

## **An Artistic Menagerie:**

### ***Collaborations of Mind and Hand and Imagerie, Paris, 1900-1926***

by Marcus Thompson

In January 2010, our first BCMS Winter Festival and Forum Series presented jointly with the MIT Music and Theater Arts Faculty explored a segment of the chamber music repertoire through the lens of ideas about Musical Time – within the music, accompanying texts, and other artistic media.

Our 2011 BCMS Winter Special Event, also jointly presented by the MIT Music and Theater Arts Faculty, focuses on musical and visual works created to accompany ballets presented by Ballets Russes and Ballets Suédois as well as on song collections by Ravel and Poulenc first seen and heard in Paris just before, during, and soon after the First World War. The concept for this program began with a search for music and visual images intended to complement each other. From there the project broadened to explore examples of collaboration and dialogue between the arts, and among artists of equal stature, where the result was a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

It is probably not an accident that we ended up with works from a place and time – in Paris at turn of the twentieth century – when strongly held views were loudly advanced through one kind of anti-establishment ‘ism’ or another. As political systems failed, war and epidemic raged, science and technology questioned certainties and the whole world seemed to be asking fundamental questions about recreating ourselves – for artists and poets, it was a time to re-imagine and re-create the world.

As the longtime refuge for political and intellectual émigrés, Paris had also become the place for literary, theatrical, and musical artists to encounter modernist thought and to form creative and protective alliances for an assault on the citadels of French tradition and taste in the interest of the new. In the minds and hands of its boldest artists, the act of creation was inseparable from that of demolishing the status quo. This assault by the avant-garde took as many forms as there were talented people with ideas: as special events, public spectacles, *scandale*, factional demonstrations at openings and exhibitions, and in the withering criticism to follow.

Writers and poets, who turned the lofty language of the Symbolists into irony, burlesque, or everyday conversation, pursued the exotic in Nature, natural histories and creation mythologies, or sought to capture a 'walk-on-the-wild-side' through the shabbier *quartiers* of Paris, its cafés, popular theaters, and dens of iniquity. Visual artists were equally occupied with Nature and the nature of everyday reality – shattering both effete decorum and perspective, boldly juxtaposing colors, modeling the geometry of African and Oceanic forms, and embracing modern mechanical developments from industry and war.

Musicians were as active in their pursuit of the 'new' in Paris. They had the greatest impact through music for ballet, an art form long associated with lofty and spiritual ideals of the French aristocracy. Under the leadership of Sergei Diaghilev, in collaboration with leading writers and visual artists, and amid the successes of exotic émigrés of the Ballets Russes and Ballets Suédois, musicians sought a means of realizing comprehensive collaborations among artists that had historically been regarded in the theater with a mystical faith as holding the greatest promise for artistic rebirth. The popularity of Richard Wagner's operas among French audiences in Paris during the 1890s and early 1900s made Wagner's realization of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (complete art work in which he created the story, poetic libretto and music) an artistic achievement to be envied, assaulted, and surpassed by the avant-garde for reasons artistic and nationalistic.

We can only imagine what the seventy-eight year old Saint-Saëns must have been thinking when he reportedly left the audience on May 29, 1913, during the premiere of Stravinsky's "great insult to habit" called *Le Sacre du Printemps* (Scenes of Pagan Russia). Debussy, reacting at age fifty-one to its brutal and irregular rhythms, called *Le Sacre* "an extraordinary, ferocious thing... primitive music with every modern convenience." He is known to have performed the bass part of the four-hand piano version at sight with Stravinsky on the upper part, without apparent difficulty.

For twenty-four year old poet Jean Cocteau, *Le Sacre* was not only a view of the primitive, filled with "savage sadness" and "noises of farm and camp" with "little melodies that arrive from the depth of the centuries." As spectacle it fulfilled the theatrical ideal of "an alliance of all the arts uniting in a common object... [as the] perfect and... only true work of art." (Wagner)

Uniquely poised between the separate worlds of the Ballets Russes, and of Post-Impressionists, Symbolists, Fauvists, Cubists, Orphists, and Surrealists, Cocteau realized that were he able to corral and cajole into a common project Picasso (whom poet Guillaume Apollinaire had celebrated among the Cubists) and Satie (whose simplicity of musical texture had impressed him), he would have the answer to Diaghilev's only requirement for a new ballet: "Astound me!"

In creating the scenario for *Parade*, and successfully recruiting Picasso, Satie, and Massine to the cause, Cocteau was able to extend the tradition that had drawn Toulouse-Lautrec to the popular music halls and Picasso and his friends to the Cirque Médrano. *Parade* was premiered in 1917 and created yet another *scandale*. However, success by *scandale*, even at the Ballets Russes, did not guarantee acceptance as an artist among the avant-gardists he courted. In those circles, Cocteau was regarded as little more than a prodigious opportunist. History has since recognized his mastery as poet, novelist, dramatist, film-maker, portraitist, and designer of posters, pottery, tapestries, mosaics, neckties, jewelry— someone in whose real life the arts were united.

By 1918 Jean Cocteau had moved on to further collaborations, this time by naming and promoting the works of six composers known as 'Les Six.' Among them were Erik Satie, whom he had selected to create music for *Parade*, and Darius Milhaud, with whom he was to collaborate in his next stage work, *Le Boeuf sur le toit*, in 1920.

Cocteau's example can certainly be felt in *La Création du Monde* with the coming together of poet Blaise Cendrars, painter Fernand Léger, and composer Darius Milhaud. In 1923 Cendrars, who with fellow poet Guillaume Apollinaire had assaulted the ideals of the Symbolist poets, published his study of ancient theories regarding the creation of the world as understood among African peoples. Naturally, these theories would challenge the Judeo-Christian account of creation and inspire Cendrars to propose a wordless scenic narrative as a ballet to a rival company working in Paris, the Ballets Suédois. The success of Ballets Suédois' productions was said by Georges Auric (another one of 'Les Six') to rest on their ability to attract "no longer just the elite or the snobs, but the general Paris public." The choreography was by Jean Börlin, who three years earlier had performed one of his first and

most original compositions in recital, *Sculpture nègre*. For that performance and for *La Création du Monde*, he had studied documentary films of black African dancers. As a result, *La Création du Monde* became the first European ballet to be derived from African dance.

In 1922 Fernand Léger published an article in which he said “modern man lives in preponderant geometrical order.” He was soon drawn into creating cutting-edge Cubist costumes and sets after studying recently published catalogs of geometric African masks. Like many of the larger African masks, these costumes obscure the human identity and movement of the wearer in favor of projecting that of the animal or deity. Léger produced many studies for the sets and was never satisfied that his masks were scary enough. Darius Milhaud, who had recently returned from two years in Brazil and been exposed to music of the tropical forest, also heard jazz for the first time on trips to London and New York’s Harlem. The juxtaposition of urban jazz and tropical sounds in the musical score has remained better known than the story or the visuals.

It is very likely the high quality of the visual images by Toulouse-Lautrec (1899) and Pierre Bonnard (1904) of Jules Renard’s *Les Histoires Naturelles* (1896) drew Ravel to undertake song settings of poems about local birds and farm animals. The poems, witty, unsentimental but affectionate, ascribe human characteristics and foibles to the animals. Renard, who admitted to an ignorance of music, expressed little interest in the effort and did not attend the premiere of Ravel’s *Histoires naturelles* (1906). The songs were greeted with public outrage and outcry over their choice of subject, accompanying harmonies, and a syllabification of the French language that polite society associated with cafés and music halls.

By contrast, Francis Poulenc’s song settings of six poems from Guillaume Apollinaire’s *Le Bestiaire ou cortège d’Orphée* were regarded then and since as highly sensitive, insightful, and predictive of the reputation he would earn as the greatest musical interpreter of French poetry. Apollinaire’s spiritual identification with Orpheus as inspired guide, charmer of stones, and tamer of beast and man is consistent with his expressed desire to unite music, the visual arts, and poetry to give form to an inner life that would create a whole new universe. The collaboration between Apollinaire and Dufy that

produced Dufy's first published illustrations yielded one of the most celebrated illustrated books of the new century.

At age eighteen, and as the youngest of Cocteau's 'Les Six', Poulenc was drawn into Apollinaire's creative circle by his intuitive interpretation of poetry. If his music was to show any revolt or rejection of the status quo, it was to be against intellectual fads and 'isms' in favor of finding his own true lyrical voice. Poulenc's first published songs (under the guidance of Georges Auric) were to follow. In time, Poulenc's fruitful and somewhat Orphic collaboration with Apollinaire would yield settings of thirty-five poems following Apollinaire's early death from influenza.

The four-hand piano versions of the ballets scores and the song collections were each heard for the first time in the intimacy of the chamber, studio, or salon. That intimacy of idea and action, mind and hand, are challenge, inspiration, and opportunity to those of us who play chamber music.

*Marcus Thompson, a violist who is Robert R. Taylor Professor of Music at MIT and on the viola faculty of New England Conservatory, is artistic director of Boston Chamber Music Society.*