

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: FRENCH CHARACTER PIECES (1860-1960)

Cindy Lin, Doctor of Musical Arts, 2013

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My dissertation recording project explores a variety of musical works that realize the expressive and organizational potential of a highly coloristic approach to composition. I focus on French character pieces written between 1860 and 1960. Although numerous French character pieces were written before 1860 and after 1960, I have narrowed the scope of the list to the time range of a century. In this research, I analyze some of the works of ten composers in chronological order to show the subtle changes in style over time. The micro-level expressive qualities of these pieces as well as their macro-level organizational structures are analyzed in this document.

The sources for the selected works include: *48 Esquisses*, Op. 63 by Charles-Valentin Alkan; *Dix pièces pittoresques* by Emmanuel Chabrier; *Etudes de Concert*, Op. 35 and *Romances sans paroles*, Op. 76 by Cécile Chaminade; *Préludes* (Book I and II) and *Estampes* by Claude Debussy; *Miroirs* by Maurice Ravel; *Cerdaña* by Déodat de

Séverac; *Les Heures persanes*, Op. 65 by Charles Koechlin; *Napoli Suite* by Francis Poulenc; *La Muse ménagère*, Op. 245 by Darius Milhaud; and *Préludes* and *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jésus* by Olivier Messiaen.

I have recorded approximately two hours of solo piano music. The selected pieces were recorded on a Steinway "D" in Martha-Ellen Tye Recital Hall at Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa by Peter Nothnagle. This document is available in the digital Repository at the University of Maryland and the CD's are available through the Library System at the University of Maryland.

FRENCH CHARACTER PIECES (1860-1960)

by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Introduction   | 1  |
| Charles-Valentin Alkan   | 2  |
| Emmanuel Chabrier  | 5  |
| Cécile Chaminade   | 7  |
| Claude Debussy   | 7  |
| Maurice Ravel  | 9  |
| Déodat de Séverac  | 11 |
| Charles Koechlin   | 13 |
| Francis Poulenc  | 14 |
| Darius Milhaud   | 15 |
| Olivier Messiaen   | 16 |
| Conclusion   | 19 |
| Programs   | 20 |
| Bibliography   | 22 |
| Supplemental Files: French Character Pieces, 1860 – 1960 (Disc One and Disc Two) |    |

## Introduction

Increasing concert activity, a renewed interest in musical traditions of the past, and the rising popularity of new music in Paris stimulated the city to regain its prominence as a cultural and musical Mecca in the second half of the nineteenth-century. French composers during this period tended to draw on styles and techniques of their native forebears, including *ancien regime* court composers François Couperin (1668-1733), Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764), and the more nearly contemporaneous Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924), Henri Duparc (1848-1933), and Vincent d'Indy (1851-1931). Such composers approached music more as a sonorous form than as “expression.”<sup>1</sup> As French visual artists of the late nineteenth-century increasingly created works as an external reflection of their inner perceptions of an image, similarly, French composers tone-painted perceptions of objects onto a sound-scape filtered through the mind’s eye. Thus, instead of the intense emotional displays typical of Romanticism, subtle coloristic patterns of tones, rhythms, and timbres permeate the music of this time. Such music is economical and reserved, rather than profuse or complex.<sup>2</sup>

During the one-hundred-year period 1860-1960, French musical style was significantly transformed. Seeking to establish their own individual musical personalities, composers during this period reexamined their basic assumptions about historic music

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<sup>1</sup> Donald J. Grout, *A History of Western Music*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 740.

<sup>2</sup> W. Wright Roberts, “The Pianoforte Works of Chabrier,” *Music & Letters*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Apr., 1923), 143.

practices in order to create new works. Exploiting new sonorities and expressive approaches thus became essential to their efforts.

The selected pieces carry descriptive titles inspired by natural scenes, symbols, paintings, objects, contemplation, poems, or pictorial imagery. Some selections portray visual and auditory images of otherworldly ecstasy, while others focus on interior or spiritual aspects of reality. Each of the French composers discussed in this study possesses an individual and distinctive approach to evoking musical expression. Sonority and tonal color are essential to their common musical language.

The origin of French character pieces can be traced back to Couperin's *Pieces de clavecin* (published in 1713, 1716-1717, 1722, and 1730). Most of these pieces are dances, but there are already a substantial number of character and descriptive pieces. Couperin's belief that music should inspire the deepest feelings and thoughts and should be expressive or represent something specific may account for his preference for character and descriptive music over conventional dance pieces.<sup>3</sup> Couperin's music was not only a synthesis of all that had come before, it profoundly influenced all that would follow.

### **Charles-Valentin Alkan**

Although his music was completely forgotten for several decades, recently, pianists such as Raymond Lewenthal and Ronald Smith started to realize the significance of Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813-1888) as an inventive composer. Alkan's creative

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Lewis Marshall, *Eighteenth-Century Keyboard Music* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1994), 125.

personality could be traced back to his Jewish background. Such titles as *Prières*, *Psaume*, and *Super flumina Babylonis* remind us of his biblical studies and suggest the involvement of traditional Hebrew sources. The originality of Alkan's piano writing is rooted in the obsessional and the systematic.<sup>4</sup> Alkan's preoccupation with the technical possibilities of his instrument forces him to squeeze every conceivable permutation out of his keyboard invention. The second and third *Esquisses*, entitled "Le Staccatissimo" and "Le Legatissimo," account for such deliberate juxtapositions; the one an extension of Scarlatti's brilliant keyboard technique, and the other akin to Couperin's more lyrical writing. Alkan's musical style suggests glimpses of Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Chopin, Schumann and Liszt with its overall impression remains essentially French in its clarity of form and texture. However, his ability to surprise by some unexpected twist of harmony, some unexpected modulation or some curiosity of texture that adds freshness to his invention and to probe beneath the surface to illuminate the familiar in an unfamiliar light or to place it in an unaccustomed setting makes him a disturbing rather than a reassuring composer. His music has been frequently praised for its "purity" and "classicality."<sup>5</sup> As Humphrey Searle suggested in his article "A Plea for Alkan," "Alkan's best effects are due to economy of means, which not only increases the clarity and cogency of his longer works, but ensures that his smallest pieces have a point or character of their own."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ronald Smith, *Alkan: The Music* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., Inc., 1987), 245.

<sup>5</sup> Humphrey Searle, "A Plea for Alkan," *Music & Letters*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (July, 1937), 277.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

Alkan composed his *48 Motifs*, subtitled *Esquisses* (Sketches), in 1861. This collection, which portrays a great variety of moods, is arranged in a tonal sequence that allows all of the major and relative minor keys to appear twice as key centers. This work derives its multi-faceted compositional style from a diverse range of composers, such as Domenico Scarlatti, Jean-Philippe Rameau, François Couperin, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Ludwig van Beethoven, Felix Mendelssohn, Fryderyk Chopin, Robert Schumann, and Franz Liszt. Such traditional forms as the toccata and scherzo and dance movements such as the rigaudon are featured in this suite. In this collection, Alkan's aural imagination and sonic mastery is tempered by a frankly conservative tonal language. Many of the *Esquisses* have fanciful titles. Some are mood paintings while others are purely descriptive. No. 9, "Confidence," one of the mood paintings, is a highly lyrical piece that portrays a tranquil atmosphere. No. 10, "Increpatio" (Rebuke), is defined rhythmically by its aggressively strummed arpeggios answered by swirling quintuplets. Its rhythmic power is increased by bass harmonies and the sharpened seventh within the arpeggios. The quintuplet figure persists in the piece, which boils up to a dissonant climax. No. 23, "L'homme aux sabots" (The Man in clogs), is a piece in which heavy accents mark out the regular clanking of this style of footwear. Ronald Smith suggests that it is a jaunty grotesquerie with a tramping, grimacing accompaniment to frighten children.<sup>7</sup> No. 24, "Contredanse," is reminiscent of eighteenth-century dance style. No. 29, "Délire" (Frenzy), is an ecstatic study in wide-spanned agility, with left hand leaps while the melody is introduced in the broken-triads by the right hand. No. 31, "Début de quatuor," is a tribute to classical string quartet style. This movement features the

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<sup>7</sup> Ronald Smith, *Alkan: The Music*, 47.

persistent imitation and the extremes of contrast and range point that suggest the late string quartets of Beethoven. No. 39, “Héraclite et Démocrite,” a piece in which two characters are introduced independently, is an astounding double portrait involving the opposition and combination of 2/4 (quarter note= 63) and 4/4 (whole note= 63) time. Héraclitus is portrayed by the first D minor section with heavy second quaver beat chords; also characteristic of the dark mood is the emptiness and despair of the open fifth intervals. Démocritus is given the sunnier related key of A major. The most innovative part of the piece is the very close juxtaposition of the Héraclitus and Démocritus duality near the end of the piece. No. 41, “Les Enharmoniques,” is an exercise in chromaticism. This piece interplays with its expressively diatonic harmonies alongside altered chromaticism.

### **Emmanuel Chabrier**

Although music seems always to have been his passion, not until Emmanuel Chabrier (1841-1894) was close to age forty did he turn to composition as a full-time occupation. After reaching compositional maturity, he crafted works characterized by their brilliance, wit, and vivid harmonic, rhythmic, and orchestral coloring. Chabrier’s piano music, which throbs with an insistent beating rhythm, remains at the same time concise and exuberant, spontaneous and refined.

Chabrier’s *Dix pièces pittoresques* (Ten Picturesque Pieces), from 1881, have individual titles that suggest a mood or a scene. Jann Pasler stated that Renoir was

“perhaps referring to the *Pièces Pittoresques* of Chabrier,” when he spoke to Wagner in 1882 of “the Impressionists in music.”<sup>8</sup>

The eighteen measures of “*Mélancolie*” (Melancholy) is a mood picture, the mood being a curious one of wistful sadness, tinged with foreboding and surprise. The alternating 9/8 and 6/8 bars create an atmosphere of wandering tenderness and uncertainty; the piece closes with a canon at the double octaves followed by low fifths. “*Tourbillon*” (Whirlwind) starts off with the ascending arpeggiated unison, in which is the main melodic figure of the movement. The insistent beating rhythm suggests the aggressive force of a whirlwind throughout the piece. Over an undulating ostinato, “*Sous-bois*” (Under the trees) insinuates a melody redolent of the most blithesome happiness. This piece portrays joy, peace, and broad spaces. The constantly changing harmonies in the right-hand are accompanied by the murmuring bass figure throughout the movement. Chabrier’s gift for melody permeates his scores. His voice is more akin to Chopin than to Fauré’s textures; however, his harmonies are French that they often seem contrapuntally generated, which accounts for some of the richer and more “daring” dissonances.<sup>9</sup> “*Improvisation*” demonstrates Chabrier’s ability for crafting music beautifully and pianistically. This piece attains to passion; it builds in a long growingly rhapsodical climax, in which the melodic line streams out into passionate arabesque. This piece is full of striking passages that are throwbacks to Chopin and prescient of what would later be heard in Debussy and Poulenc.

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<sup>8</sup> Jann Pasler, “Impressionism,” *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Grove’s Dictionaries, Inc., 2001), 90.

<sup>9</sup> Barela, “Chabrier: Piano Pieces,” *American Record Guide*, Vol. 69, Issue 4 (July/August, 2006), 80.

## **Cécile Chaminade**

Although Cécile Chaminade (1857-1944) composed music in a variety of genres, her reputation rests almost solely on a handful of brief, salon-style piano pieces. The six *Etudes de Concert*, Op. 35, (1886) are not densely virtuosic in the manner of such other nineteenth-century etude collections as Chopin's two sets of twelve *Etudes* (Op.10, 1829-32, and Op. 25, 1832-37) or Liszt's *12 Etudes d'exécution transcendante* (1851), yet they bespeak a highly sophisticated style.

Chaminade's "Automne" (Etude No. 2) begins *lento*, sonorously, in D-flat Major, with a luscious melody in the middle voice, continues with a *con fuoco* middle section, in which earth-shattering tritones move through the bass, and returns at the end to a calm atmosphere reminiscent of the opening. Six *Romances sans paroles*, Op. 76, written in 1894, are six songs without words. Each piece is straightforward, with a single mood or image. For instance, No. 1, "Souvenance," portrays an image of remembrance typical of Romantic melancholy.

## **Claude Debussy**

Claude Debussy (1862-1918) produced a substantial body of orchestral and piano works deliberately independent of the Germanic tradition's harmonic, formal and coloristic norms. Although Chabrier was the first composer to translate the idea of "Impressionism" into music, it was Debussy who cultivated the new impressionistic

sensibility to its apogee.<sup>10</sup> Debussy succeeded in evoking the precise tone color from each instrument for which he composed, to capture successfully the expressive demands of his music. Influenced by the Balinese gamelan he experienced for the first time at the Paris International Exposition in 1889, Debussy transferred the gamelan's shining coloristic sonority to western music's instrumental timbres and tonal language. He created his signature harmonic background by adding timbral depth to many of his descriptive pieces, including such piano works of his as the two sets of *Images* (1901-05 and 1907), *Children's Corner* (1906-8), and the twenty-four *Préludes* (two books, composed, respectively, in 1909-10 and 1911-13). In *Estampes* (1903), for piano solo, he matches the title of the piece to the character of the music.

“Estampes” means print or engraving. This piano suite contains three movements that are musical depictions of particular moments at particular locales. First movement, “Pagodes” (Pagodas), evokes images of East Asia, in which Debussy makes extensive use of pentatonic scales and mimics Chinese and Japanese traditional melodies while also incorporating hints of Javanese gamelan percussion. The music hovers mostly at low and medium dynamic levels, rising for only a couple of sonorous climaxes that soon recede into the softly tinkling texture. “La Soirée dans Grenade” (Evening in Granada) uses the habañera rhythm of Flamenco and the strumming of guitars that evokes an image of Granada, Spain. “Jardins sous la pluie” (Gardens in the Rain) describes a garden in Debussy's native France during a violent rainstorm. Throughout the piece, there are sections that evoke the sound of the wind blowing, thunderstorm raging, and raindrops falling. The piece incorporates fragments of the French nursery songs “Do, do l'enfant

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<sup>10</sup> Jann Pasler, “Impressionism,” 91.

do” and “Nous n’irons plus au bois,” suggesting a child unable to go out and play but taking great interest in the rain, watching snug behind some window. Chromatic, whole tone, major, and minor scales are used in this movement.

Each of Debussy’s *Préludes* Book I and Book II is a short but substantial work that conveys a particular mood of impression suggested by its title. “Les Collines d’Anacapri” (The Hills of Anacapri) is the fifth of the twelve works that comprise Debussy’s *Préludes* Book I. Typically, the pieces in both Book I and II deal with nature, with the earthy or contemporary world, or with legend. The work is one of the set’s nature pieces, but it also falls into the second category, owing to its use of the theme from an Italian folk song. The piece is a lively scherzo in tarantella rhythm whose theme exudes the sunny and exotic flavors of Italy. “Minstrels,” the last of the *Préludes* from Book I, is a sardonic parody of the music heard in turn-of-the-century music halls. This movement uses crisp rhythms and “popular” harmonies punctuated by sharp dissonances. In “Ondine,” the eighth of the twelve *Préludes* in Book II, Debussy depicts the legendary water sprite with a subtly changing atmosphere. Typical “water-like” arpeggiated figuration alternates with scherzando outbursts throughout the piece.

## **Maurice Ravel**

Although often aligned with Debussy’s impressionistic style, the music of Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) encompasses a variety of influences, while carrying his distinctive stamp that is marked by consummate craftsmanship, traditional forms, diatonic and modal melodies, and complex harmonies--all within an essentially tonal

language. Ravel's works are often separated into two categories: 1) Impressionism, and 2) Neo-Classicism. *Jeux d'eau* (1901), *Gaspard de la nuit* (1908), the orchestral suite *Rapsodie espagnole* (1907-8), and the ballet *Daphnis et Chloé* (1909-12) evoke impressionism by means of their strong musical imagery and colorful harmonies. Conversely, such piano pieces as *Menuet antique* (1895), *Pavane pour une infante défunte* (1899), and *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (1914-17) borrow from the French Baroque tradition of stylized dances and suites. The descriptive pieces in the set *Miroirs* (Reflections) (1904-05) belong to Impressionism, in regard to their distinct auditory imagery and brilliant harmonies.

In the *Miroirs*, Ravel sought not to express emotion but to give life to states of mind by representing the faces and scenes that gave rise to them. Ravel makes use of a completely new style in these five pieces with assured freedom, which show by their dedications that they are perfectly in keeping with the spirit of "Les Apaches," a group of French creative revolutionaries including musicians, writers and artists which formed around 1900. Thus Léon Paul Fargue is presented with "Noctuelles," Ricardo Viñes with "Oiseaux tristes," Paul Sordes with "Une Barque sur l'océan," Michel-Dimitri Calvocoressi with "L'Alorada del gracioso," and Maurice Delage with "La Vallée des cloches." The opening movement of the set "Noctuelles" is a highly chromatic work, maintaining a nocturnal mood throughout. It is a piece of rhythmic flexibility that incorporates extensive cross-rhythms and frequent meter changes. The middle section is calm, with rich textures and flowing melodies. The third movement, "Une Barque sur l'océan," recounts the sailing of a small boat upon the waves of the ocean. Arpeggiated sections and sweeping melodies imitate the flow of ocean currents. The final movement,

“La Vallée des cloches,” evokes the sounds of various bells through its use of sonorous harmonies.

### **Déodat de Séverac**

Déodat de Séverac (1872-1921) was among the composers influenced by Debussy.<sup>11</sup> The conservative expressive language of his works, displaying subtlety and sophistication, is distinctive in its frequent use of modal writing and folk idioms. De Séverac’s piano music is often pictorial. In his article “Impressionism in Music and Painting and Déodat de Séverac,” Demet Akkilic remarked “Just as the impressionism artists depicted nature going out of their workrooms outdoors, Séverac, being affected by nature colours, smell and sound, communicated with the sun, clouds and the sky and considered himself ‘a rural composer.’”<sup>12</sup>

De Séverac’s piano cycle *Cerdaña* (1911), which depicts a musical journey through the Cerdaña region of Catalonia, includes Séverac’s impressions of his trip to the Catalan Pyrénées-Orientales mountain villages of Puigcerda, Font Romeu, and Llivia, all of which are represented in the five movements. De Séverac’s suite starts with “En Tartane: l’arrivée en Cerdagne” (In the Tartane: Arrival in Cerdaña.) “En Tartane” begins to reveal the countryside, signaled by the flute of the Pyrenees goat herders. Then, the Tartan rolls along noisily, to the fast trot of its mules, stopping for an instant... then

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<sup>11</sup> Demet Akkilic, “Impressionism in Music and Painting and Déodat de Séverac,” *Turkish Journal of Music Education*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (June, 2009), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

starts off again, finally stopping in Cerdanya with the reminder of the flute of the goat herders.<sup>13</sup> Sectional divisions and thematic recurrences transpire within the first movement, which contains irregular phrase lengths and is in the following form: Introduction-A-B-A-B-A-Coda. An initial theme occurs in the opening A section within five different keys. The theme then recurs with different patterns within ensuing A sections. A second theme occurs in Section B in the key of C minor in a passage labeled in the score as “Esperanza,” which recurs in a new key within the second B section. The thematic recurrences epitomize the spirit and cyclic nature of the suite. The third movement of the set, “Les Ménétriers et glaneuses”: souvenir d’un pèlerinage a Font-Romeu (Fiddlers and Gleaners: Memories of a Pilgrimage to Font-Romeu), depicts a pilgrimage to an ancient sanctuary of the Virgin Mary in the Catalan mountain village of Font-Romeu.<sup>14</sup> This movement consists of two themes. The first theme is inspired by a popular *sardana* theme of the region, and the piano evokes the type of Catalan *cobla*.<sup>15</sup> Pianistic passages include fourths and fifths that are common in *cobla* harmonies. The second theme is a quieter *goig* theme, evoking the prayers of pilgrims, is also included following the *sardana* section before again returning to the dance played by the *cobla*. The *goig* is a Catalan hymn primarily in honor of the Virgin Mary and was often used in Séverac’s later compositions.<sup>16</sup> The piece ends by alluding to the goat herder’s flute

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<sup>13</sup> Robert F. Waters, *Déodat de Séverac* (England: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008), 212.

<sup>14</sup> Robert F. Waters, *Déodat de Séverac*, 214.

<sup>15</sup> Robert F. Waters. *Déodat de Séverac*, 212.

<sup>16</sup> Robert F. Waters, *Déodat de Séverac*, 214.

(derived from the first movement.) De Séverac depicts the ancient custom of uniting dance with Catalan religious traditions in “Ménétriers et glaneuses.”

## **Charles Koechlin**

Charles Koechlin’s (1867-1950) music is uncomplicated but colorful and mildly impressionistic. Many of his works, although sectional, unfold almost as improvisations. His melodies in particular tend toward unrestricted and continual motion. Harmony and tonal color are essential in Koechlin’s music. By freely using both polytonality and atonality, the musical idiom present in *Les Heures persanes* established Koechlin among the avant-garde of French composers of his time. *Les Heures persanes*, completed as a piano suite in 1919 and orchestrated in 1921, evokes the mysteries of the night and bursts of light in a dream of imagination.

Koechlin himself described that “Certainly I benefited by the innovation embodied in ‘Pelléas et Mélisande’ and also in the works of Chabrier, Satie and Franck – whom one is inclined to forget – but in spite of my admiration for Debussy, it cannot be said that I was a Debussyist. My style of writing and thought were different, as can be seen already in my ‘Three Poems on the Jungle Book’ which were written before ‘Pelléas’ and even before the ‘Nocturnes’. They showed a feeling – a need for rhythm in contrast to the admirable ‘Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune,’ and a contrapuntal style writing in which the spirit of the fugue is never far way. By this time I had heard ‘Le Sacre du Printemps,’ and Darius Milhaud had introduced me to his first works, which reflected the need I felt for polytonal writing.”<sup>17</sup>

Charles Koechlin never visited Persia. His *Les Heures persanes* is loosely based on the travel book *Vers Ispahan* (Towards Isfahan) of Pierre Loti, who journeyed

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<sup>17</sup> Rollo H. Myers, “Charles Koechlin: Some Recollections,” *Music & Letters*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (July, 1965), 218.

overland from the Persian Gulf to see Isfahan in the season of roses. The titles attached to the sixteen movements suggest a journey starting before dawn on one day and concluded after nightfall on a second. Koechlin's inner preoccupation with the theme of light- the changes between light and dark, sun and moon, day and night, month and season is revealed in all his creative periods and often makes its way into the musical interpretation itself as the playing instruction. For instance, "En Vue de la ville" (In view of the town), "Chant du soir" (Evening song), and "A'lombre, près de la fontaine de marbre" (In the shade, near the marble fountain) are incidental and pictorial, which evokes the most discreet hints of oriental color.

### **Francis Poulenc**

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) was the leading composer of "Les Six," a group of French composers devoted to turning music away from Impressionism, formality, and intellectualism. The five other musicians were: Georges Auric, Louis Durey, Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, and Germaine Tailleferre. Although different in their styles of composition and artistic inclination, they continued collective participation in various musical events. Poulenc wrote in a direct but tuneful manner, often juxtaposing the witty and ironic with the sentimental or melancholy. He never experimented with the popular devices of "machine music," asymmetrical rhythms, and polyharmonies cultivated by Honegger and Milhaud. Futuristic projections held little interest for him. He was content to follow the gentle neo-Classical formation of Ravel's piano music and songs.

Poulenc began sketching his three-movement *Napoli – Suite pour le piano* in 1922 during a visit to Italy, completing it in Nazelles in September 1925. The suite opens with a “Barcarolle,” a flowing cantilena, with a thin two-voice texture and lilting rhythms. The following movement is the lyrical “Nocturne.” The movement is in ABA structure, where the B section captures the brutality of sharp dissonance in contrast to the tranquil and lyrical beginning and ending. The third movement, “Caprice italien,” suggesting the bustling city of Naples, is described by Poulenc as a dance in the style of Chabrier’s *Bourrée fantasque*.<sup>18</sup> “Caprice italien” begins in a light, playful mood suggestive of the tarantella. Yet, at the beginning of the B section of the ABC structure, the writing becomes heavier and gradually more affected, eventually reaching its climax at the end. The music is effective, virtuosic, and exuberant.

## **Darius Milhaud**

Darius Milhaud (1892-1974), a prolific twentieth-century composer, was another member of “Les Six.” One of the most important aspects of his music is its consistent use of polytonality. For the most part, he employed polytonal techniques in order to extend harmonic possibilities in a consistent manner.<sup>19</sup> Milhaud succeeded in establishing a style that was distinctly and identifiably his own. His melodies are

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<sup>18</sup> Francis Poulenc, “Letter to Valentine Hugo,” [September 25, 1925], *Francis Poulenc: Correspondance, 1910 – 1963*. ed. Myriam Chimènes (Paris: Fayard, 1994), 263.

<sup>19</sup> David Burge, *Twentieth-Century Piano Music* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1990), 112.

nostalgically lyrical and his instrumental writing is of great complexity, and yet entirely within the capacities of modern virtuoso technique.

During his years in the United States, Milhaud wrote *La Muse ménagère* (The Household Muse) in Oakland, California, in 1944 as a tribute to his wife, Madeleine. *La Muse ménagère* is written in a straightforward, direct, and uncomplicated style. The program of *La Muse ménagère* is drawn from Milhaud's own home environment and is a deeply personal work that fairly beams with the love and respect that Milhaud felt for Madeleine. Paul Collaer wrote in his book *Darius Milhaud*, "Most of the fifteen pieces could even be described as 'silent music,' meaning the kind of silence that descends on a household toward evening, when thoughts turn inward, few words need to be exchanged, and all is at peace."<sup>20</sup> The titles of the pieces that make up *La Muse ménagère* are self-explanatory, from the opening and closing pieces in gratitude to his wife for housework of all kinds as well as for moments of leisure in a busy day. For example, the suite opens with a dedication to his wife, "La Mienne" (My Own), "Les Soins du ménage" (Household Cares), a moment of poetry in "La Posie" and the washing is done in "La Lessive." This collection is the private diary of a tranquil, loving, and protected home.

## **Olivier Messiaen**

The music of Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) is distinguished by his devotion to Catholicism, exoticism, and nature. In synthesizing his individual style, Messiaen discovered in the music of Debussy such exotic modes as whole-tone and diminished

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<sup>20</sup> Paul Collaer, *Darius Milhaud* (San Francisco: San Francisco Press, Inc., 1988), 186.

scales, calling them “modes of limited transposition.”<sup>21</sup> The utilization of these modes enabled Messiaen to create harmonic progressions and melodies free of the tonic-dominant polarity of traditional tonal music. Messiaen developed a strong interest in rhythm, through his investigations of Gregorian chant, ancient Greek poetic meters, the Indian raga, and music for the gamelan. Messiaen’s imaginative use of tonal color, rhythm, and register is represented in his character pieces.

The eight *Préludes*, published in 1929, carry evocative titles that often suggest meditative nature. For example, “La Colombe” and “Un Reflet dans le vent,” look back to the earlier impressionistic style which strives both to paint a picture and express a sentiment.<sup>22</sup> Messiaen used a variety of traditional forms such as the sonata, binary, or rondo form in the *Préludes*. Two devices employed in the *Préludes* are of particular importance in view of later developments. One is the use of canon and the other of added resonance. Most of the *Préludes* use the same mode of limited transposition throughout, although in different transpositions. Nos. 1, 2, 3, and 7 are largely occupied with mode 2 and Nos. 4 and 8 with mode 3 according to Messiaen’s classification of the mode of limited transpositions.<sup>23</sup> The first *Prélude*, “La Colombe” (The Dove), is in a binary form. The use of added resonance occurs at the end of the piece, where a short melodic fragment is reproduced very quietly a diminished fifteenth above. The third *Prélude*, “Le Nombre léger” (The Light Number), is also in a binary form, but with the second

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<sup>21</sup> Siglind Bruhn, *Image and Ideas in Modern French Piano Music* (New York: Pendragon Press, 2003), 37.

<sup>22</sup> John M. Lee, “Harmony in the Solo Piano Works of Olivier Messiaen: The First Twenty Years,” *College Music Symposium*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Spring, 1983), 67.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and The Music of Time* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1985), 35.

appearance of the theme presented in the dominant and treated in canon in the coda.

Both “La Colombe” and “Le Nombre léger” use mode 2 as the harmonic and thematic device (C-D-flat-E-flat-E-natural-F-sharp-G-A-B-flat-C.) The final *Prélude*, “Un Reflet dans le vent” (Reflection in the Wind), uses a sonata form and mode 3 (C-D-E-flat-E-natural-F-sharp-G-A-flat-B-flat-B-natural-C.)

Messiaen’s *Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus*, written in 1944, are twenty contemplations of the infant Jesus seen from a variety of perspectives. The twenty movements in this work involve the contemplation of the Child of God by God the Father, the Church, the Holy Spirit, the Virgin, angels, wise men, and immaterial or symbolic entities that include Time, the Star, the Cross, and Silence. One piece in the set, “Regard de la Vierge,” represents a contemplation of Jesus by the Virgin. The religious sources and Christian symbolism inspired Messiaen and determined the ordering of the twenty movements. Symbolism also has an influence on the melodic and harmonic shape of *Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus* through the use of cyclic themes that function symbolically within the context of the work. Messiaen uses cyclic themes in this work to provide a unifying factor. Although Messiaen frequently changes mode during the course of a piece or superimposes different modes, some pieces present an ambiguous sense of tonality. For instance, the fourth piece from *Vingt Regards*, “Regard de la Vierge,” centers on F-sharp at the beginning, yet C-sharp emerges at the end as the stronger modal tonic. The form A-B-A-C-A-B-A is used in this piece.

## **Conclusion**

Although numerous French character pieces were written before 1860 and after 1960, this dissertation surveys ten composers who wrote piano character pieces within the one-hundred-year period, during which musical style was significantly transformed. Composers sought to establish their own individual personalities in music by exploiting new sound, diverse patterns of rhythm, and coloristic effects. Turning away from the intense and deeply felt emotional style established by Germanic Romanticism, French composers viewed sonority and tonal color as essential elements of their musical language. The selected character pieces demonstrate such effort to its fullest. Recording these pieces and understanding the constructional structures and expressive qualities within the music have made me realize and appreciate the true art of French piano music.

## Program

### Disc One:

Alkan, Charles-Valentin: 48 *Esquisses*, Op. 63  
9. Confidence (2'27")  
10. Increpatio (1'26")  
23. L'Homme aux sabots (34")  
24. Contredanse (1'15")  
29. Délire (1'01")  
31. Début de quatuor (1'04")  
39. Héraclite et Démocrite (1'59")  
41. Les Enharmoniques (1'54")

Chabrier, Emmanuel: *Dix pièces pittoresques*  
2. Mélancolie (2'13")  
3. Tourbillon (1'34")  
4. Sous – bois (3'56")  
8. Improvisation (4'40")

Chaminade, Cécile: *Etudes de Concert*, Op. 35, No. 2: Automne (5'33")  
*Romances sans paroles*, Op. 76, No. 1: Souvenance (2'02")

Debussy, Claude: *Estampes*  
Pagodes (5'56")  
La Soirée dans Grenade (4'57")  
Jardins sous la pluie (4'20")  
*Préludes* (Book I)  
5. Les Collines d'Anacapri (3'14")  
12. Minstrels (2'15")  
*Préludes* (Book II)  
8. Ondine (3'35")

### Disc Two:

Ravel, Maurice: *Miroirs*  
1. Noctuelles (4'56")  
3. Une Barque sur l'océan (8'49")  
5. La Vallée des cloches (4'52")

De Séverac, Déodat: *Cerdaña*  
1. En Tartane (7'08")  
3. Ménétriers et glaneuses (6'03")

Koechlin, Charles: *Les Heures persanes*, Op. 65  
5. En Vue de la ville (2'28'')  
7. Chant du soir (1'50'')  
11. A l'Ombre, près de la fontaine de marbre (2'51'')

Poulenc, Francis: *Napoli – Suite pour le piano*  
Barcarolle (1'30'')  
Nocturne (2'55'')  
Caprice italien (5'20'')

Milhaud, Darius: *La Muse ménagère*, Op. 245  
1. La Mienne (1'21'')  
3. Les Soins du ménage (1'01'')  
4. La Poésie (1'51'')  
7. La Lessive (1'13'')

Messiaen, Olivier: *Préludes*:  
1. La Colombe (1'36'')  
3. Le Nombre léger (1'59'')  
8. Un Reflet dans le vent (5'37'')  
*Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jésus*  
4. Regard de la Vierge (5'29'')

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