

Jean Cocteau and the Group of Six

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Abstract: *The beginning of the twentieth century is marked, in art, by the interweaving of several aesthetic directions such as symbolism, neoclassicism, Dadaism, futurism. Having no affinities with Debussy's music and rejecting the German-Slavic influences of Wagner and Stravinsky, Jean Cocteau pleads for "a music of France", for a pure song to oppose the contaminations he considers "harmful". This avant-garde aesthetic finds its formulation in *Rooster and Harlequin*, notes on music published in 1918. In the spirit of new artistic directions, Cocteau combines poetry, music, theater, painting and choreography in a form of musical performance, which opposes established genres. Thus, the poet becomes the animator and source of inspiration of a group of young musicians gathered around the tutelary figure of Erik Satie - the organizer, impresario and self-proclaimed theorist of the Group of Six, composed of Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc - already established - Germaine Tailleferre, talented and "discreet", Georges Auric, an early genius and Louis Durey, today, almost forgotten.*

Key-words: *modernism; avant-garde; Group of Six; Jean Cocteau; musical universe*

1. Introduction

The beginning of the twentieth century knows an extraordinary artistic effervescence that affirms its modernity through forms of spectacle that scandalized the tastes of the time (*Le Sacre du Printemps* by Stravinsky, *Parade* by Jean Cocteau, *Chansons madécasses* by Ravel etc.), causing the embrace of avant-garde positions and the interweaving of several aesthetic trends such as symbolism, neoclassicism, Dadaism and futurism. The rapid evolution of the new aesthetic language due to the dynamism of artistic creation as well as the relationship between art and social and technological progress have led to a growing number of musical trends to emerge over three decades. The modality, the polytonality, the polymodality, the atonality, the return to tonality, the microtonalism, the dodecaphonism and many other expressions will coexist more or less harmoniously until the middle of the 1940s. A new generation of musicians who want to discover a new musical universe with universal language, will create a reversal of things and will question the definition of modernity. These are the members of the Group of Six: Francis Poulenc, Darius Milhaud, Arthur Honegger, Louis Durey, Georges Auric, Germaine Tailleferre. In this context, Jean Cocteau appears as a unifying point of the arts, being one of the few multipurpose artists who enjoyed almost equal success in all its forms of artistic manifestation.

Around the 1920s, he dedicated himself to poetry, writing novels, plays, ballet plots, choreographing, staging shows, getting involved in cultural journalism, designing masks and costumes, drawing and painting. Poetry is the connecting thread of his concerns forming the main expression of his sensitivity and aesthetics. It governs his creative activity to such an extent that in the early 1930s, Cocteau classified artistic forms of expression into categories such as: "poetry", "critical poetry", "Theater poetry", "graphic poetry", "cinematographic poetry" etc. The poet actively participates in defining the foundations of the new French music,

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promoting the musicians of the future Groupe des Six and collaborating with them in avant-garde performances that combine poetry, theater, music, painting, choreography in a tight osmosis destroying the established genres.

Through Erik Satie, whom he considers his master, Cocteau discovered the artistic environment of Montparnasse, different from the social salons he frequented at the time. Huyghens Hall is one of the anchor points where the young generation of painters, musicians and writers begin to assert themselves through exhibitions, concerts and poetic mornings. Cocteau befriends these young people who revolve around Satie, soon becoming a kind of impresario of the young music school.

2. Objectives

The article aims to draw attention to the collaborative techniques of creating unique shows, bringing together under the aegis of the unusual artistic personalities with different orientations and aesthetic visions. These achievements occur under the auspices of Jean Cocteau, who intuitively understands the impact that this unity in diversity can produce on the spectator, a fact confirmed in the first show of this kind.

3. The Group of Six and the crystallization of an aesthetic

Between 1919 and 1920, the meetings of the group members are hosted on Saturday by Cocteau. Later, the meetings took place in public places such as the Gaya Bar or Bœuf sur le Toit, inaugurated on January 10, 1922. During this period of intellectual exchange, Cocteau immersed himself in Satie's ideas and conceived a new aesthetic which, after its application in parade, finds its wording in *The Rooster and the Harlequin. Notes on music* work written in early 1918 that advocates a "French music of France", a French rooster with pure song, which opposes the motley harlequin with harmful influences.²

The Rooster and the Harlequin. Notes on music is a work that conveys an aesthetic attitude that combines literature, music and painting. According to Suzanne Winter Cocteau vehemently expressed a personal aesthetic version through a sum of provocative statements, paradoxes and short observations that combine metaphor with precision.³ The poet attributes a gallery of meanings to this symbol of French nationalism which is the rooster in opposition to the harlequin which represents the motley music of German influences despised by the new generation of composers. Cocteau justifies the tone of his statements: "Depuis que je parle musique, j'évite ce qui ne me regarde pas. Je saute les détails. Je me refuse nuances et pédales /.../. Que voulez-vous, je n'ai pas une minute à perdre. Je dois aller vite, déblayer, fournir un gros travail."⁴

The work is dedicated to Auric of German origin, a young musician who does not allow himself to be assimilated by Wagnerian influence. Cocteau will intensify the dissemination of this new aesthetic, temporarily turning into a journalist. From March 31 to August 11, 1919, he led the "Carte blanche" section of Paris-Midi in which he wanted to inform the reader about the

² Claude Arnaud. 2003. *Jean Cocteau*. Paris : Gallimard Publisher, p.206.

³ Suzanne Winter. 1997. "La mise en musique des poèmes de Jean Cocteau". In Leiner Wolfgang (dir.). *Jean Cocteau et les arts. Oeuvres critiques*. Paris: Gallimard, pp. 119-142; p. 120.

⁴ Jean Cocteau. 1950. *Le Coq et l'Arlequin. Le Rappel à l'ordres. Œuvres complètes*. Tomes IX, Geneve: Marguerat, p.55.

"Since I started talking about music, I avoid things that don't concern me. I skip the details. I refuse nuances and pedals /.../. What do you want, I don't have a minute to lose. I have to go fast, clear, do a lot of work."

new values by talking about Satie and the music of his young friends. Thus, Cocteau becomes their undeclared spokesperson, being invited to give a lecture on Satie and the young composers at the Institute for Advanced Study in Brussels.⁵

It should be noted that the Group of Six has indeed existed informally since 1917 but is officially named after the composer and journalist Henri Collet, who published two articles on 16 and 23 January 1920 about them. Jean Cocteau will become their group's impresario and artistic director, whose members he will invest in avant-garde shows.

4. The concert show in collaboration with the Group of Six

The first concert-show by Jean Cocteau in collaboration with the Group of Six takes place on February 21, 1921. This show takes place less than a month after the publication of two articles by Henri Collet who christened the Group of Six. The show takes place in sets, costumes and masks prepared by Guy-Pierre Fauconnet according to Cocteau's instructions. The mixture of genres is the central axis of this show: the circus, the music hall and the South American rhythms come into force on a stage. With *Le Boeuf sur le toit* by Milhaud, the *Cockades* by Poulenc or *Adieu New York* by Auric accompanied by the famous clowns Fratellini, we are right in the middle of the aesthetic of the Six most marked: music hall, circus, fair, jazz.

The son and son-in-law of the former English clown George Footitt of the Nouveau-Cirque du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, whom Cocteau keeps a vivid childhood memory, are hired for the acrobatic dances of Georges Auric's *Adieu New York* foxtrot. The music includes several syncopated rhythms of American dances, such as foxtrot or ragtime. The aerial drawings with simple lines, representing the position of the stylized human bodies, touch us with the poetry that these naked features emanate. They show what the choreographer expects from the two acrobats who interpret their figures symmetrically: jumps back and forth, walks with their hands, movements of butterflies, opposite walks, gestures with their heads on the ground, movements creeping.

5. The structure of the show

The show begins with an overture by Francisc Poulenc which is the end of the four-hand sonata orchestrated by Darius Milhaud. The first part of the show ends with the "Koubitzky singing tour". Tenor Alexandre Koubitzky performs *Les Cocardes*, "three folk songs" by Poulenc based on poems by Jean Cocteau, with his wonderful Russian accent. The text of the poems is based on the process of "finishing the words", according to which each line must occupy the last syllables of the previous line. Cocteau introduces these songs with a short address stating that these *Cockades* are fake folk songs, just as the circus is a fake circus and the theater a *trompe-l'oeil*.

The music that evokes some chords Petrushka uses the violin, trumpet, trombone and drum as the evening of July 14, not to make people laugh, but to reflect "a certain melancholy very much at home", that of popular festivals. The tenor's outrageously serious performance has a comedic effect, as he was hit and caught by a cold, his voice being slightly guttural. During the break, the audience rushes to one of the lounges, thinking they will find champagne and sandwiches there, as the printed program suggests. For any "bar", spectators must be content to imagine it through the Hawaiian mandolinists, newly introduced in France, who animate this "musical break". Liane de Pougy notes that the *Trois Petites Pièces Montées* by Satie, presented

⁵ Jean Cocteau. 1989. *La difficulté d'être*, Paris: Édition du Rocher, p.23.

at the opening of the second part, is appreciated. Only their titles, inspired by Rabelais - From Pantagruel's Childhood (Rêverie) - Marche de Cocagne (Démarche) - Gargantua Games (Coin de Polka) - are ready to laugh, as always with Satie. The music is simple, unaffected and very melodious.

The highlight of the show is *Le Bœuf sur le toit* by Darius Milhaud. The latter had composed a carnival orchestral fantasy based on popular arias and various South American-inspired dances. Under the title Cinéma-Fantaisie, these lush sambas and tangos with syncopated rhythms quickly became some of the songs dedicated to Saturday's meetings, played in their four-handed version. The pre-existence of this music inspires Cocteau in the design of a farce-type show represented in an American atmosphere (within a bar during the ban period) which gives the title of one of the Brazilian tangos. The farce consists of seven carnival-dressed characters who roam this bar and cause a series of incidents requiring the intervention of a police officer. The theme of the show is inspired by Chaplin's silent American films.⁶

Music has the role of introduction into the atmosphere. Supported by the constant percussion of chocalha, the South American rhythms surprise the Parisian audience of the 1920s. Later, the characters that populate this unusual universe appear. The performers are not dancers or professional actors, but clowns from the Médrano circus (Fratellini brothers and the giant Bosby). François and Albert Fratellini take on the roles of transvestites (the red-haired lady and the low-cut lady). These actors, with large cardboard heads, faithfully complied with Cocteau's rigorous requirements. The figure of each of them is drawn, frozen in a unique expression that corresponds to its character. The enormous heads diminish the bodies so much that the hands and feet become imperceptible, the postures and the smallest movements are more and more accentuated and the gestures acquire an enigmatic distinction. For Cocteau, the characters have the status of a mobile setting whose slow and cumbersome movement, accentuated by the size of the masks, contrasts with the nervous dynamism of Satie's music, producing an unreal atmosphere.

In *Adieu New York* and *Le Bœuf sur le toit*, Cocteau experiences new relationships between music and movement. Between gestures and music, between gestures and facial expressions, between music and costumes, between music and scenery, between music and quarrel, between quarrel and ballet, there is a radical distancing and disconnection that generates theatrical poetry. This rupture between the slow movements of the performers imitating the effects of a slow-motion movie and the catchy music noticed by Misia Sert, produces an extraordinary effect transporting the viewer in a reverie until the last chord. This deliberate contrast, the purpose of which is to provoke an unexpected emotion, was described by Cocteau in 1946 as "accidental synchronism."

6. Conclusions

Opponent of the German excess and the pagan gigantism of the Russians, Cocteau pleads for a cheerful, light, enchanting music. Constantly pursued by the echo of Diaghilev's demands (Surprise me!) and by the desire to renew the forms of artistic expression, the poet finds the reverberations of his avant-garde aesthetic in the creation of the members of the Group of Six in which he sees an invigorating breath. The performances realized in collaboration with the members of the Group of Six prove an innovative aesthetic direction.

⁶ Sylvain Caron, François de Médicis et Michel Duchesneau (dir.).2006. *Musique et modernité en France*, Montréal: Les presses de l'Université de Montréal, p.56.

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