



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Source: *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 75, No. 3 (Autumn, 1991), pp. 255-278

Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/742051>

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New Music as Confrontation: The Musical Sources of Jean Cocteau's Identity

Jann Pasler

Jean Cocteau knew he was different: a mediocre student, drawn to men more than women, admired for his “feminine soul,” his physical beauty, and incisive wit. He was the child of his upbringing—privileged bourgeois suburbanite—and yet not entirely so. By age twenty-nine, in writing *Le Coq et l'Arlequin*, he had figured out “what the public reproaches in you, cultivate it, that's who you are.”¹ To arrive at this clarity—a self-definition essentially based on a confrontive relationship with the public—took most of his twenties, a period during which he gradually learned to distinguish himself from and yet still define himself in terms of the conventional social circles in which he and his family moved. I suggest that Cocteau achieved this distinction through a conscious change in his musical tastes, and that it was indeed what he found in and extracted from new music that allowed him to construct much of the identity we think of as Cocteau.

Cocteau was not, of course, the first French writer to look to music for direction. Charles Baudelaire took inspiration from Wagner's music and used his understanding of that music to elucidate a new aesthetic ideal in poetry—symbolism—and a new methodology—correspondences. Stéphane Mallarmé publicly envied music's power of suggestion, of mystery. Paul Verlaine wrote, “De la musique avant toute chose.” The philosopher Henri Bergson looked to melody to explain the way the unconscious perceives time in his path-breaking book *Time and Free Will*. Marcel Proust built one of the cornerstones of his novel, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, on the effect on the narrator of one involuntary memory—a “petite phrase” of music. And Paul Valéry, perhaps the most influenced of them all, borrowed the idea of recurring rhythmic patterns and harmonic modulation as organizational principles in his poetry.

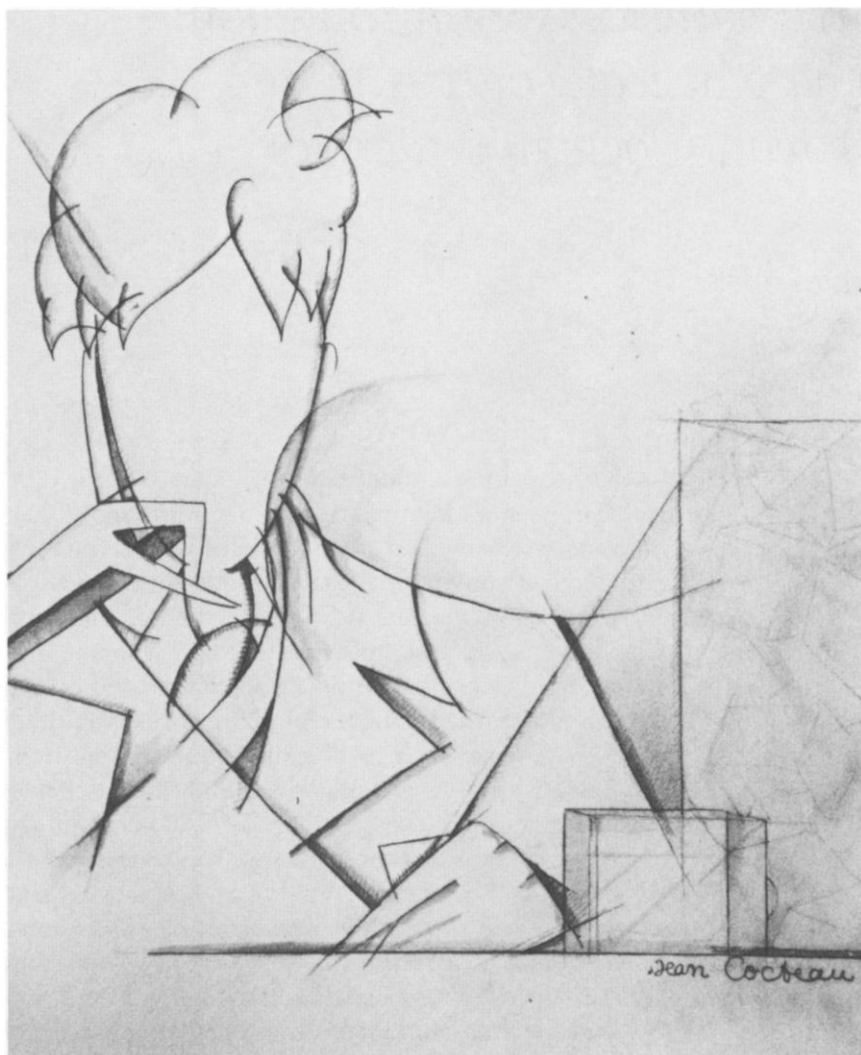


Figure 1. Jean Cocteau, cubist self-portrait, ca. 1909, pencil on paper. All figures courtesy the collection of the Severin Wunderman Museum, Irvine, California. I am grateful to Tony Clark for permission to photograph and reproduce these drawings.

For Cocteau (to cite the composer Ned Rorem), music “inevitably reflected *situations* rather than constructions, *social rapport* with makers and their audiences rather than the ‘creative process’ ” (emphasis mine).² Cocteau focused his attention on the interdependent relationship between the artist and the public, particularly the composer and his public. Cocteau understood, furthermore, that when

the French talk about music, they are talking about themselves. "The public like to recognize," he asserted.³ Recognize themselves, he might have elaborated.

In Paris at this time, musical tastes were an important barometer of one's social class and even political orientation. Performances, especially of music, served as springboards for the discussion of everything from personal morality to nationalism, as if society could, thereby, work out its social and political differences. This belief was evident in the scandal surrounding Claude Debussy's opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* when, during the first two weeks of performances in the spring of 1902, the monarchists, aristocrats, haute bourgeoisie, anti-Dreyfusards, socialites, and the conservative musical public felt threatened or antagonistic toward the new work, whereas the republicans, businessmen, socialists, Dreyfusards, professional writers, art-lovers, and the progressive musical public were more willing to give it a chance.⁴ This confrontation of values fueled the numerous artistic scandals we associate with Parisian culture of the period.

Cocteau's family seems to have had some interest in music. His grandfather owned a set of Stradivarius violins and played quartets regularly in his home, often with such distinguished violinists as Sarasate. (Hiring top professionals to perform in one's home was a common privilege of the rich at the time.) His parents went regularly to the Opéra, even carrying Wagner scores on occasion. Given the concert series that they patronized, however, it is not clear whether they went out of a passion for music or because such attendance was expected from those of their social standing.

In his *Portraits-Souvenir*, Cocteau recalls as one of his first memories visits to concerts of the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire: "My grandfather had seats for these in the third row of the main floor, on the right. There I discovered thrown together Beethoven, Liszt, Berlioz, and Wagner."⁵ Proust once called this the "Senate" of Parisian concert series: its repertoire had the "mark of authority," its performances were the "most perfect," and its subscribers "considered themselves and prided themselves a little . . . as if they were invited guests."⁶ These concerts and the Opéra and the Comédie Française, to which Cocteau says his family also subscribed regularly, were the principal venues to see and be seen in Paris. Good aristocrats or "wealthy bourgeois families," like Cocteau's,⁷ considered attendance at these series almost a social obligation. For them, the Opéra, with its huge staircase and elegant hall of mirrors modeled on those of Versailles, served as a nostalgic reminder of the days when the aristocracy flourished. By donning the right clothes and attending the opera,

anyone, especially the nouveaux riches, could give the impression they belonged to the upper classes. Writer Octave Mirbeau describes the Opéra as an “institution of luxury, that luxury upholds, and that is made only for it,” a sort of “grand banal salon divided into an infinity of small individual salons” that provided subscribers with “all the conveniences for holding fashionable receptions.”⁸

Cocteau’s own initial fascination with the theater came from watching his mother dress for the occasion, the “prologue to the spectacle,” he called it, full of “foreshadowing resemblances. . . . This madonna covered with velvet, choking with diamonds,” for whom the chamber maid tried to create the air of “a Spanish virgin’s nobility,” would flow “like a red river and blend her velvet with the velvets of the theater, her brilliance with the brilliance of the chandeliers and stage lights.”⁹

Conspicuously absent from this discussion are the Opéra Comique, the Concerts Lamoureux or Concerts Colonne for orchestra (religiously attended by the symbolist writers including Mallarmé), and the Société Nationale (formed to encourage the performance of French music). The audiences for these were largely distinct from those of the Opéra, the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, and the Comédie Française. Subscription lists for the Opéra Comique, for example, were much smaller than they were for the Opéra: in 1900, 425 people subscribed to the Opéra, 550 to the Comédie Française (61 of whom subscribed to both), while only 70 subscribed to the Opéra Comique (only 8 of whom also subscribed to the Opéra, and 6 also to the Comédie Française).¹⁰ The ticket prices of the Opéra Comique cannot be blamed for this difference, for they were between those of the Opéra and the Comédie Française. Nor can the size of the hall, which is forty percent, not eighty-four percent, smaller than the Opéra. Moreover, in 1905–1906, the Concerts Lamoureux had a sizable subscription list of 208, the great majority of which were not subscribers of any of the three major series.

The primary difference between these two kinds of subscription series was in the attitude of their organizers toward new work. Institutions like the Opéra and the Comédie Française maintained French traditions, an ideal to which many of the subscribers were perhaps more committed than to the actual music or theater presented therein. Article 1 of the Opéra’s *Cahiers de charge* in 1879 states, “The Opéra is not an experimental theater; it must be considered like a museum of music.” By edict, only two new works every other year had to be performed at the Opéra: one could be a translation of a foreign opera, and one had to be by a recipient of the Prix de Rome (in other

words, a young up-and-coming “official” composer). The Opéra Comique and the two orchestral concert series performed new works far more regularly and by a wider variety of composers, including Vincent D’Indy, Gabriel Fauré, and Claude Debussy. They even repeated a new work at the same concert and again a week later if the audiences liked it. The Société Nationale gave premieres at almost all of its concerts. Cocteau later vehemently criticized the work of composers like Debussy, but he never refers to this music in his autobiographical essays or portraits of friends; this absence suggests that he might not have had regular exposure to this music when he was growing up. Moreover, in her notes for a radio program on Cocteau in 1951, Cocteau’s close friend Valentine Hugo points out that in the milieu in which they lived, “people made fun of *Pelléas*.”¹¹

Cocteau apparently had an excellent musical memory and a good tenor voice. The composer Georges Auric recounts that Cocteau could play the piano, but only pieces written in the key of F major,¹² yet his tastes throughout the first decade of the century, in music as in literature, were very conventional. For the most part, they derive from and reflect his social milieu.

The composer to whom he most often refers is Reynaldo Hahn—another elegant young man, a student of Massenet, and ever the darling of the salons—whom he met through Proust in 1908. Hahn wrote charming melodies that fashionable women loved to perform, as well as several operas and one ballet for which Cocteau provided the scenario. After hearing his opera *La Carmélite* in December 1902—six months after the premiere of Debussy’s *Pelléas*—one critic compared Hahn’s score with the salons he frequented. In it, “very well-known phrases meet, their very archaic melodic contours wearing wigs pass closely by one another.”¹³ *La Carmélite*, based on the story of a nun who was the lover of Louis XIV, could not fail to charm the Opéra public. The theater director spent a fortune on the production, and the critics pointed out that “never has the stage seen such a sumptuous evocation of the Sun King’s court.”¹⁴ Although the work was supposed to evoke seventeenth-century music and dance, as well as mores, it sounded more like Massenet. Hahn “gives the same nice turn of phrase to God, the devil, love, and the priesthood. He makes everything from the nun’s fall to her redemption into Massenet,” observed the critic of *Le Soleil*.¹⁵ When the well-regarded critic Willy (Colette’s husband) blasted the work for its lack of originality, Hahn publicly responded in an interview published in *Le Figaro*: “Sometimes taste is the worst enemy of what the public calls originality. I admit that what I have always tried to stay away from is errors in taste.”¹⁶

Such a preoccupation with the public and its taste anticipates Cocteau and links him with Hahn in an important way.

Catulle Mendès, the librettist of *La Carmélite* and a critic for one of the most prominent newspapers in town, *Le Journal*, was another of Cocteau's close associates during this period. The subject of one of Cocteau's portraits in his memoirs, Mendès was his mentor for a time. They ate lunch together every Saturday for years. One wonders about the extent to which Mendès influenced Cocteau's musical tastes before he died in 1909. He was a staunch Wagnerian and not particularly sympathetic to Debussy, although Debussy once expressed interest in setting Mendès's play *Rodrigue et Chimènes* to music. In his review of *Pelléas*, Mendès said that he left the theater wanting to see the music and the play performed separately, thereby rejecting Debussy's innovative integration of music and text, and he told Debussy's symbolist supporters that they had been "deceived" in placing their hopes in Debussy.¹⁷

Cocteau's other well-known literary friends during the first decade of the century, Léon Daudet, Jules Lemaître, and Anna de Noailles, were staunch royalists. Lemaître, the "victim and the success" of Madame de Loynes and her salon, made it all the way into the Institut by advancing the views of his patron. This world of aristocrats, and would-be aristocrats, and the writers through whom they chose to speak revolved around the idea of glory (according to the *Petit Robert* dictionary, *gloire* means "great renown spread throughout a very large public"). Cocteau writes of Madame de Noailles:

It's glory that she idolized. Glory, her *idée fixe*. "You only admire failures!" she said. In vain, I tried to show her that the privilege of France is in fact to have its secret glories, famous men which the crowd doesn't suspect. Rimbaud a little. Verlaine just enough. Hugo! Glory is the number of squares, of streets, of avenues. His [God's] celebrity, Rome, and the number of His temples is, in the eyes of the Countess, one of the proofs of the existence of God. "Anna," I told her, "you want to be a bust, while still alive, but with legs to run everywhere!" She insulted me, I retorted. Our arguments ended with my flight. . . . Tender arguments, pretexts for unending dialogues!¹⁸

Glory in postrevolutionary, democratic France was only possible through what genius claimed for itself. This group wished to link the aristocracy of blood with the aristocracy of talent. In *Le Coq et l'Arlequin*, Cocteau later wrote, "The artist, that's the true rich man. He rides in the automobile. The public follows by bus."¹⁹



Figure 2. Cocteau, Anna de Noailles, ca. 1920, black ink on paper. Cocteau's mother apparently wished him to marry Anna.

Cocteau knew he needed to stand out from the crowd and to achieve some sort of "glory." But in 1912, after five years of public life, he had to face a devastating review of his poetry in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, one of the most forward-looking journals of the time, warning him that premature success was ruining his talent.²⁰ That

same year, the Ballets Russes' production of Hahn's *Le Dieu bleu*, for which he had written the libretto, was a flop; even Diaghilev found it "dull and ineffective."²¹ His future was at stake. When Diaghilev commanded him, "astonish me!" Cocteau was taken aback: "The idea of astonishing had never come to me before. I was from a family in which one didn't ever think of astonishing. We believed that art was a tranquil, calm, different kind of thing—one didn't have a choice."²² But he listened and paid attention while the Ballets Russes, even as it was supported by the French and Russian aristocracy (and the French banking establishment), rapidly won the attention and admiration of the French public through making very different assumptions: "The troupe taught me to scorn everything that it shook up. This phoenix teaches that one must burn oneself alive in order to be reborn."²³

Music, in some ways the most aristocratic of the arts because it is the most pure and the most able to cross international boundaries, was perhaps in the best position to teach him ways to distinguish himself without having to separate himself from his social milieu. But to do so required a change in his attitude toward music and a willingness to accept "new music."

The first stage in this transformation developed out of his response to Igor Stravinsky's music. In his *Journals*, he writes, "*Le Sacre du Printemps* totally upset me. Stravinsky . . . was the first to teach me *how* to insult *habits*, without which art stagnates and remains a game" (emphasis mine).²⁴ From his understanding of Stravinsky—heavily influenced by the anti-impressionist argument in Jacques Rivière's review of *Le Sacre*²⁵ (and not necessarily how Stravinsky would have chosen to be understood)—Cocteau came to define originality as the *contradiction* of preceding expressions and the creator as someone who contradicts his predecessors.²⁶ These are very simple concepts, but they can have very real power. An artist who understands a set of givens may "change the rules of the game," as Cocteau puts it²⁷—do something different with the givens that artist's public already understands and avoid the search for a new public willing to accept a new set of givens.

Clearly this revelation was only a first step. The spirit of rebellion was new for Cocteau; only two years earlier, on 23 June 1911, he had written to the composer Florent Schmitt, "People like discord. Me no, you neither."²⁸ But the effects of *Le Sacre* were not short-lived. By 1919, in a speech to Belgian musicians, he had expanded his response to the ballet into a general theory: "One could say that the spirit of the new in every period is the highest form of the spirit of

contradiction." His theory, moreover, began to take on the tone of a manifesto: "The true creator *must* contradict and the next masterpiece *can only be* the violent contradiction of the preceding masterpiece" (emphasis mine).²⁹

Besides this notion of contradiction, Cocteau took inspiration from the way Stravinsky "detected what lies beneath the surface, despite appearances," particularly in the ballet *Petrushka*.³⁰ Appearances in an artwork could remain conventional; the Ballets Russes' public accepted *Petrushka* from the start because, from Cocteau's perspective, it considered the ballet to be "an arm against the very new"³¹—the folk tunes must have lent an air of tradition to it. Yet a consciously artificial exterior, like that of the puppet in *Petrushka*, could provide an interesting means to "entreat the public to penetrate inside for the *internal spectacle*." In his next work, *David* (conceived in 1914 in hopes of collaborating with Stravinsky but never completed), Cocteau devised a masked character as the main character. Note the opening text of scene 1:

Enter ladies and gentlemen!
Enter inside—enter ourselves!
To the other side! To the interior!

Outside one only sees my poor friend the acrobat
who, for the eye, is like
an orchestral instrument is for the ear.
.....
everything—inside outside happens at the same time.³²

Such a notion represents not only an aesthetic stance, but also a relationship between artist and public. As Milorad observes, the scenario of *Parade*, derived in part from *David*, "already explains the drama that was taking place and would take place, between Jean Cocteau and his public"; that is, while the public could see only "the 'parade' of the poet," the poet "was trying in vain to interest it in the 'internal spectacle.'" ³³ This idea later plays a major role in Cocteau's films, where characters walk through mirrors and use other devices to bring the public with them to the other side of their consciousness.

To project a certain kind of social identity for himself, as if he were hoping for glory through association, Cocteau used his acquaintance and a feigned intimacy with Stravinsky. He advertised to his friends and in print that at 2 A.M. after the scandalous premiere of *Le Sacre*, he was with Stravinsky, Nijinsky, and Diaghilev in the Bois de Boulogne, a fact that Stravinsky later denied. He dedicated his first

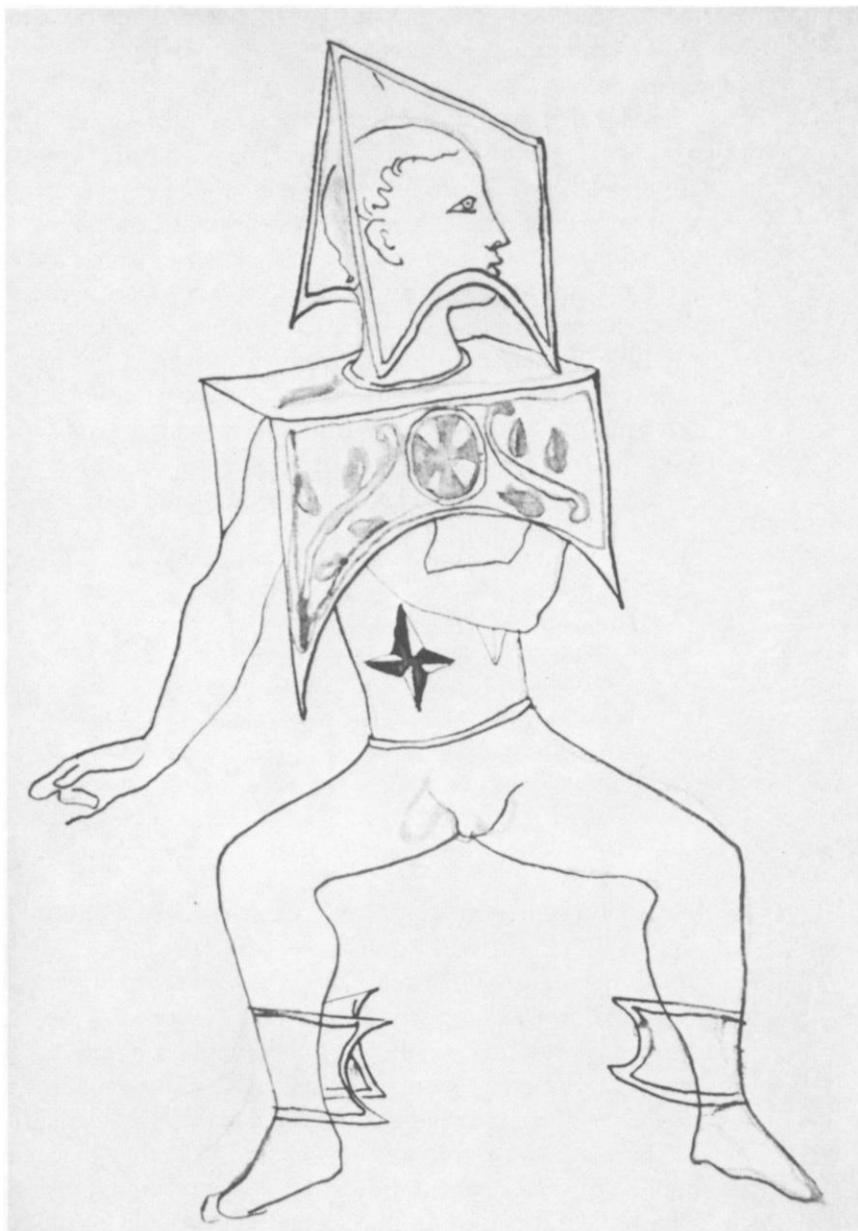


Figure 3. Cocteau, design for dancer, ballet *David*, ca. 1915, pen, ink, pencil, and watercolor on paper.

book, *Potomak*, to the composer, an act Stravinsky considered “pure flattery destined to assure his collaboration for *David*.”³⁴ In an unpublished letter of 22 July 1914 to the critic Rivière, author of the influential *Sacre* review, Cocteau reports from Switzerland where he was visiting the composer:

Igor . . . has been writing *Le Rossignol* in order to stay alive under a huge avalanche of telegrams from S[erge]. de D[iaghilev]. But he's been living to write *David*. . . .

He played me his work every morning as one points out a finished fragment of a difficult puzzle and discovers an unexpected image. *Le Rossignol* was born of his insect skull, of his binocle, of his sixteen hands, of his tenacious dynamo. *His love was elsewhere*.³⁵

As his biographer Francis Steegmuller so aptly points out in his analysis of the Cocteau-Stravinsky correspondence, this assumption on Cocteau's part was pure nonsense. The composer never showed any real interest in collaborating on *David*.³⁶ And yet in the summer of 1916, Cocteau was still writing Stravinsky of his “veneration,” which had become “well-known. . . . You are the one I admire and respect the most.”³⁷

Stravinsky, however, was not altogether the perfect model. Eventually Cocteau realized *Le Sacre* presented a paradox he found increasingly troublesome, not for its aesthetic implications, but for its effect on the public. In *Le Coq et l'Arlequin*, he writes, “I consider the *Sacre du Printemps* a masterpiece. But in the atmosphere created around its performances, I find a religious complicity among its followers, the same hypnotism as at Bayreuth.”³⁸ And in his “Notes on Music” he concludes, “Any music that attracts a group of ‘faithful’ and that creates a kind of religious atmosphere is suspect.”³⁹

In October 1915, Cocteau met Erik Satie, thanks to the efforts of their mutual friend Valentine Gross, a young painter and Ballets Russes follower. As early as March 1914, only months after meeting Satie, Gross considered him “the French equivalent of Stravinsky in music.”⁴⁰ Whether it was Gross's idea to bring the two together, as implied in Satie's letter to her of 15 October,⁴¹ or Cocteau's, which his biographer proposes,⁴² the two began to see each other regularly after this point. Satie's correspondence with Gross traces the history of his relationship with Cocteau, his frustrations with Cocteau, and his intent to remain independent (presumably in musical matters), as well as their eventual success in attracting Diaghilev and Picasso to the project in July and August 1916. *Parade* evolved, not only as a trans-



Figure 4. Cocteau, Igor Stravinsky at the home of Coco Chanel, 1930, pen, ink, and wax with white chalk on paper.

formation of the ill-fated *David*, but also as a result of Satie's desire to write a new piece rather than make available to Cocteau any preexisting music.⁴³

Satie's music helped Cocteau to go somewhat further in discovering what he truly valued. Like Stravinsky's, it was a reaction to impressionist vagueness—"without the sauce," an expression he borrowed from Rivière's review of *Le Sacre*.⁴⁴ It also "contradicted," for

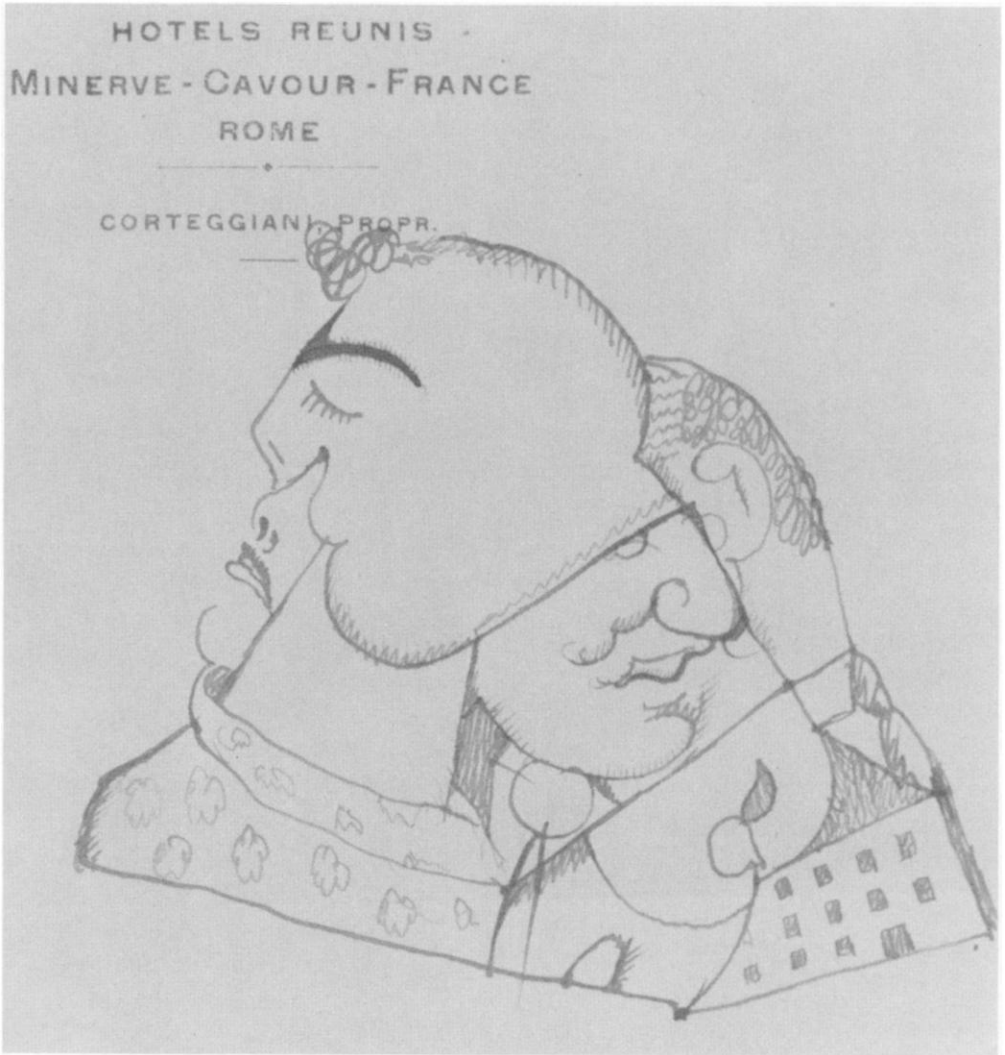


Figure 5. Cocteau, collaborators on *Parade*, 1917, pen and ink on writing paper.

Satie knew he could not follow in the path of *Pelléas*. Cocteau explains Satie's turn to writing counterpoint as "the only way to contradict harmonic refinement. . . . His friends scorn the fugue as an academic exercise, Satie works on it."⁴⁵

The ultimate form of contradiction that Cocteau found in Satie's music—his "opposition in a period of extreme refinement," his rejection of bourgeois values—was the aesthetic of simplicity, which Coc-

teau calls “the greatest audacity of our time. . . . Not a retreat, not a return to old simplicities, not a pastiche of the harpsichordists.” Satie’s simplicity appeared new and “enriched” to Cocteau; in *Parade*, he thought of it as that of a mechanical toy.⁴⁶

The reduction of materials that this simplicity implies was already present in Stravinsky’s music, but while “Stravinskysme risked pushing the young toward a riot of colors, brutalities, and cruelties that are not made for types like us,” Satie’s music seemed to Cocteau “white, and so delicate that in listening to it, one thinks about Nietzsche’s phrase: ideas that change the face of things come from the wings of doves. . . . His music is finally a French music.”⁴⁷ In his “Notes on Music,” it is Satie that Cocteau sees as capable of standing up to Wagner and who, then, becomes Cocteau’s next “school-teacher.”⁴⁸

What he learned from Satie, besides the value of simplicity, again comes from how he perceived Satie’s relationship with his public. The public as a whole did not even know Satie. He had never written a major orchestral piece nor an opera; he spent most of his time in small cafés. From Cocteau’s perspective, this anonymity protected Satie. “The café concert is often pure; the theater always corrupts . . . even a Stravinsky,” he later wrote.⁴⁹ It was certainly not a question of the public’s deifying him, but of Satie’s attracting their interest. Listening to Satie play his *Pieces in the Form of a Pear* for piano four-hands with Ricardo Viñes in 1915, Cocteau began to understand the value of humor in Satie’s music, not only as a tool with which to contradict people’s expectations, but also as a form of social power. Works such as *Airs to Make People Flee* (1897) helped Satie get people’s attention. “They allowed him to stay alive . . . they protected him from hatred and from people tortured by the sublime who only judge a piece by its title.” Cocteau also noticed that when Satie no longer needed humor, he no longer used it. There is none, Cocteau points out, in *Parade* (1917), nor in *Socrate* (1918), nor in the *Nocturnes* (1919).⁵⁰

When referring to Satie, Cocteau defines originality quite differently than he did when discussing Stravinsky: “The profound originality of a Satie teaches young musicians in a way that doesn’t imply they must abandon their own originality. Wagner, Stravinsky, and even Debussy are beautiful octopuses. Whoever approaches them has a hard time extricating themselves from their tentacles: Satie points out an empty path where each one may freely leave his own footprints.”⁵¹ Such a message suggests that Satie’s example, more than that of oth-

ers, provided Cocteau with the encouragement he needed to search out and pursue his own identity.

Satie's example, furthermore, succeeded in turning Cocteau's attention away from the narrowly defined milieu of the aristocrats and their obsession with glory toward the proletarian milieu and, especially, popular music. By the time he wrote *Le Coq et l'Arlequin* in 1918, Cocteau had become critical of the "exhausted public, seated on Louis XVI garlands, Venetian gondolas, soft couches, and oriental cushions. . . . On this diet, one digests in a hammock, one dozes off; one chases away what is really new like a fly; it disturbs."⁵² Cocteau began to realize that there were important groups in Paris that did not form part of this public. With rare exceptions, the painters did not come to the Ballets Russes. "Montparnasse ignores *Le Sacre du printemps*."⁵³ At some point, Cocteau began to frequent different parts of town. In a draft of his "Why I Play Jazz," he mentions meeting his friends in "a practical part of town" and "nevermore having recourse to the old café of Verlaine and Moréas."⁵⁴ There he found a different kind of music, the newest popular music of his time, jazz. This "curious amalgam of the rhythm of machines and the rhythm of Negroes—of the banal cry of the poster and the advertisement of New York and the wooden idols/fetishes from the Ivory Coast" appeared to Cocteau as the ultimate reaction to the "sluggishness of impressionism" and the "haziness of symbolism."⁵⁵

What appealed to him in this music, as in that of Stravinsky and Satie, was again its effect on the public. Note his description of the "jazz band" in one of his notebooks:

Little black orchestras where a barman, surrounded by the accessories for making resonant noises, banging, and whistling, composes cocktails to swallow . . . all this resulting in a furor of sound. Rimbaud's drunken boat which predicts the future in the travel books becomes Cendrars's drunken train (free association, Jules Verne).⁵⁶

The two principal "advantages" of such music, he points out in another notebook, are that first, "it makes so much noise that it suppresses any literary conversation," and second, "it prevents people from taking me seriously."⁵⁷ Given his description of the time spent with such people as Anna de Noailles, these statements represent quite a change of attitude and values. "Interminable dialogues" about "grandeur" and "glory" were not only out of place, but also physically impossible in such a context.

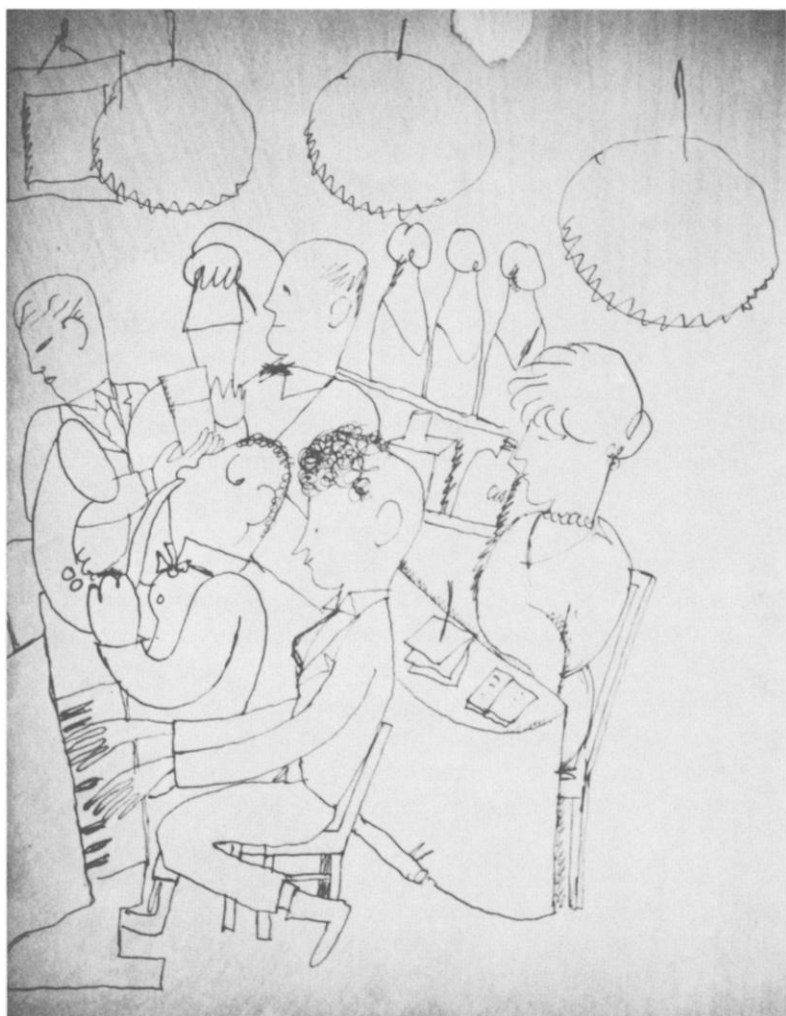


Figure 6. Cocteau, at a jazz bar, ca. 1921, pen and india ink on paper over board.

As Cocteau explains at the end of *Le Coq et l'Arlequin*, the period 1910 to 1920 was for him one of “transformation”: “I was maturing, I was in a growth spurt. It was only natural that after a period of being frivolous, spread very thin, and overly talkative would follow an excessive need for soberness, method, and silence.”⁵⁸ In the music of Les Six, especially Auric and Poulenc, Cocteau found a similar attitude toward popular milieux, popular music, and an art that is

"stripped of the superfluous." Since he wrote *Le Coq* after "all kinds of conversations about music" with Satie and Auric,⁵⁹ it is not clear who had a greater influence on whom, the musicians on Cocteau or he on them. He articulates their shared aesthetic attitudes—"the brief, the gay, the sad without romance." He presages many of their between-the-wars preoccupations: "orchestras without the caress of the strings. A rich orpheon of woodwinds, brass, and percussion," writing for a "mechanical organ"—the pianola, as it turns out.⁶⁰ But as he once pointed out, "I am the friend of the group, not its mentor."⁶¹

His work with these musicians helped him to clarify his own aesthetic goals and to find a revolutionary banner that distinguished him from his contemporaries, yet his interaction with them seems to have been limited to formulating their commonly held aesthetics and to providing them with an outlet for their music. In other words, it does not appear that he had any direct influence on their compositions per se. Milhaud, for example, regretted how Cocteau used his score in the "spectacle-concert," *Le Boeuf sur le toit* (1919).⁶² Rather than constructing a scenario about a carnival celebration in Rio de Janeiro as Milhaud intended for his already-composed music, Cocteau devised a farce set in New York during prohibition. This "Nothing-doing bar," as it was called for the English public, had little to do with the Brazilian popular songs, the tangos, and the sambas in Milhaud's music.

Their next collaborative venture, *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* (1921), involved a scenario and text by Cocteau, music by five of the six members of the group, and costumes designed by Valentine Gross's husband, Jean Hugo. The story of a petit-bourgeois marriage at the Eiffel Tower, conceived as an eighteenth-century style *pièce-ballet*, plays up the nostalgic, the gay, the banal, and the absurd, but incorporates music only as a diversion. Cocteau saw it as "a secret marriage between ancient tragedy and the revue from the end of the year, the chorus, the music-hall number"—in effect, a new genre involving theater, acrobatics, pantomime, drama, orchestra, and speech. He thereby considered it not only "my most beautiful toy," but also "the first work in which I owe nothing to no one, which is unlike any other work and in which I found my code."⁶³

For the participating composers, however, *Les Mariés* represented a far less radical gesture. Of the nine short compositions, the only piece that functions as more than incidental music is by Arthur Honneger, the composer least sympathetic to Cocteau. During his "Funeral March of the General"—a farce incorporating both a theme from Milhaud's previously heard "Nuptial March," much slower and in a



Figure 7. Cocteau, program cover, 1927, lithograph. In this image of Les Six, one can discern not only the various members of the group but also the group as a whole in the shape of a large ear.

minor key, and at its climax, a waltz tune from *Faust*—someone in the play cries out, “Finally! there’s some music.”⁶⁴ The other musical interludes make little if any musical commentary on the scenario. The score remained in oblivion until the 1960s, and the group never worked together again.

The exchange with Auric, Cocteau’s favorite Les Six composer and the person to whom he dedicated *Le Coq*, was of a different nature, yet still not truly significant from a musical perspective. Satie and Picasso did not allow *Parade* to turn out the way Cocteau had envisaged it, with the music serving merely as background to “suggestive noises” such as sirens, typewriters, and dynamos. Although these sounds do appear in the work, Cocteau claims that *Parade* was “so far from what I would have wanted that I wouldn’t go see it in the hall.”⁶⁵ Stravinsky did not actually work with Cocteau until *Oedipus Rex* in 1926–27 when, according to Stravinsky, the composer dictated both story and tone to the poet and rejected Cocteau’s first two versions until he got what he wanted. In Auric, Cocteau found a composer willing to accommodate his desires, but there was still very little interaction between the two. As Auric recalls (with regard to scoring Cocteau films), “He told me simply, evidently: in such-and-such a passage, I imagine a music with this kind of character. It ended there. When I played my music, when he heard my music, there was no discussion of any sort between us. He was happy with what I had done.”⁶⁶ For *La Belle et la Bête* (1946), Cocteau did not even want to hear what music Auric wrote until it was being recorded after the film had been made. The only mark Cocteau seems to have made on the music used in his films is his occasional determination of the order in which its parts would be played, as was the case for *Les Parents terribles* (1948).

“It is not easy to form oneself. To reform oneself is harder still,” Cocteau recounts in his journal.⁶⁷ What makes Cocteau’s musical tastes so illuminating, why they helped him build his own distinct, yet still socially bounded identity, and why the change in these tastes is so revealing are that they reflect and express the paradoxes of the artist in the social world in which Cocteau moved. Even as the poet surprises, stuns, or insults, he appeals to that which his audiences seek from him. The notion of originality—first downplayed in his association with Reynaldo Hahn and then defined as contradiction and glorified in his cult of Stravinsky—almost had to go both ways, as the old debate between “les anciens et les modernes” was being rekindled at the same time as “the new” was becoming increasingly successful as a

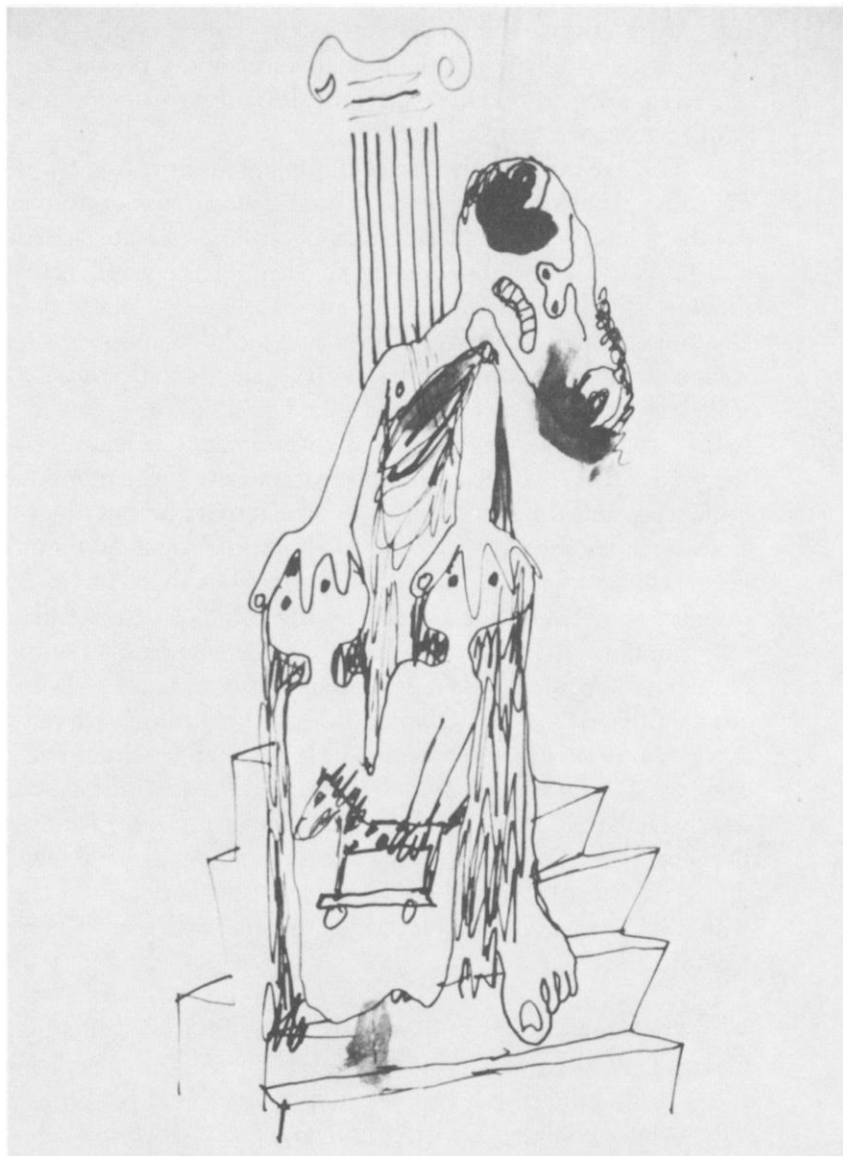


Figure 8. Cocteau, *Oedipus rex*, ca. 1937, pen and ink on tracing paper. Oedipus stands in front of an ionic column, his eyes disfigured with splotches of ink. According to the executive director of the Severin Wunderman Museum, Tony Clark, the two children represent Cocteau and Stravinsky, who, having differed about the production of the opera-oratorio, realize that it is more important than the two of them.

marketing tool. The juxtaposition of the external and the internal, of what the public sees and what the poet wants it to see, the replacement of the simple for the highly refined, the humorous for the serious, noise for literary conversation, the pure for the corrupt—these paradoxical oppositions, characteristic of his life and work, still suggest an artist who wants control, a sublimated control, it is true, that is not unlike that to which his aristocratic audiences aspired even as their social and political status was becoming increasingly negligible. Both Cocteau and his audiences were still ideologically committed to the aristocracy of the gifted. Whether art was “a kind of game and the idea of struggle” irrelevant, as it was in Cocteau’s early career,⁶⁸ or a form of insult, a passageway to the new, as it later became for him, he still wanted to drive that automobile with the public following behind by bus. He still wanted admiration rather than criticism.

To what extent the self-appointed avant-garde represents quasi-aristocratic values and mores is not the subject here; Poulenc’s statements about music and the subjects he chose to set to music reveal the direction in which this Les Six composer was moving. But one wonders about the extent to which the values that Cocteau assigned to music sheltered him from the fiercely political issues of the day. Composers found ways both to confront their public and yet remain accepted. Did Cocteau realize that the sanctity and “purity” of music, especially certain new music, could help him to construct an apparently apolitical identity, one that reached full bloom in his works based on classical mythologies? I would argue that the last words of his musical manifesto, *Le Coq et l’Arlequin*, address this very point:

Shelter well your gift of making miracles because “if they know that you are a missionary, they will cut out your tongue and tear off your fingernails.”⁶⁹

Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented to the symposium, “Jean-Cocteau and the Parisian Avant-garde,” University of California, Irvine, 19 Feb. 1989.

1. Jean Cocteau, *Le Coq et l’Arlequin. Notes autour de la musique 1918* (Paris: Stock/Musique, 1979), 70. All translations are by me unless stated otherwise.
2. Ned Rorem, “Cocteau and Music,” *Jean Cocteau and the French Scene* (New York: Abbeville, 1984), 155.
3. Cocteau, *Le Coq*, 71.
4. Jann Pasler, “Pelléas and Power: Forces behind the Reception of Debussy’s Opera,” *19th Century Music* 10, no. 3 (1987): 263.

5. Cocteau, *Portraits-Souvenir 1900–1914* (Paris: Grasset, 1935), 23.
6. Marcel Proust, "Un dimanche au Conservatoire," *Cahiers Marcel Proust*, nouvelle série 3: *Textes retrouvés* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 115.
7. Pierre Chanel, *Album Cocteau* (Monaco: Henri Veyrier-Tchou, 1979), vi.
8. Octave Mirbeau, *Des Artistes*, 2nd series (Paris: Flammarion, 1924), 253, 259–60.
9. Cocteau, *Portraits-Souvenir*, 39–40.
10. These numbers come from counting subscription lists published in the *Annuaire des Artistes* (1900).
11. Valentine Hugo, Notes for "Une heure avec Jean Cocteau," 18 Nov. 1951. Manuscript in the Valentine Hugo Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin (hereafter referred to as HRC).
12. Georges Auric, "Témoignages," *Cahiers Jean Cocteau*, vol. 7, *Avec les musiciens* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 71.
13. Louis Schneider, "Opéra-Comique: *La Carmélite*," *Revue Musicale* (Dec. 1902), 509.
14. Gaston Carraud, *La Liberté* (18 Dec. 1902).
15. O'Divy, *Le Soleil* (17 Dec. 1902).
16. Robert de Flers, *Le Figaro* (18 Dec. 1902).
17. Pasler, 250–51.
18. Cocteau, *Portraits-Souvenir*, 220–22.
19. Cocteau, *Le Coq*, 47.
20. Henri Ghéon, "Les Poèmes," *Nouvelle Revue Française* 45 (1912): 507–11.
21. S. L. Grigoriev, *The Diaghilev Ballet 1909–1929*, trans. Vera Bowen (New York: Penguin, 1960), 78.
22. Francis Steegmuller, *Cocteau* (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1973), 67.
23. Cocteau, *Prospectus 1916* (Paris: Stock, 1924), 9.
24. Wallace Fowlie, ed. *The Journals of Jean Cocteau* (New York: Criterion, 1956), 41.
25. Jacques Rivière, "Le Sacre du Printemps," *Nouvelle Revue Française* 5 (1 Nov. 1913): 706–30. In this review, Rivière contrasts Stravinsky's ballet with Debussy's music, saying it is the first masterpiece to "break away from debussysme," to renounce impressionist "sauces": "Stravinsky passes from the sung to the spoken, from invocation to discourse, from poetry to prose." In an unpublished letter to Rivière dated 5 Nov. 1913, Cocteau wrote, "I haven't yet had the pleasure of meeting you, but why hold oneself back? Never have I read a critical article more beautiful than yours on *Le Sacre*. I admire you and feel I must let you know. The day we will meet I will tell you the intimate service that this article will render to Igor S. for whom my friendship holds you in profound recognition" (Alain Rivière Collection, France). In his admiration of Rivière's review, however, one should note that Cocteau ignores Rivière's

clarification of Stravinsky's work as "not simply a negative novelty": "Stravinsky did not simply amuse himself by taking the opposite path from Debussy. If he chose instruments that don't quiver, that say nothing more than they say, of which the timbre is without expansion and which are like abstract words, it is because he wants to speak directly, expressly, by name. There is his principal preoccupation. There is his personal innovation in contemporary music" (706–9). Moreover, both Rivière and Cocteau ignore Ravel's contribution to such notions, for example, in his *Histoires naturelles* (1906).

26. Cocteau, "Présentation d'Oeuvres de Musiciens Nouveaux," Institut des Hautes Etudes de Belgique, 19 Dec. 1919, HRC ms.

27. Cocteau, *Le Coq*, 72–73.

28. Autograph letter Jean Cocteau no. 3, Music Division, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

29. Cocteau, "Présentation d'oeuvres."

30. Cocteau to Stravinsky, n.d., *Stravinsky: Selected Correspondence*, vol. 1, ed. Robert Craft (New York: Knopf, 1982), 85–86.

31. Cocteau, *Le Coq*, 86.

32. Cocteau, *David*, HRC ms.

33. Milorad, "Avec les musiciens," *Cahiers Jean Cocteau* 7:22. See also Jerrold Siegel, *Bohemian Paris* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 359–63.

34. Steegmuller, 81.

35. Alain Rivière Collection.

36. Steegmuller, 73–84.

37. Cocteau to Stravinsky, 85–86.

38. Cocteau, *Le Coq*, 53–54.

39. Cocteau, "Notes on Music," HRC ms.

40. Valentine Gross to Zélie Gross, 4 Mar. 1914, Valentine Hugo Collection, HRC.

41. Valentine Hugo Collection, HRC.

42. Steegmuller, 102, 111. In an undated letter to Misia Sert, Cocteau writes that "Satie asked for my collaboration at the very moment when I was going to ask for his" (117).

43. Satie to Valentine Gross, 25 Apr. 1916, Valentine Hugo Collection, HRC. See also Steegmuller, 111.

44. Cocteau, *Le Coq*, 68. See Rivière, 706.

45. Cocteau, "Présentation d'oeuvres."

46. Cocteau, "Présentation d'oeuvres"; *Le Coq*, 60.

47. Cocteau, "Présentation d'oeuvres." Of course, Cocteau was not alone at the time in using national identity as a way of attracting attention to a composer's work,

of ascribing validity, and even of hoping for a place in history through it. Debussy used the same tactic throughout the first decade of the century. By 1915, to bolster his own identity as Rameau's successor in the realm of French composition, he was willing to bury all French composers from Berlioz to his contemporaries with the claim that "since Rameau we don't have any clearly French tradition" (Claude Debussy, *Monsieur Croche et autres Ecrits*, ed. François Lesure (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 260.

48. Fowlie, 38.
49. Cocteau, *Le Coq*, 62, 79.
50. Cocteau, "Présentation d'oeuvres"; see also *Le Coq*, 56–57.
51. Cocteau, *Le Coq*, 59.
52. Cocteau, *Le Coq*, 88.
53. Cocteau, *Le Coq*, 93–94.
54. Cocteau, [Miscellany, Drafts and Notes] "Pourquoi je joue du jazz," HRC ms.
55. Cocteau, "Notebook on Art, Music, and Poetry," HRC ms. Even though Cocteau saw jazz, the music halls, and the circus as totally different kinds of artistic experiences from those offered by impressionist or symbolist works, Debussy too looked to those same sources as fodder for his imagination, and many of his works employ popular tunes or humoristic gestures inspired by those nonelitist milieux.
56. Cocteau, "Notebook on Art."
57. Cocteau, "Pourquoi je joue du jazz."
58. Cocteau, *Le Coq*, 97–98.
59. Auric, 62.
60. Cocteau, *Le Coq*, 64–65, 69.
61. Cocteau, "Pourquoi je joue du jazz."
62. Steegmuller quotes Milhaud from his memoirs: "Forgetting that I had written *Choéphores*, the public and the critics decided that I was a comical and entertaining composer . . . me who hated the comical and who, in composing *Le Boeuf sur le toit*, aspired only to writing a gay diversion, without pretension, in memory of the Brazilian rhythms that had so seduced me and great gods! never made me laugh" (180).
63. Cocteau's discussion of the work as a "spectacle" first appeared in *La Danse*, no. 9 (see Jacques Pradère, "Les Mariés . . . du group des Six," program note on the compact disc Ades 14.146–2, a reissue of the 1966 recording by the Orchestre de l'O.R.T.F. conducted by Darius Milhaud); Steegmuller, 204; Fowlie, 38.
64. Milhaud, "L'enregistrement des 'Mariés,'" program note on the compact disc Ades 14.146–2.
65. Cocteau, *Le Coq*, 66–67.
66. Auric, 68.
67. Fowlie, 38.
68. Fowlie, 41.
69. Cocteau, *Le Coq*, 82.