Two Works for Clarinet by Germaine Tailleferre: Sonata for Solo Clarinet (1959); Arabesque for clarinet and piano

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Sonata for Solo Clarinet (1959)

Arabesque for clarinet and piano (1973)

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Music 200, Women in Music
Spring 1996
Introduction

Germaine Tailleferre (1892-1983) is known principally as one of "Les Six," a group of young French composers who, during the 1920s, became famous as proponents of a new French musical style, less ponderous than Romanticism and more down-to-earth than Impressionism. Tailleferre was the last survivor of the group of friends and continued to compose until the year of her death. Among the works of her later years are two pieces for clarinet, a Sonata for solo clarinet and a short piece for piano and clarinet called Arabesque.

Some of the clarinet music written by members of "Les Six" is familiar. Francis Poulenc's Sonata for Clarinet and Piano is part of every college clarinetist's course of study and appears often on recital programs. The Poulenc Sonata for Two Clarinets is frequently performed (I once heard it three times during a week-long symposium), and one occasionally hears the Sonatine for Clarinet and Piano Opus 100 of Darius Milhaud. But the two works by Tailleferre are practically unknown. Almost never performed (Tailleferre biographer Shapiro lists one performance of the Sonata, in 1992; no performances of either work are listed in The Clarinet since then¹), neither piece is considered part of the standard clarinet repertoire, small as it is. In his book on clarinet pedagogy, for example, Jack Brymer (the grand old man of English clarinet playing) lists neither work in his chapter on "The Clarinet Repertoire."² Neither are the works particularly well known among students of music by women. Reference works
about female composers do not always include the clarinet works in lists of Tailleferre's compositions (Laurence, for example, lists neither), and when they are listed they sometimes appear inaccurately.

Several recordings of *Sonata for Solo Clarinet* and *Arabesque* are, however, available. (These are listed in an appended discography.) The most easily found seems to be that by clarinetist Virginia Soames and pianist Julius Drake, "Aaron Copland, *Sonata for Clarinet and Piano* and 'Les Six,' The Complete Works for Clarinet & Piano." Reviews of the CD have been mixed: Stephen Max describes the *Sonata* as "a terrific find for clarinetists" (quoted in Shapiro, 199) while for John D. Wiser *Arabesque* and the *Sonata* are music that "evanesces as soon as heard" (quoted in Shapiro, 251). A 1992 review in *The Clarinet* by clarinet historian Pamela Weston was positive on the subject of the Tailleferre works, but it displayed the profession's complete ignorance of them: Weston described *Arabesque*, composed and published in 1973, as "probably written before the advent of 'Les Six.'"

The purpose of this paper is to start to fill in this gap. In what follows, I begin with a brief biographical sketch of Germaine Tailleferre. I then describe what I have been able to find out about the contexts in which *Arabesque* and the *Sonata for Solo Clarinet* were composed, and I provide a brief musical description of each piece. As far as I know no systematic
attention has been paid until now to these two clarinet pieces, so even this preliminary effort should be potentially useful.¹

Biographical Sketch²

Germaine Tailleferre³ was born in 1892 in Parc Saint-Maur, a town near Paris. Her parents' marriage was unhappy (as both of hers would later be). Tailleferre's father refused to allow Germaine to develop the musical talent that became apparent very early in her life, so her mother had to arrange for her to practice the piano in secret and for an audition at the Conservatoire in Paris. Accepted into the Conservatoire at 12, Tailleferre won the first of her many prizes, this one in solfege, two years later. She continued to be an outstanding student, winning prizes in harmony, counterpoint, fugue, and accompaniment, despite having to teach to support herself.

Tailleferre's classmates at the Conservatoire included Arthur Honneger and Darius Milhaud, who were both her age. During the First World War, she studied composition in a class of only four students, of whom she, Honneger, and Milhaud were three. They became close friends. Other friends of Tailleferre's included painters and poets of the Montparnasse avant-garde. After the war she met Modigliani and Picasso and began to study drawing, continuing to give music lessons to support herself and her mother. (Her father had died.)

In 1917 Tailleferre met Jean Cocteau and Eric Satie, the experimental designer/filmmaker and composer, respectively, who
had collaborated with Diaghilev on the innovative Ballet Russe Parade involving typewriters and sirens as part of the orchestra and huge cubist costumes. Like other young musicians, Tailleferre was attracted to the idea of combining art and music in new ways. Hearing her play, Satie named her to his quasi-official following, Les Nouveaux Jeunes. Jean Cocteau promoted the work of Les Nouveaux Jeunes, including Tailleferre’s Sonatine pour cordes, attracting important patrons for them. In his musical manifesto, Le Coq et l’Arlequin, Cocteau argued for a new, simplified kind of French music, a reaction to the pomposity of Romanticism and the hazy sensuality of Debussy and other Impressionists. Tailleferre and her friends found the idea attractive.

One evening in 1920, an influential critic attended a studio concert of pieces by Tailleferre, Milhaud, Honeger, Francis Poulenc, Georges Auric, and Louis Durey. Impressed with their work, he wrote an article labelling the group "Les Six" on the analogy of the "Russian Five." Tailleferre and her friends became an instant legend. Though they never shared an explicit philosophy and their compositional styles were quite different, the six were linked from then on, and even as an old woman Tailleferre was still "the surviving member of 'Les Six.'" Being a member of the group smoothed Tailleferre's path considerably; she immediately began to have work commissioned and published.

Tailleferre’s music is the work of a naturally talented musician with no intellectual axes to grind. Asked in an
interview the year before her death about her "esthetic ideals," Tailleferre said, "I do not analyze those sorts of things. Either music happens naturally or it should not happen at all" (Mitgang "One of 'Les Six!'", quoted in Shapiro, p. 204). Much of her work is simple in construction: symmetrical, repetitive, often based on folk-song-like themes. Harmonically, it surprises with small quirks such as excursions into polytonality. She wrote chamber music such as a string quartet, orchestral music including an Ouverture that is now fairly often performed in band transcription, concertinos for flute and for harp, much piano music (she was a pianist and often performed her work herself), small operas, later film, television, and radio music.

Tailleferre was most productive in the 1920s. During the 1930s and 1940s she was married twice, once to an American and once to a Frenchman. Both men discouraged her work out of jealousy and could be abusive and demanding. She lived in New York for a time, where she met and befriended Charlie Chaplin, an artist with a sensibility somewhat like hers. With her second husband, she had a daughter, Françoise. Partly because of the father's abusiveness, Françoise had mental difficulties, and Tailleferre eventually raised Françoise's daughter Elvire, supporting herself and her granddaughter after her second divorce by composing and teaching as well as by painting and by restoring antiques. After the Second World War, during which she lived in the U.S. again, she returned to France and her old friends from 'Les Six.' (She was particularly close to Poulenc.) Tailleferre
wrote and published more chamber, piano, and orchestral music during the 1950s as well as a new ballet, "Parisiana." She continued to compose, at a somewhat slower pace, during subsequent years until her death in 1983, at 91.

Sonata for Clarinet Solo
The Sonata for Clarinet Solo was published in 1959 by Rongwen Music, Inc. The date of composition listed with Taillferre's name on the first page is 1957. (Several of the major sources about music by women (Rosenstein, Cohen, Sadie and Samuel) give the date of the Sonata as 1958, apparently in error -- unless it is acceptable to average composition and publication dates.) The Sonata is dedicated to Henri Dionet, who was solo clarinetist at the Paris Opéra (Weston, "Copland Sonata & 'Les Six'"). It is in three movements, "Allegro tranquillo," with a metronome marking of quarter note = 84, "Andantino espressivo," and "Allegro brioso." Metronome markings are not given for the latter two movements. The suggested duration for the piece given on the first page is 4:25 minutes.

The Sonata is mentioned in several sources (Rosenstein, Sadie and Samuel, Shapiro) for one reason: it is said to represent Taillferre's only "foray into serialism" (Shapiro, 23). In what is perhaps the least accurate of the existing descriptions of the work, Rosenstein suggests that the Sonata for Solo Clarinet (which she refers to as the Clarinet Sonata and dates 1958) was an "experiment with serialism and polytonality"
(polytonality was in fact characteristic of Tailleferre's music from the very beginning), unusual in light of the fact that Tailleferre felt "little sympathy for the newest serial and electronic musical developments." In fact, Tailleferre was sympathetic to serialism and electronic music alike. A classmate of Tailleferre's (Jourdan-Morhangé) quoted her in 1955 as saying that twelve-tone music "attracts me" though it "represents such a task that I no longer have the strength to undertake it," and Tailleferre apparently thought that electronic music was the only possible music of the future. The Sonata was unusual for Tailleferre, though, in being quite different from other things she was composing around the same time. During 1956 and 1957 Tailleferre wrote music for three films and two radio programs, an opera (La Petite Sirène, or The Little Mermaid), a suite of three songs for baritone and orchestra, a Toccata for two pianos, a reed-instrument trio, and a Partita for piano (Shapiro, list of "Works and Performances," 82-86).

In the liner notes accompanying her recording of the Sonata for Solo Clarinet, Victoria Soames (Ralph and Soames, 8) describes it, inaccurately, as "one of the few works Tailleferre produced after the demise of 'Les Six.'" Soames' musical description of the piece is impressionistic but I think true to its feel. The first movement, says Soames, has a "strange and distant feel," the second is "sad" and "remote," the third "angry fiery and very fast with a cadenza in the middle" (Ralph and Soames, 8).
On inspection, the Sonata turns out not to be serial music in anything like the strict sense of the word. The first movement begins with a "row" of ten different notes: C, F#, E, G, F#, G, C#, A, Eb, D. The lack of a clear tonal center in this phrase does create the characteristic "strange and distant feel" of 12-tone music, which continues throughout the movement. But duration and pause combine to highlight two of the notes: the C# at the end of the first-measure phrase and the D of the dotted half note in the second measure. (See extract 1).

For Henri Dionet

SONATA

For Clarinet Solo

Germaine Tailleferre
(1957)

Duration: 4:25 minutes

Allegro tranquillo \( \left( \frac{4}{4} - 84 \right) \) throughout

Extract 1
In measure 3 the first six notes of the series are repeated, followed by a new phrase B, Bb, A, F#. The focus of this measure is the four-beat-value F#, and the A that precedes it stands out because it is a repeat of the A in the parallel phrase in m. 2. Thus by the beginning of the fifth measure, with the stressing of C# (leading tone), D (tonic), F# (third), and A (fifth), the piece already sounds distinctly as if it were in D Major. (Indeed, the key signature has two sharps, but that may be simply the result of the whole-step transposition required for Bb clarinet. Two sharps in clarinet music might signal either "transposed from C" or "transposed from no key signature.") The main notes of the D Major scale continue to be highlighted, as, for example, the repeated A's in mm. 5 and 6, the F# in m8, the repeated F# D* D# D* figure at the ends of mm. 10 and 12. The B section of the movement consists of three loud, long, A's (m. 13), after which the first section repeats.

The third section of the movement consists once again of long, loud A's, this time acting as a bridge into the key of A Major (dominant in D, tonic in A). After excursions into several other keys, the movement ends by rocking between two tonalities in a way that is very characteristic of Tailleferre, concluding on F#. (See extract 2.)
The second movement, like the first, looks more atonal and serial than it sounds. Salient notes here again are D, A, and F#. The time signature is 6/8, with a few measures in 9/8, but the rhythm alternates between 6/8 and 3/4, as, for example, in the first four measures (see extract 3).

Andantino espressivo

\[\text{Extract 3}\]

The third movement, much faster than the first two, begins with a repeated phrase that echoes the end of the first movement, with arpeggios rocking back and forth between two tonalities a half-step apart (possibly e minor and f minor, though not written that way). The section ends in D major, on D. (See extract 4.)

Allegro brioso

\[\text{Extract 4}\]

At the end of another broken-chord phrase is a cadenza (extract 5) that is strongly reminiscent of Debussy, with whose \textit{Première}
Rhapsodie for clarinet Tailleferre may well have been familiar.

Cadenza

Extract 5

The first section is then repeated, followed by another section of fast arpeggios. A "recitativo lento" repeatedly accents C#'s, and the piece ends with a very fast arpeggio up to altissimo (the highest clarinet register) G.

Though it seems somewhat pieced together (the third movement has little in common with the first two, which are very similar in feel to each other), the Sonata for Solo Clarinet is interesting to listen to, and it does not require advanced skill to play. Its small reputation as Tailleferre's token serial piece is misleading; it is in fact complexly polytonal rather than atonal and does not use 12-tone techniques in any systematic way I can see, though at the very beginning it looks as if it might be going to.
Arabesque

Arabesque was published in 1973 by Editions Henry Lemoine in Paris. Its date of composition is not entirely clear; most sources list it as 1973, but some (Cohen, Ralph and Soames) list it without a date. Sadie and Samuel (425) suggest that it "uses material from La Petite Sirène," which would mean that it was first conceptualized at about the same time the Sonata for Solo Clarinet was written. It is dedicated to Désiré Dondeyne.

Dondelayne was a composer and conductor of symphonic band music, whom Tailleferre met around 1970 in Paris (Shapiro 27-28). She was "captivated" by the sound and began to write for band; Dondeyne was apparently captivated by her, and made band arrangements of some of her earlier work. By this time Tailleferre, in her late 70s, had rheumatism that made writing physically difficult, so Dondeyne often took dictation from her and filled in the harmonic sketches she provided.

At around the same time as Arabesque was published, Tailleferre also published a number of other single-movement, dance-like pieces for a solo instrument and piano: Forlane pour flûte et piano, Rondo pour hautbois et piano, Choral pour trompette et piano, Gaillarde pour trompette et piano (Shapiro, list of "Works and Performances," pp. 95-96). The Choral for trumpet and piano was extracted from La Petite Sirène, as the others may also have been.§ Arabesque is apparently similar to the Forlane for flute and piano, which has been described as "a liesurely 6/8 dance movement with dotted rhythms; a phrase is
repeated frequently, transposed, then modulated back to the original tonality" (Pellerite, quoted in Shapiro, p. 215). The first movement of a later unpublished Sonatine for oboe and piano is a transcription of Arabesque (Shapiro, 102).

Clarinetist Victoria Soames describes Arabesque as "simple, gentle, and outstandingly beautiful" (Ralph and Soames, 7). It is in one movement in 3/4, marked "Allegretto." It begins with a two-measure phrase in b flat minor marked with a falling pattern of dotted notes, which is then transposed a step down. Clarinet and right hand both play the melody; the bass provides a pedal Bb. The next two measures answer the first with a rising pattern, again transposed; the section ends with set of sixteenth notes in the solo part and chords in the accompaniment. (See extract 6, next page.)

This 8-measure theme is repeated and varied throughout the rest of the piece, transposed again and again into different keys. In the middle is a cadenza-like section in which piano and clarinet play the same thing in three keys at once (extract 7); it ends with a loud, high clarinet trill and a slow transition back to the A section of the piece, with which it ends.

Only 2 or 3 minutes long, Arabesque poses no technical difficulties for the clarinetist except for some slurred leaps down from altissimo to clarion registers. An intermediate player should have no difficulty with it.
ARABESQUE

pour Clarinette en Si♭ et Piano

Germaine TAILLEFERRE

Extract 6
Conclusion

This paper should be seen at this point as a very tentative first draft, since I have not yet been able to consult many possibly relevant sources and since my skill as a musical analyst is rudimentary. I am not in a position to claim musical pre-eminence for either work (and might not even if I were in such a position), but they should at least be better known than they are. Both pieces are available, and clarinetists should certainly not dismiss them without a look.
Notes
1. The Clarinet's listings of recitals and performances consist of programs volunteered by readers, so they are not complete.

2. Arabesque had been published only three years before Brymer's book came out, so that might account in part from its omission from Brymer's list. But it does not appear in similar lists in later books, either.

3. These recordings of the "Les Six" selections seem to have been released twice on two different labels, first in 1991 as AVM 3031 CD and then in 1992 as Clarinet Classics CC0001.

4. I would like to expand the project at some point, perhaps for publication. This would involve consulting more documentary sources, listening to more of Tailleferre's music, and, I hope, corresponding with biographer Laura Mitgang.

5. The major biographical sources about Tailleferre are Mitgang, "Germaine Tailleferre" and Shapiro's "bio-bibliography." They are the sources for this section. The Shapiro book is unfortunately not completely trustworthy. The index, for example, is almost useless. (Reviews of recordings of Tailleferre's clarinet music are not indexed under "Clarinet" or under the names of the pieces, for example, and only two of the three recordings of the clarinet pieces are mentioned in the list of "works and performances" although all three are in the discography. In order to find potentially relevant information it was necessary to read every entry in the bibliographical listing and the discography.)

6. Apparently her name was originally "Taillefesse." I do not know when or why it was changed.

7. I use an asterisk in place of the natural sign.

8. I have not yet been able to hear any of these pieces, or the ballet.

9. I do not know whether the works are still in print -- this seems unlikely, since the copies I purchased appear to be part of the works' original printings -- but unused copies are still available and can be ordered through, for example, Eble Music in Iowa City.
Works Cited


Additional works consulted


Discography

Both Sonata for Solo Clarinet and Arabesque can be heard on the following recordings:

