

## The French School



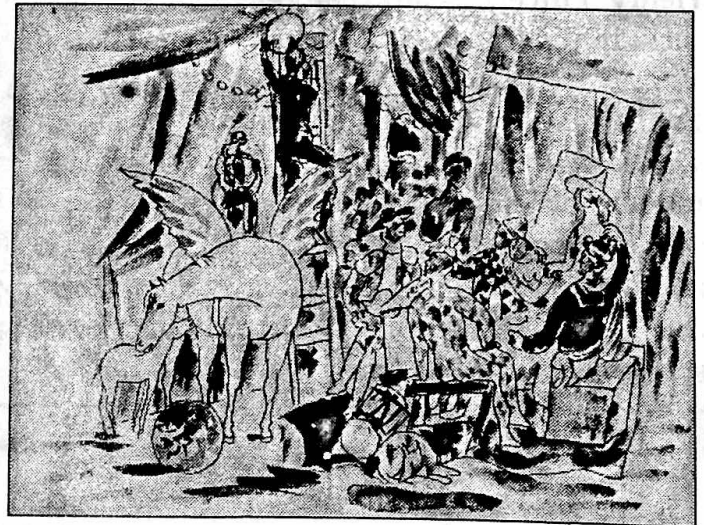
Erik Satie

In France, Erik Satie (1866–1925), following the example of the Dadaist writers and artists who were trying to recapture the way a child looks at the world, strove to develop a simple, less pretentious musical style. He reacted against the German Wagnerian style and Debussy's impressionism and proclaimed the idea that simplicity is the greatest virtue in music. He is best known for his many works for piano, including *Trois Gymnopédies* (two of which were orchestrated by Debussy), *Trois Gnossiennes*, *Trois morceaux en forme de poire*, *Trois préludes* and *Sports et divertissements*. Other important works include *Socrate*, for four sopranos and chamber orchestra, and a ballet, *Parade*, which was staged by Jean Cocteau and designed by Pablo Picasso. The score calls for a typewriter, a steamship whistle and a siren.



Le groupe des Six and some friends

Satie had a strong influence on a group of composers called "Le groupe des Six" after its six members. Darius Milhaud (1892–1974) is remembered as a leader in the development of polytonality. His ballet, *Creation of the World*, was one of the first to incorporate blues and jazz into a symphonic score. Arthur Honegger (1892–1955) shocked the world with *Pacific 231*, a symphonic poem glorifying the locomotive. Francis Poulenc (1899–1963) is the best known of the group today. His most important works are the operas *The Dialogues of the Carmelites*, and *The Human Voice*, based on a one-act play by Jean Cocteau. He was also one of the leading composers of art songs for voice and piano, setting the poems of the Modernist French poets to music.



Picasso's sketch for the stage curtain for Satie's *Parade*

## The English School

Dame Ethyl Smyth (1858–1954) was one of the few British women composers of the early twentieth century. She trained in Leipzig and Berlin and her music has strong German characteristics, even though she was a strong supporter of English national music. She is one of the few women opera composers. Her best known work is *The Wreckers*, but she composed five other operas, as well as orchestral works and chamber music. She is the only woman composer to have had an opera performed at the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958) and Benjamin Britten (1913–1976) are the two composers primarily responsible for the English school. Vaughan Williams based his work on the English folk song melodies he collected, but also on the music from the composers of English Renaissance, Thomas Tallis and William Byrd. Vaughan Williams wrote nine symphonies, of which *A London Symphony* is most popular. Another well known orchestral work is the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*. He wrote song settings of the poetry of A. E. Houseman, and George Herbert, and has several notable choral works, including the *Mass in G Minor* and the cantata *Dona Nobis Pacem*.

Britten, primarily known as an opera composer, was also an outstanding pianist and conductor. He studied at the Royal College of Music in London, and began his career composing radio, theatre and cinema music. His opera, *Peter Grimes*, brought him international recognition. The tragic story of a fisherman harassed to his death by the people in his small fishing village, *Peter Grimes* was the first successful English opera since those of Henry Purcell in the Baroque period. Britten's other operas include *Billy Budd*, *Gloriana*, *The Turn of the Screw*, and *Death in Venice*. He wrote a number of works that were influenced by English mediaeval religious dramas, including *Curlew River* and *The Prodigal Son*. *Noye's Fludde* was based on one of the Chester miracle plays. His largest choral work is the *War Requiem* for soloists, choir and orchestra. Based on the Latin Mass for the dead and incorporating the poetry of Wilfred Owen, who was killed in the last days of the First World War, the *Requiem* is a tribute to the soldiers who died in many wars.



Vaughan Williams



Benjamin Britten

Students may well know Britten's *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*.

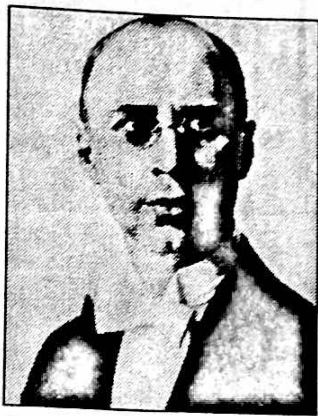
## The Russian School



Serguei Rachmaninoff (1873–1943)

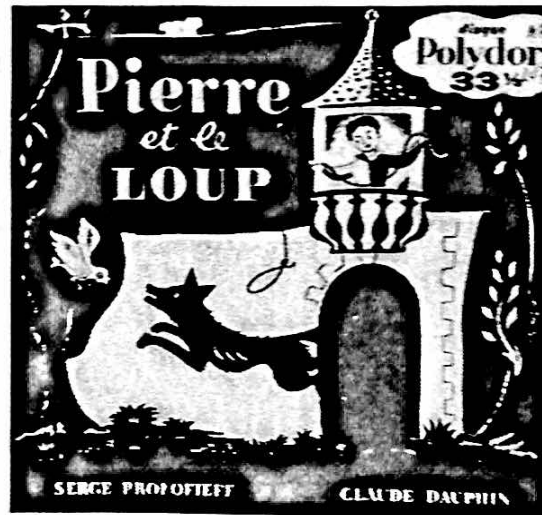


Aleksandr Scriabin  
(1872–1915)



Serguei Prokofiev (1891–1953)

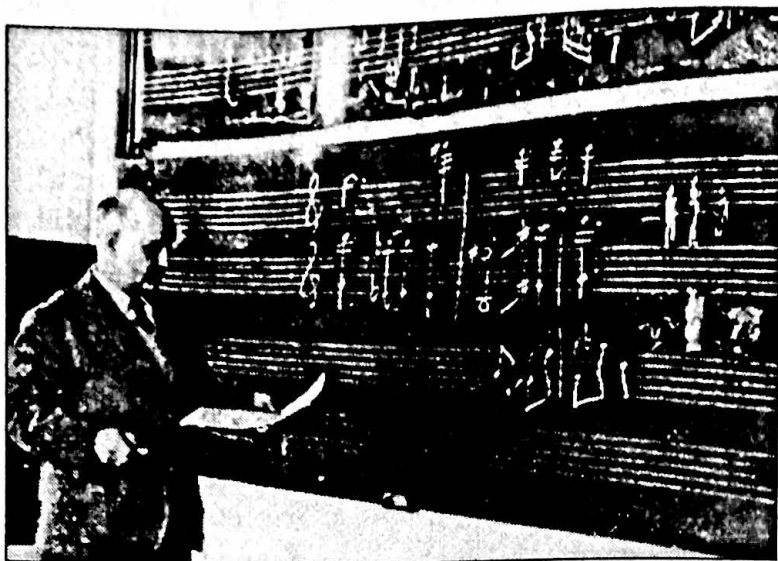
In Russia, the early part of the century produced three important composers: Serguei Rachmaninoff, Aleksandr Scriabin and Serguei Prokofiev. Rachmaninoff was a talented pianist, and his best known compositions are his piano concertos, especially the Second, and his *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. Scriabin's music is full of complex rhythms and unusual harmonies. He believed there was a relationship between music and colour, and envisioned a keyboard that would project a colour when a particular note was played. Prokofiev is one of Russia's best-known composers. Prokofiev combined neoclassical elements with an interest in innovation. His music has a strong rhythmic drive as well as lyrical expression. He also includes humour in many of his works. Among his most famous works are the opera, *A Love for Three Oranges*, the children's classic *Peter and the Wolf*, the cantata *Alexander Nevsky*, adapted from his score for the film of the same name, the ballet *Romeo and Juliet* and the opera *War and Peace*. He also wrote seven symphonies, five piano concertos, two violin concertos and a cello concerto.



The cover for the 1936 French record album of *Peter and the Wolf*

## The German School

Germany's Paul Hindemith (1895–1963) was primarily a neoclassical composer who worked within Baroque musical forms. He left Germany before WW II and worked in the United States, teaching at Yale University, where many young Americans came under his influence. Many of his contemporaries saw him as conservative, and all his compositions are certainly rooted in tonality. He makes great use of counterpoint, but moves away from the traditional in that the sounds are highly dissonant. His book on composition, *The Craft of Musical Composition*, is an important one in the field.



Paul Hindemith giving a lecture

Kurt Weill is best known for his works for the theatre. His collaboration with the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht became most famous for *The Threepenny Opera*, a modern version of Gay's *Beggar's Opera*. Weill too emigrated to the US in the 1930s and spent the rest of his life writing musicals for Broadway.

Carl Orff, who remained in Germany all his life, is best known for the *Carmina burana*, a scenic oratorio based on thirteenth century poems by student monks. He also developed a method of music education for children that is widely used.



Carl Orff