

# Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

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## *Trois pièces brèves (Three Short Pieces), for Woodwind Quintet*

### Jaques Ibert

Jaques Ibert represents the quintessence of the Parisian composer in the early- to mid-20th century: cultivated but not pompous, technically adept but self-effacing, blending the “serious” with the “popular,” typically good-spirited and often witty. He was born in Paris during the Belle Époque and died in the same city 72 years later, having weathered two world wars. His mother, who was distantly related to the Spanish composer Manuel de Falla, had studied piano at the Paris Conservatoire and encouraged his musical education as a child. He was drawn to both music and the theater, but his first professional steps after high school were hardly distinguished: he started working as a movie-hall pianist and writing popular songs under the pseudonym William Bert.

Realizing that he needed systematic artistic training, Ibert enrolled at the Paris Conservatoire in 1910, initially as a drama student. Soon he began studying harmony and in 1912 he moved on to the renowned counterpoint classes of André Gédalge; his fellow students included Arthur Honegger and Darius Milhaud, with whom he would enjoy lifelong friendships. In 1913 Ibert also began studying composition with Paul Vidal, a teacher who was interested in up-to-date developments in music, of which there were plenty at that moment. Unfortunately, World War I intruded just when Ibert would have begun the Conservatoire’s orchestration curriculum, and instead he spent several years as a nurse and stretcher-bearer. When the war ended in 1918, he instantly returned to his composing and — little short of miraculously, given the interruption and his lack of orchestration training — he was

awarded the prestigious Prix de Rome on his first try, in 1919. Ibert never departed much from an essentially traditional musical language that used explicitly modern harmonies only as surface details. Apart from the *Trois pièces brèves*, his most frequently visited pieces today are his orchestral work *Escapes*, his Flute Concerto, and a neo-Renaissance ballet score, *Diane de Poitiers*.

From 1924 on he also composed a good deal of incidental music for dramatic productions, a natural intersection of his double-threat background in music and theater, and it was one such project that gave rise to *Trois pièces brèves*. The play was the five-act comedy *The Beaux’s Stratagem*, by Irish author George Farquhar (1677 or 1688–1707), one of the cleverest playwrights of the Restoration stage; its plot involves two rakish brothers and their hilarious quest to better their lot by marrying well-positioned young ladies in the peaceful countryside. It was adapted by Maurice Constantin-Weyer into a French version that was purveyed under the title *Le Stratagème des roués*, and when it was unveiled, in Paris in 1930, it was graced with a charming score by Ibert. With a view toward practicality, he

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## IN SHORT

**Born:** August 15, 1890, in Paris, France

**Died:** February 5, 1962, in Paris

**Work composed:** 1930

**World premiere:** March 21, 1930, as part of a theatrical production at the Théâtre de l’Atelier in Paris

**Estimated duration:** ca. 6 minutes

crafted his music for a standard wind quintet, which the theater could accommodate with little space and a modest budget.

Within months, Ibert selected three of the morsels from his incidental music to stand on their own as a concert triptych. After a *fortissimo* call to attention, the first movement proper (*Allegro*) is insouciance itself, built on an oboe tune that, ironically, is both absent-minded and unforgettable. In the minuscule, more pensive second movement (*Andante*) the texture is pared down to a duo of flute and clarinet, though at its end the other instruments join in to rock the movement to sleep. A not-too-heartily reveille (*Assez lent*) announces the finale, in which upper lines sing out with what briefly seems a touch of alarm (from the flute) above a pattering accompaniment (*Allegro*

*scherzando*). Gradually good order is restored, and the music waddles off cheerfully.

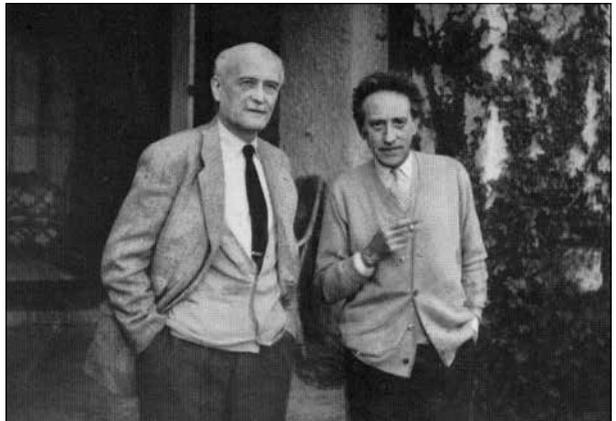
There is nothing complicated about this score, which in its entirety lasts only six minutes or so. On the surface it offers some moderately spicy bitonality that is reminiscent of Stravinsky's *Pulcinella*, but it would not have pushed any of its initial listeners out of their comfort zone. Nonetheless, this amiable, lightweight suite proved perfectly suited to its medium, and it wasted little time establishing itself as one of the most frequently programmed pieces in the entire literature for wind quintet.

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## A Distinguished Career

Jacques Ibert would extend his activities to include music administration, and in 1937 he was named director of the Académie de France at the Villa Medici in Rome, which is where he had spent time as a Prix de Rome winner. He held that position until 1960, commuting between Paris and Rome frequently throughout that period, though with a break during the years of World War II. The Vichy Régime found him abhorrent (to his great credit) and banned his music. He responded by retreating from Paris to Antibes on the Riviera — hardly a penance in and of itself — then on to other locales until the war was over. In 1955 Ibert was named Administrator of the Théâtres Lyriques Nationaux, in which capacity he oversaw both of Paris's principal opera houses, the Opéra de Paris and the Opéra-Comique. Ill health forced him to resign less than a year later, but his spirit was boosted when, shortly thereafter, he was elected to the Académie des Beaux-Arts.



Ibert (left), with Jean Cocteau, 1953