No problems involved—neither for composers, nor for listeners: no faces buried in hands for music whose makers would devise it with their hands in their pockets.

The most unaccountable thing about this unaccountable scheme was how well it succeeded. With their lazy and busy hands, Les Six made exactly the music that suited the lazy and busy Twenties. They achieved style, even technically—for example with polytonality, Milhaud’s favorite device. Polytonality had been tried out long before, by Debussy, by Berlioz, by Beethoven. But then the sudden appearance of a nonblending chord or line had always evoked the strange or the ghostlike. With Milhaud, quite to the contrary, it became two (or more) naïvetés combining into sophistication: one improvising minstrel (or craftsman) piping in E flat, another fiddling in G, and the spirit of improvisation enjoying the oddness and chic of the result. And this style and this chic proved irresistible. Stravinsky and Ravel applied their mastery to falling in with its tentative charm.

But tentative though it was, it could not be improved upon. The Six themselves, later on, matured, and willy-nilly became experienced: Honegger even became respectable and a member of several academies. But, with the exception of Auric, as Les Six grew wiser, their music lost its beauté du Diable without gaining much on the side of the angels. Yet in retrospect the best among their early works have gained something: they have grown into period pieces, freed of their rather heartless up-to-date heartiness. We enjoy them as we enjoy a René Clair film. We now discover a poetic quality in their brittleness, their pathetic, because short-lived, impertinence.

One more paradox with Les Six: their methods screamed for opposition—and made the potential opponent’s part very uncomfortable to play. Who among the young was going to oppose youthfulness, charm, and chic? Who was going to reassert the values of planning, of mastery, of gravity, at the risk of looking a prig and a ci-devant? The thing was done, without ostentation, without polemics (and with hardly anybody noticing what was happening) by another alliance of friends: Jeune France. Again a heterogeneous batch. Two were organists, Olivier Messiaen and Daniel Lesur; one a Breton and a sailor, Yves Baudrier; and the fourth, André Jolivet, simply a young composer, but a singularly strong-headed one, the disciple of a French master whom very few knew to be French (since Varèse lived in America), and fewer still took to be a master, since his methods were of an almost forgotten and seemingly antediluvian species: scandalous, fanatical, revolutionary, and not at all unromantic.

There was nothing of eighteenth-century elegance about Varèse, who preferred to pitch his tent in a virgin forest rather than in the gardens of Versailles; nothing of the ballet—for to him dancing was not an entertainment but a rite; nothing craftsmenlike—except perhaps in the way of the savage, decorating his shield and bow with the magical runes of the tribe. Again, Varèse had little reason to be afraid of the father-figure—because his hunting ground lay beyond Debussy’s. For if Debussy had dined with fauns and nymphs, and with Gregorian and other ghosts of bygone ages, Varèse made bold to sup with great Pan himself: i.e., to conjure up primeval magic, rhythm undomesticated by meter, and sound not yet shaped into tonal symmetries. What is Varèse’s intentions were something more than a mere primitivist’s and archeaizer’s. Precivilized purity and magic were his ends, but his means and his techniques were always of the most civilized, modern, scientific order—so much so, that today we know of hardly any invention or discovery put forth by musique concrète, or by the experts in electronic distortion of sound, which had not, as early as 1925, been foreseen or postulated by Varèse.

His influence on contemporary French (and other) music has been second to none—not even to Schoenberg’s or Webern’s—a fact which it is perhaps not superfluous to emphasize. For, very unlike Schoenberg’s, this influence has more than once passed unnoticed and unacknowledged.

Jolivet (b. 1905), Varèse’s disciple, made a theory, inchoate and hazy to all but himself, out of Varèse’s practice. But he also wrote, in the Varèsian manner, Mana (the most original and imaginative piece of piano writing since Debussy), the 5 Incantations for solo flute, the 5 Danses rituelles for orchestra, and the String Quartet. And this manner of writing—these compact and stubborn chords and ostinati alternating with eerie one-voiced recitative—this summoning up, not, Debussy fashion, of elusive phantoms but of massive poltergestists—all this is today the stock in trade of nine contemporary composers out of ten. But the most brilliant and elaborate works of the followers, or even Jolivet’s own later scores, have by no means paled the comparatively naïve prototypes set by Varèse and early Jolivet. On the contrary, the prototypes have in advance outshone the imitations.

Olivier Messiaen (b. 1908) came from academic quarters. A brilliant pupil of the Paris Conservatoire, his beginnings were a Debussyist’s and a Romanticist’s. Compared with Jolivet, he is a composer of less imagination and greater ingenuity. And he owes his place in contemporary music—an important one—to his aesthetically most doubtful leanings as much as to his most admirable qualities. The work that has been his greatest success, Trois Petites Liturgies de la présence divine, recalls Bernini’s Santa Teresa in its irresistibly effective mixture of mysticism and sensuality. Messiaen’s melody is meretricious enough to win the applause of those who have succumbed to Tosca the night