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In Search of Lost Time

**Music and the Quest for Culture and Identity**

Synesthesia is a neurological phenomenon in which a person’s senses are essentially mildly confused. A synesthete will experience one sensation, which will trigger them to experience another, seemingly unrelated, sensation. One of the most common forms of synesthesia is the association of numbers and colors. For example, the number 1 might be a light blue color.

I have a form of synesthesia known as lexical-gustatory synesthesia. When I hear a particular word, voice, or sound, I can taste it. Jack Kerouac’s name tastes like plain granola. My father’s speaking voice tastes like something stale, cold, and very slightly burnt. More than anything else, however, I taste music.

Music has always been very important to me. Because music involves a couple senses for me, listening to it can be intense and overwhelming. If a song has a particularly unpleasant taste (for example, most songs by The Maccabees have the very specific and disgusting taste of cold mashed potatoes and a tiny bit of blood), then it’s too upsetting for me to even consider how the music actually sounds. However, if a song both sounds and tastes good, I can listen to just that one song on repeat for hours. It is often very difficult for me to find the energy to focus on anything else when I can hear music.

Because of this, music has been very prevalent in my life. Starting from when I was very little, I have always tried to do absolutely everything, from walking downstairs to pouring cereal in a bowl, to a beat or rhythm. I can define every period of my life by the type of music I listened to at the time. For example, when I was in seventh grade and trying very hard to be edgy (while still somehow afraid of edginess), I had a very embarrassing phase where I listened almost exclusively to Christian screamo music. Immediately after that, I became very obnoxiously pretentious and listened only to The Beatles (who, incidentally, have always tasted very bad to me. I just liked telling people I listened to The Beatles more than I actually liked listening to The Beatles).

Music is a large part of my personal identity. I listen to it to regulate or create emotions, and I play it to express emotions. Not everyone experiences music in the same way I do and is affected by it in the same ways I am, but everyone who listens to music is affected by it in some way. By analyzing the music listened to by a certain society in a certain time, you can figure out a lot about that society. The music will reflect the listeners’ insecurities, hopes, and cultural aesthetic.

Music is one of the most prominent ways a culture represents itself. And for France, the years during and between World War I and World War II were a time of confusion and a search for cultural identity. From opera meant to instill national moral values, to the modern, polytonal compositions of Les Six, and the shock and scandal of jazz, France was eager to have something to establish itself as the center of power and culture in a fast-paced imperialistic world.

During World War I in France, everyone was expected to contribute to the wartime effort in some way. This included intellectuals and teachers of musicology, who instructed students in a way that led to them having very set ideas about what it means to be French. Charles Maurras, French author and critic, wrote about the sentiment, “’French comprised not only a language, but a mode of thought and feeling, common values and traits that bound the community in a political and aesthetic whole.”[[1]](#footnote-1) In a sense, French culture was becoming mythologized. Art became a way to instill national myth and memory, and opera is a very famous form of this. For example, Jacques Rouche’s opera-ballet, *Mademoiselle de Nantes* was essentially a form of cultural propaganda. Jane F. Fulcher, a professor of 19th and 20th century music at the University of Michigan, commented,

“Central to the work’s scenario is a concert with musicians and audience dressed in period costume, the former are presenting a performance of French music before the grandchildren of Madame de Montespan. More specifically, the eighteenth-century progeny of this famous mistress of Louis XIV are listening to selections of Lully and Charpentier which illustrate the birth and growth of opera in France. The ‘homology’ between the performances here was charged: the audience that was present in the opera was being manipulated astutely toward identification with what was being represented on the stage. The concert depicted historically was instilling national memory as well as cultural identity, creating a sense of its unity and continuity as the patrimony of all future generations. So too was the performance at the opera: the audience in the theater was witnessing its own past on the stage and, in identifying with the historical audience, imbibing the same lesson of French identity and tradition. Its heritage, it learned, was classic; in addition, since the illustrious days of Louis XIV it has been bound instrumentally to state power, defining the French community and insuring its prestige.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Because opera was such an easy way to create unified national beliefs, Rouche wrote a letter in 1915 to the Ministere de L’Instruction Publique describing his plan to make them more accessible through a series of matinees. The matinees were less formal, had lower ticket prices, and were comprised of selections from various operas. He wrote in the letter, “the audience will witness the history of music at the opera; it will be convinced that the French tradition is refined today, stronger and richer than ever.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

But opera, of course, was not the only popular form of music during and between the wars. “Les Six” were a group of six French musical composers who rose to prominence in the early 1920s. The group was comprised of Arthur Honegger (1892-1955), Darius Milhaud (1892-1974), Francis Poulenc (1899-1963), Georges Auric (1899-1983), Germaine Tailleferre (1892-1983), and Louis Durey (1888-1979).[[4]](#footnote-4) Their music was created as a reaction against the impressionistic styles of composes like Maurice Ravel and Claude Debussy. In a sense, they were a part of (and helped create) a counterculture, though their work was popularized. Jane Fulcher wrote, “for, unlike the preceding generation, they perceived the war less as an occasion for confirmation of the culture that existed before it than as an opportunity for radical cultural change.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Darius Milhaud in particular was an example of the changing cultural tastes in music. His work prominently featured polytonality, the simultaneous use of more than one key. Milhaud was also heavily influenced by the jazz he heard while visiting Harlem in 1922.[[6]](#footnote-6) This influence is most famously seen in Milhaud’s 1923 work, *La création du monde. La création du monde* is a 20 minute opera conveying the beginnings of the world according to African folk mythology. He utilized instruments very rarely used in ballets, but common for jazz musicians, such as the alto saxophone, the string bass, and the bass drum with pedal and attached cymbal crasher.[[7]](#footnote-7) The French public at this time was very fascinated by what they perceived as the “exotic primitivism” of jazz music, and the ballet enjoyed mild success.

Jazz itself has a complicated relationship with the French public and culture. Though jazz is now often thought of as being connected (at least in part) to French culture, the first popular jazz band in France was actually American. The 369th Infantry Regiment (known also as the “Harlem Hellfighters,” and consisting of African-American soldiers) brought jazz to prominence in France during the First World War. In fact, from February 12th to March 29th in 1918, the Hellfighters went on tour in France.[[8]](#footnote-8) In a time of cultural instability and insecurity, the French public turned more and more to the rising imperialistic power of the United States for music and art.

Despite the average French citizen’s willingness to embrace jazz, most critics were not too fond of the genre at first. In fact, they viewed it as a sickness to French culture. However, it was the church that was the biggest opponent of jazz music. Matthew F. Jordan, a cultural studies professor at Penn State, researched the church’s relationship to jazz.

“One conservative institution, the Catholic Church, believed that jazz was destroying France’s moral foundations. Church leaders argued in public and in print that jazz dancing caused more psychological and constitutional damage to the individual than any war trauma ever could. The secular temptations of the body associated with jazz dancing, the church argued, were contrary to the heady cultivation of spiritual life associated with Christianity. The archbishop of Paris, Cardinal Amette (1850-1920), condemned jazz dancing as a modern perversion. ‘It is said that it is useless to warn Christians, who hardly frequent the kind of salons where they dare this [dancing]. This is not my opinion. Even the best supports of social order are deplorably permeable to this perverting snobbism.’ He believed that the cure for France’s troubled soul was to be found in confession and chapel, not in dancing or bars. Soon after, the Catholic Church forbade jazz dancing for practicing Catholics.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

While many saw jazz as the problem, others, like Leopold Sedar Senghor (Senegalese poet, politician, and cultural theorist), saw it as the solution, and perhaps even the salvation, to the rigid, mechanistic European traditions of the last century.[[10]](#footnote-10) Other critics (mostly fans of Freud) saw jazz as good psychological catharsis.[[11]](#footnote-11) In fact, several writers and scholars tried to come up with psychological or biological explanations for the popularity of jazz. One physician proposed that soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder would be drawn to jazz because of the jerky movements associated with it,[[12]](#footnote-12) and an ethnomusicologist argued that France’s black ancestors gave current French citizens a genetic predisposition to enjoying African rhythms.[[13]](#footnote-13)

By the mid-1920s, jazz became so incredibly popular in France, that the French had absorbed it into their culture. One author, Andre Coeuroy, wrote *Histoire Generale du jazz,* which argues that not only is jazz a strictly European form of music, but also that it belongs specifically to France.[[14]](#footnote-14) Around this point, many scholars began to make a distinction between “authentic jazz,” and “white jazz.” As French jazz gained more and more popularity, it became more and more white. Essentially, jazz became an imperialistic tool. Jeremy Lane, a French Studies professor at the University of Nottingham, wrote, “Timothy Brennan has coined the term *imperial jazz* to capture the role played by the promotion of US jazz in interwar France as a form of cultural propaganda on the part of a government only too eager to have the music created by its own oppressed peoples symbolize a virtue taken to be inherent to the national patrimony.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

Music, and all art in general, is a reflection of a society. In early 1900s French society, we see groups of people eagerly trying to retain classical culture through opera, create a new culture through modern polytonality, or claim culture through the French absorption and reimagining of jazz. With the turn of the century, the process and completion of world wars, and the dramatic rise of imperialism, France wanted to make sure it established itself as a culture still relevant and influential in a rapidly changing world.

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2. Ibid, pg. 19 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid, pg.24 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid, Pg. 155 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid, pg. 154 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Miller, R. Ward. "DEFINING JAZZ ELEMENTS IN DARIUS MILHAUD's LA Crçation DU MONDE." *Journal Of Band Research* 50.1 (2014): 1-12. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 3 June 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Jordan, Matthew F. *Le Jazz: Jazz and French Cultural Identity.* Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2010. Pg.43 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid, pg. 54 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Jeremy F. Lane, *Jazz and Machine-Age Imperialism: Music, ‘Race,’ and Intellectuals in France, 1918-1945* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2013), pg. 123 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Jordan, Matthew F. *Le Jazz: Jazz and French Cultural Identity.* Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2010. Pg. 70 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid, pg. 55 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid, pg. 58, 59 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Jeremy F. Lane, *Jazz and Machine-Age Imperialism: Music, ‘Race,’ and Intellectuals in France, 1918-1945* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2013), pg. 129 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid, pg. 144 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)