contemporary music around two figures: "the activity of the majority of young composers is currently the result of these two forces—Schoenberg-Stravinsky—acting in an inverse sense."<sup>79</sup> While Schloezer's pairing of Schoenberg and Stravinsky was not new, the clarity of his description of their aesthetic opposition was unprecedented. Table 1 extracts the language he employed to contrast the aesthetics, timbres, and forms of the two composers: "Stravinsky is the most anti-Wagnerian of musicians," Schloezer pronounced, whereas Schoenberg's "art is essentially *Tristan*-esque"; Stravinsky's music is a "system of sounds," organized according to "purely musical affinities," by comparison with Schoenberg's "outpouring of emotions"; and Stravinsky's thought concerns only the "musical plan," while Schoenberg's "never attains absolute autonomy."<sup>80</sup>

78. Messing, *Neoclassicism in Music*, 87–88.

79. Schloezer, "La musique," 247: "ce qu'on pourrait appeler le néoclassicisme, si ce terme n'avait pas été déformé dans sa signification primitive. . . . [L']activité de la plupart des jeunes compositeurs est actuellement la résultante de ces deux forces agissant en sens inverse: Schoenberg-Stravinsky." For a translation of a larger portion of Schloezer's article, see Messing, *Neoclassicism in Music*, 129–30.

80. Schloezer, "La musique," 247–48: "[l'art de Schoenberg] est en son essence tristanesque. . . . Il s'agit de . . . perfectionner la langue sonore qui sert à répandre les émotions. . . . La musique de Schoenberg . . . ne parvient jamais à l'autonomie absolue. . . . Stravinsky est le plus antiwagnérien des musiciens. . . . Sa *Symphonie pour instruments à vents* . . . n'est qu'un système de sons, qui se suivent et s'agrègent selon des affinités purement musicales; la pensée de l'artiste ne se meut que dans le plan musical." Schloezer's article responds to performances of Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire* (1912) and Stravinsky's *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*

**Table 1** Schloezer's opposition of Stravinsky and Schoenberg (1923)

Stravinsky	Schoenberg
anti-Wagnerian, anti- <i>Tristan</i> , classicism, neoclassicism	Wagnerism, <i>Tristan</i> -esque, expressionism, Romanticism, neo-Romanticism
sonorous language conveys a system of sounds, purely musical affinities	sonorous language conveys emotions, feelings, psychological experiences
absolute music	extramusical ideas and images

Schloezer's article has been duly recognized as an important document in the history of neoclassicism. But what has not been observed before is the manner in which it builds upon and updates many of Rivière's observations of 1913. This indebtedness was acknowledged by Schloezer himself when he published a tribute to Rivière shortly after his death in 1925, in which he revisited his colleague's review of *Le sacre* and marveled at its prescience in outlining the new aesthetic: "The word is not there, but 'this devotion to the object' that Rivière speaks of in 1913 is what today, after ten years of exegesis, we call the 'realism' or 'objectivism' of Stravinsky."<sup>81</sup> Not only did Schloezer provide the term "neoclassicism" for Stravinsky's aesthetic in 1923, but he also updated Rivière's comparative analysis of Stravinsky and Debussy to reflect the contemporary music scene of a decade later. That is, in his depiction of aesthetic opposites (Table 1) he simply substituted one composer for another, moving Schoenberg into the position formerly occupied by Debussy. With one exception this was a straightforward exchange, as illustrated in Table 2: Debussyism, impressionism, and symbolism were replaced by the various "isms" used to encapsulate Schoenberg's musical aesthetic; the atmosphere and vagueness of Debussy's sonorous language were replaced by the emotions, feelings, and psychological experiences of Schoenberg's; and, like Debussy, Schoenberg was censured for drawing inspiration from outside the realm of music. The only facet of Debussyism that did not have a one-to-one corollary in Schoenberg's music was Debussyism's ostensible overemphasis on harmony or verticalism, which had in

(1920), although by the end of his discussion of each work he is describing their "art" in more general terms.

81. Schloezer, "Jacques Rivière," 629: "Le mot n'y est pas, mais 'ce dévouement à la chose' dont parlait Rivière en 1913, c'est ce que nous appelons aujourd'hui, après dix ans d'exégèse—le 'réalisme' ou l'objectivisme' de Stravinsky." Prior to this passage Schloezer recalled his many conversations with Rivière about Stravinsky: "Here, I touch upon certain personal memories, because Stravinsky's art was the object of many intense but friendly discussions between us that were extremely profitable for me. . . . It was that we each felt and judged this art from a different point of view. In the end, however, we were not as far from each other as it seemed" ("Ici je touche à certains souvenirs personnels, car l'art de Stravinsky fut l'objet de maintes discussions ardentes, mais amicales entre nous et qui me furent extrêmement profitables. . . . C'est que nous sentions et jugions cet art chacun d'un point de vue différent. Mais en somme, nous n'étions pas si éloignés l'un de l'autre qu'il nous semblait," 628).

**Table 2** Similar aesthetic positions occupied by Debussy and Schoenberg

Debussy	Schoenberg
Debussyism, impressionism, symbolism	Wagnerism, <i>Tristan</i> -esque, expressionism, Romanticism, neo-Romanticism
sonorous language conveys atmosphere, vagueness	sonorous language conveys emotions, feelings, psychological experiences
extramusical ideas and images	extramusical ideas and images
harmonic emphasis, verticalism	

turn led to the valorization of counterpoint. And it is this gap in the transfer from Debussy to Schoenberg that would be responsible for much confusion in later accounts of neoclassicism, to which I will return shortly.

Schloezer's reframing of the musical field did not go uncontested: Auric swiftly responded to him in a column for *Les nouvelles littéraires*. What irritated Auric most was Schloezer's statement that the music of the majority of young composers was influenced by either Schoenberg or Stravinsky. Auric demanded to know who these young composers were and, more importantly, whether they were indeed French. He then promptly dismissed Schoenberg's influence, declaring, "it would be truly foolish to have set aside Wagner in order to embrace the romantic Schoenberg."<sup>82</sup> But his comment regarding Stravinsky is illuminating: "The good lesson of Stravinsky, for those who know how to listen to him, is that he impels us, more strongly than any other, toward a path which, at all times, was our own."<sup>83</sup> In other words, Auric responded not by denying Stravinsky's influence, but by clarifying that the musical characteristics that Schloezer associated with neoclassicism already existed in modern French music. It was not that young French composers were following Stravinsky's example, but that Stravinsky provided the strongest affirmation of their own musical and aesthetic priorities.

Schloezer, in turn, responded to Auric with another article, one that reiterated Stravinsky's preeminence and this time specified which French composers and works he considered to be representative of neoclassicism. Milhaud's *Cinq études pour piano et orchestre* (1920), for example, was described in the following terms: "These powerful pages, which resemble Bach and also Stravinsky, realize this conception of music that could be called 'neoclassical' and that is certainly one of the dominant forces of the moment." (His recognition of Bach in the *Cinq études* can refer only to Milhaud's third étude, the aforementioned polytonal fugue.) To justify this interpretation Schloezer drew on his previous description of neoclassicism, categorizing the *Cinq études* as "absolute music, stripped of all psychological meaning," whose "rigorous form" gives the work "an exclusively sonorous existence." Poulenc's

82. Georges Auric, "La musique: M. Vuillermoz et la musique d'aujourd'hui" (1922), quoted in Messing, *Neoclassicism in Music*, 130.

83. *Ibid.*

Sonata for Two Clarinets (1919) and Sonata for Clarinet and Bassoon (1922) were similarly branded as neoclassical, together with Auric's *Sonatine* (1922). Finally, Schloezer considered the neoclassicism of Tailleferre's *Marchand d'oiseaux* (1923) to be already formulaic, in that "the rhythmic and melodic style of Scarlatti" was "embellished according to the taste of the day following the model given by Stravinsky in his *Pulcinella* (Pergolesi)."<sup>84</sup> In this way, a group of composers that set out with no intention other than to make a stand against a stifling Debussyism began to acquire the mantle of neoclassicism.

This brief exchange between Schloezer and Auric is important for elaborating upon some of the details of the emerging aesthetic. First, it demonstrates that by the end of 1923 the musical attributes of anti-Debussyism and neoclassicism were largely identical. The ease with which Schloezer was able to co-opt Les Six to his view of the musical field was due to the compositional characteristics that were common to works shaped by anti-Debussyism and by the nascent neoclassicism. Secondly, in specifying which French compositions he believed to be neoclassical Schloezer unwittingly proved Auric's point: his identification of a range of works composed between 1919 and 1923 confirmed Auric's claim that young French composers were already pursuing this compositional path. Finally, and perhaps most significantly for future discussions of neoclassicism, Schloezer established that a connection to the past was a customary feature of a neoclassical work. This was neither a condition for his earlier definition of neoclassicism nor a concern for anti-Debussyism. But in recognizing the emphasis on counterpoint in the compositions of Les Six, Schloezer linked this modern contrapuntal focus, developed in reaction to the recent past, to the more distant past of Bach, Scarlatti, or the masters of the eighteenth century more broadly.

Schloezer was not the only critic to make a connection with the eighteenth century, and by 1923 it was quite common to see Bach mentioned in descriptions of the emerging aesthetic (as in the reviews of Roland-Manuel and Boulanger cited above). This is perhaps not surprising given the emphasis on counterpoint in contemporary composition, and the logic of this development can be easily traced: from an initial emphasis on line and

84. Schloezer, "La saison musicale," 240–41: "Ces pages puissantes qui tiennent de Bach, et aussi de Stravinsky, réalisent cette conception de la musique qu'on pourrait dénommer 'néo-classique' et qui est certainement une des forces dominantes du moment. . . . Musique pure, dépouillée de toute signification psychologique . . . une forme rigoureuse . . . une existence exclusivement sonore. . . . Le *Marchand d'Oiseaux* de Germaine Tailleferre . . . qui nous présente le style rythmique et mélodique de Scarlatti agrémenté au goût du jour, selon le modèle donné par Stravinsky en son *Pulcinella* (Pergolèse)." For a longer translated extract from Schloezer's article, see Messing, *Neoclassicism in Music*, 131. Schloezer placed Honegger in an "opposing camp" ("du camp adverse"), describing him as a "neo-Romantic" ("un néo-romantique") because he perceived "Wagnerian thought" ("la pensée wagnérienne") in his music: Schloezer, "La saison musicale," 241.

melody in contrast to the putative “verticalism” of prewar composition; to the prioritization of counterpoint in whatever form it might take, be it horizontalism, stylistic imitation, counterpoint of chords, or contrapuntal polytonality; and ultimately to an association with Bach in neoclassical works. But this line of thought clearly emanated from anti-Debussyist arguments. Schoenberg was never criticized for deficiencies in melody and counterpoint, but these were precisely the complaints that were lodged against Debussy, who was perceived to have neglected melody and counterpoint in favor of harmonic exploration. Even after descriptions of neoclassicism evolved to accommodate an anti-Schoenberg stance, the emphasis on line, linearity, melody, and counterpoint remained a crucial part of its definition, despite being a vestige of its anti-Debussyist past. For this reason, one of the greatest changes that took place in later definitions of neoclassicism concerned counterpoint: specifically, how to explain the prioritization of counterpoint in neoclassical works as a reaction against Schoenberg.

This recalls the gap that arose in Schloezer’s binary account of the musical field at the point at which Schoenberg displaced Debussy (Table 2). Without the reaction against Debussyist harmony to justify a return to counterpoint, writers had to cultivate new arguments to explain the prominence of contrapuntal procedures. And within the Stravinsky-Schoenberg dialectic that was quickly becoming established (Table 1) there were a few possible directions in which these arguments could evolve. At the most general level, counterpoint signaled a desired connection with the music of the eighteenth century, thereby repudiating the excesses of nineteenth-century musical expression, such as Wagnerism, expressionism, and Romanticism. More specifically, counterpoint served to combat extramusical ideas and images in order to present pure music par excellence; and with increasing frequency counterpoint was marshaled in the battle against emotions, feelings, and psychological experiences. All three of these arguments appeared after 1923, as Schoenberg moved to the fore and Debussy receded in descriptions of the new musical aesthetic.

## The Dual Heritage of Neoclassicism

While Debussy’s presence within discussions of neoclassicism began to recede, it did not disappear altogether: his name continued to be invoked as commentators reconfigured their perceptions of contemporary composition in light of the emerging Stravinsky-Schoenberg dichotomy. The writings of the later 1920s often betray neoclassicism’s dual heritage, in some cases offering separate renderings of recent music history—one anti-Debussyist, the other anti-Schoenbergian—and in others conflating the two. An example of the former can be seen in articles by Arthur Lourié, which illustrate the conceptual drift that occurred in definitions of neoclassicism from the mid-

late 1920s.<sup>85</sup> In an article of 1925 on Stravinsky's Piano Sonata Lourié constructed a vision of the musical field that positioned Debussy and Scriabin in opposition to Stravinsky. Comparing the sonatas of these three composers, Lourié held Debussy and Scriabin responsible for the final step in the evolution of the decadent Romantic sonata in France and Russia respectively. According to Lourié, the "living experience of the sonata comes to an end" as a result of their vocal rhetoric and inorganic forms: Debussy, for example, created his sonatas in "a spirit of vocal-instrumental rhapsody," while Scriabin always composed in the form of "the ecstatic poem, artificially enclosed in an extramusical plan." In contrast, Stravinsky "deliberately departs from this path of decadent evolution" and returns to "the original tradition of the eighteenth century" by reestablishing "the instrumental dialectic and organic form of the sonata."<sup>86</sup>

Three years later, however, Lourié's configuration of the musical field had changed. Instead of contrasting Debussy and Scriabin with Stravinsky he focused on the now prevalent opposition of Schoenberg and Stravinsky, defining their art as "opposite poles in the world of contemporary music."<sup>87</sup> Schoenberg's aesthetic, Lourié claimed, embraced "neoromantic emotionalism," "individualism," and "expressionism in its extreme form," while Stravinsky's represented "classical intellectualism," a "greater-than-individualistic principle," and an "objective style." Debussy is never cited but is rather subsumed into a single mention of impressionism, which itself is now perceived not as an oppositional force but as an intermediary one: "To make a generalization, one may locate the contemporary musical camps as to their relative positions in the following way: at the extreme left, the expressionists; at the extreme right, the neoclassicists; with the adherents of impressionism in the center." As in his earlier reading, Lourié maintains that the current aesthetic dilemma is a "direct consequence of the intellectual attitude inherited from the end of the last century," which continues to be "active in the guise of expressionism." But the impressionists have now moved from an antagonistic to a transitional role, as they endeavored "to go beyond [this heritage] and to prepare the way for new realizations." While their efforts were not

85. Lourié first met Stravinsky on January 18, 1924, and shortly thereafter assumed the role of his assistant, a position that involved correcting proofs, copying parts, and creating piano reductions of his compositions. As Valérie Dufour argues, it is highly likely that Stravinsky was the source for Lourié's early articles on the composer's musical aesthetics and that these articles were published with Stravinsky's approval: Dufour, *Stravinski et ses exégètes*, 92–93.

86. Lourié, "La sonate pour piano," 101: "Pour Scriabine, le type de la composition est toujours celui du poème extatique, enfermé artificiellement dans un schéma extra-musical. . . . Debussy réalise sa sonate dans un esprit de rhapsodie vocale-instrumentale. . . . Avec ces œuvres se termine l'expérience vivante de la sonate. . . . La *Sonate* de Stravinsky quitte délibérément la voie de cette évolution décadente. Elle pose à nouveau le principe du problème instrumental et de la forme organique de la sonate. Telle est la nature de ce retour à la tradition originelle du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle."

87. Lourié, "Neogothic and Neoclassic," 6.

successful they were apparently essential, Lourié stating that “we are probably witnessing the last phase of the struggle” between expressionism and neoclassicism. In this version of the recent musical past Debussy not only fades into the background but undergoes a degree of rehabilitation in the process. His fate can be contrasted to that of Scriabin, who was not so fortunate: he is now identified as the precursor of Schoenberg, his six-tone chord “only a step to the twelve tone scale of Schönberg and to the disorder that followed.”<sup>88</sup>

Though Debussy was far from being the central figure in either of Lourié’s articles, it is interesting to follow his shifting fortunes in the music criticism of the period. Lourié’s articles of 1925 and 1928 provide just one example, but they represent in microcosm the turn away from Debussy and toward Schoenberg as the main negative pole in contemporary accounts of neoclassicism. This was a boon for Debussy’s posthumous reputation, which slowly began to recover, as attention, much of it hitherto negative, was redirected toward Schoenberg.<sup>89</sup> But it also meant that the way in which Debussy had been invoked in the first formation of neoclassicism became obscured at the same time that one of the essential features of anti-Debussyism—counterpoint—continued to underpin accounts of the new tendency. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the “back to Bach” movement that emerged in 1924–25, itself an outgrowth of the emphasis on counterpoint in the immediately preceding years. Koechlin’s article “Le ‘retour à Bach’” is the locus classicus for a discussion of Bach and counterpoint in contemporary composition, but it also beautifully encapsulates the way the two lines of thought—one anti-Debussyist, the other anti-Schoenbergian—commingled in later writings on neoclassicism. Koechlin summarizes the principles of neoclassicism as he perceived them in 1926: “[1] Clear themes as in certain allegros of Bach (a remonstrance!); [2] no Beethovenian, Franckist, or Wagnerian pathos; [3] no Fauréan or Debussyist *expressionism* (I certainly cannot write “impressionism”!) but [4] *pure music*, which does not claim to signify anything. [5] And fugues. Or rather, sketches of fugues, adapted to the needs of an epoch in which time is money.”<sup>90</sup>

A supporter neither of neoclassicism nor of the ostensible return to Bach, Koechlin offered a scathing account of current aesthetics and demonstrated the degree to which the dual heritage of neoclassicism had merged. His first principle points to the lack of clarity and melody often cited in critiques of

88. *Ibid.*, 3–5.

89. For more on the vicissitudes of Schoenberg’s reception in postwar Paris, see Mussat, “La réception de Schönberg.”

90. Koechlin, “Le ‘retour à Bach,’” 242: “Des thèmes nets, comme ceux de tels *Allegros* de Bach (la remonstrance!);—point de pathétique beethovenien, franckiste ou wagnérien; pas d’*expressionnisme* fauréen ni debussyste (décidément, je ne puis écrire *impressionnisme!*) mais de la *musique pure*, et qui ne prétend à rien signifier. Et des fugues. Ou plutôt des esquisses de fugues: adaptées aux besoins d’une époque où l’on sait le prix du temps” (Koechlin’s emphasis).



Debussyism, in which Bach's counterpoint was seen as a necessary corrective (or "remonstrance") against an unhealthy harmonic emphasis. The second principle derives from the other branch of neoclassical thought, the reaction against Romanticism and Wagnerism that was a common feature of anti-Schoenberg rhetoric. The third principle is a curious mixture of both arguments. Koechlin acknowledges that expressionism has replaced impressionism in current accounts of neoclassicism: thus anti-expressionism derives from Schoenberg, whereas the earlier reaction against Fauré and especially Debussy would certainly have been termed "anti-impressionism." Koechlin's fourth principle could refer to either conception of neoclassicism, as both Debussy and Schoenberg were criticized for the extramusical dimension to their music. Finally, fugue was one of the outcomes of the emphasis on counterpoint, itself a reaction against the perceived harmonic emphasis of Debussyism. Thus Koechlin's definition, like others of the later 1920s, presents an amalgam of anti-Debussyst and anti-Schoenbergian rhetoric that, when teased apart, reveals the two lineages of neoclassicism and their inherent contradictions.

Indeed, this conflation of sources subtends the premise of Koechlin's entire article, which argued against invoking Bach to achieve a degree of anti- or non-expressiveness in modern music. On the one hand, Koechlin acknowledged that the notion of returning to Bach was triggered by anti-Debussyism, "the composer whom they now want to escape by going back to the allegros of the eighteenth century." On the other, Koechlin rejected the idea that this "return to Bach" provided the means by which to counteract emotion and expression in contemporary composition. As his final sentence makes clear, "I dispute finally and positively the right of anyone to mention [Bach's] great name to support a 'revolt against emotion.'"<sup>91</sup> Thus Debussy appears explicitly in Koechlin's article as the figure who motivated the return to Bach in the first place, while Schoenberg appears implicitly, represented by the arguments developed in reaction to his musical aesthetic (see Figure 2). But, in truth, the two elements—anti-Debussyism and anti-emotion—never belonged together, representing separate branches of neoclassicism's dual heritage: emotion was entirely absent in critiques of Debussy's influence and the prioritization of counterpoint never entered into anti-Schoenberg rhetoric. Rather, the linking of anti-Debussyism and anti-expressionism represented the intellectual maneuvers that had to be carried out in order to transfer the prioritization of counterpoint from one composer to another—that is, from a reaction against Debussyst verticalism to a reaction against Schoenbergian emotion and expressionism in music.

91. *Ibid.*, 249, 251: "ce Debussy que l'on espère fuir par le retour aux Allegros du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle"; "On conteste enfin à quiconque, et formellement, le droit d'évoquer ce grand nom pour soutenir une 'révolte contre la sensibilité.'"

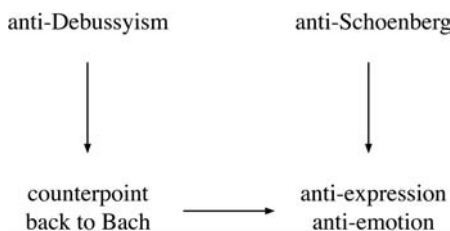


Figure 2 Conflation of the dual heritage of neoclassicism

Koechlin's argument against equating Bach and counterpoint with anti-emotionalism attests to the state of neoclassical affairs in French musical aesthetics by the mid-1920s. That is to say, by 1926 the notion of counterpoint had concretized in the minds of many critics as a compositional procedure capable of counteracting musical emotion and expression. Schloezer, who had been the principal architect of the definition of neoclassicism in 1923, enunciated this point of view four years later: "It was the Bach of the allegro (according to Koechlin's expression) that postwar musicians needed; and what attracted them, what truly bewitched them in these allegros and fugues, was their continuous movement, their implacable unfolding that seemed to forbid all intrusion of psychological elements within this sonorous framework."<sup>92</sup> In a conflation of his own, Schloezer interpreted the embrace of counterpoint by postwar musicians as a stand against "all intrusion of psychological elements," a circumlocution denoting Schoenberg's expressionism. His reading is perhaps not surprising given his earlier definition of neoclassicism: that is, his incorporation of counterpoint would likely have to fit within his Stravinsky-Schoenberg binary view of the musical field. What is surprising, however, is Schloezer's acknowledgment that a reaction against Debussy in the immediate postwar years initiated the return to Bach. No doubt responding to Koechlin's arguments, Schloezer linked the two phenomena as follows: "The young generation had been intoxicated by freedom, truth, and sincerity (the conventions of Debussy had escaped them). They aspired to discipline and convention. The return to Bach has no other significance."<sup>93</sup> In a remarkable revision of very recent music history, counterpoint

92. Schloezer, "Réflexions sur la musique," 254n31: "C'était du Bach des 'Allegro' (selon l'expression de M. Kœchlin), dont avaient besoin les musiciens d'après-guerre; et ce qui les attirait, ce qui véritablement les envoûtait dans ces Allegros, dans ces Fugues, c'était leur mouvement continu, c'était leur déroulement implacable qui semble interdire aux éléments psychologiques toute intrusion dans cette trame sonore."

93. Ibid.: "Ils avaient été enivrés de liberté, de vérité, de sincérité (les conventions de Debussy leur avaient échappé). Ils aspirèrent donc à la discipline et aux conventions. Le retour à Bach n'eut pas d'autre signification."

was no longer regarded as a means by which to combat a Debussyist harmonic verticalism, but was now seen to be a reaction against the composer's "freedom," which in turn precipitated a desire for "discipline and convention." In terms of both cause and effect, Schloezer reinterpreted the prioritization of counterpoint in postwar French music. In terms of its cause, he revised its *raison d'être* and in the process weakened the logic of its connection to Debussy. Contrary to Schloezer's assertion, the young generation had indeed recognized "the conventions of Debussy"—or more accurately, the conventions of Debussyism. It was precisely their perception of "la formule debussyste"<sup>94</sup> that had led them to pursue an inversion of his musical values and hence to articulate counterpoint as integral to their anti-Debussyism. In terms of its effect, Schloezer simply reiterated the prevailing belief that counterpoint could prevent the encroachment of "psychological elements" in music. While Koechlin battled against the invocation of counterpoint to combat emotion and expression, Schloezer not only accepted it but attributed it to the young, postwar generation of musicians. Counterpoint having become detached by degrees from its anti-Debussyist heritage, neoclassicism was now firmly reconfigured as a reaction against Schoenberg and his neo-Romantic and expressionistic musical aesthetic.

## Conclusion

Writing in 1926 Poulenc identified "the two great musical revolutions of our epoch: Debussyism and the objective evolution of Stravinsky."<sup>95</sup> It is hardly surprising that, having come of age as a composer between 1917 and 1924, Poulenc would be attuned to and active in the transition from one aesthetic to another. But as this article has shown, it was not simply a chronological passing from one "ism" to the next: the reaction against Debussyism informed many aspects of the new aesthetic *avant la lettre*. Neoclassicism did not emerge from a musico-cultural vacuum, nor did it develop from within the oeuvre of a single composer; rather it was the culmination of many years of aesthetic debate, albeit under a different moniker. Taking anti-Debussyist aesthetics into account situates the nascent neoclassicism within the musical priorities and concerns that were circulating in Paris between 1919 and 1923, a context that is surprisingly absent from current accounts of the concept. Isolating Stravinsky from the Parisian music scene to which he was trying to acculturate raises inevitable questions regarding the evolution of his musical style. Why did he turn to a series of small, traditional chamber music genres between 1923 and 1925? Why did these genres foreground

94. Auric, "La musique: quelques maîtres contemporains," 74.

95. Poulenc, "Festival d'œuvres posthumes," 246: "les deux grandes révolutions musicales de notre époque: le debussysme et l'évolution objective de Strawinsky."

eighteenth-century counterpoint, almost inexplicably, for the first time in his career? And where did this contrapuntal emphasis come from?

Restoring anti-Debussyism to this narrative sheds light on such issues and, more broadly, serves to clarify the formation and development of neoclassicism in several important respects. First, anti-Debussyism was a necessary precondition for the initial formation of neoclassicism. Despite the difference between the negative rhetoric of anti-Debussyism and the positive rhetoric of neoclassicism, their musical goals were the same: sharply etched lines and an emphasis on counterpoint, clearly defined timbres favoring wind instruments, and a preference for the unadorned content of absolute music. Stravinsky's oft-cited first neoclassical work—the Octet of 1923—can be seen to emerge from this anti-Debussyist context and the close company he kept with the composers of Les Six. Secondly, the prioritization of counterpoint in postwar contemporary music initially had little if anything to do with either Stravinsky or Schoenberg, but was instead aimed at the wholesale renunciation of prewar harmonic Debussyism. Understanding the origin of this contrapuntal emphasis in neoclassicism becomes all the more important with Schoenberg's entry into the debate, as neoclassical definitions evolved to repudiate his aesthetic on the one hand while still maintaining the original fetish for counterpoint on the other. Finally, regardless of what neoclassicism later came to represent—be it a return to counterpoint, to Bach, or to the eighteenth century—its initial impetus was much more straightforward. Rather than looking to pre-Romantic traditions, the beginnings of neoclassicism were to be found much closer to home, going no further back than the reaction against Debussy, Debussyism, and the previous generation.

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## Abstract

Much of the literature on neoclassicism in music focuses on Stravinsky or on the Stravinsky-Schoenberg polemic that emerged in the mid-1920s. Yet both approaches to neoclassicism bypass a crucial moment in its early formation: the former neglects Stravinsky’s engagement with the musical priorities of postwar Paris, while the latter ignores the fact that many of the themes that would later crystallize under the banner of neoclassicism were first developed in opposition not to Schoenberg’s music but to Debussy’s. As described by Jacques Rivière in a letter to Stravinsky of 1919, the postwar musical climate was “anti-impressionist, anti-symbolist, and anti-Debussyst.” This article revisits the debates that appeared in the Parisian musical press between 1919 and 1923, a period in which the term “neoclassicism” had not yet been coined but in which a new, anti-Debussyst aesthetic was nevertheless emerging. Recognizing the role of anti-Debussystism in the formation of neoclassicism is necessary if we are to understand the motivation behind the movement, a motivation that was responsible for establishing its compositional priorities, instrumentation, and aesthetic. Regardless of what neoclassicism later came to represent—be it a return to counterpoint, to Bach, or to the eighteenth century—its initial impetus was much more straightforward. Rather than looking to pre-Romantic traditions, its beginnings were to be found closer to home, going no further back than the reaction against Debussy, Debussystism, and the prewar generation.

**Keywords:** anti-Debussystism, neoclassicism, reception history, Les Six, Stravinsky