

Germaine Tailleferre: Mémoires à l'emporte-pièce (1986)

In February 1986, in the *Revue internationale de musique française*, the musicologist Frédéric Robert published the memoirs of Germaine Tailleferre, entitled for the occasion *Mémoires à l'emporte-pièce* [the untranslatable locution, literally referring to a cookie cutter, has roughly the sense of 'unpolished' —tr.]. This text, presented as the unpublished memoirs of the least-known of 'Les Six', in reality resulted from the editor's merging of two distinct sources. On the one hand, the journal was publishing for the first time all of the extracts from the *Mémoires* written by Tailleferre starting in the 1960s. According to Robert Shapiro, the composer, not very interested in the story of her own life, gave in to the entreaties of her granddaughter Elvire de Rudder, who still conserves her archive today. Tailleferre herself had chosen the musicologist Frédéric Robert, author of a biography of Louis Durey, to help with the organisation and publication of her scattered reminiscences (Shapiro, pp. 242-3). The publication had been anticipated as early as 1972 in an article by Joseph Monot for the newspaper *Ouest-France*, apparently without follow-through except for the desultory publication of extracts devoted to Les Six (*Créer*, n^{os} 19-20, Feb.-July 1975) and to Paul Valéry (*Europe*, July 1971).

To supplement Tailleferre's original text, however, Frédéric Robert claimed to have used the stenography of an interview with Tailleferre conducted in the televised broadcast *Les Archives du xx^e siècle* (Jean José Marchand, O.R.T.F., 1969-74, INA, Fonds Archives du vingtième siècle, Retranscriptions d'entretiens (17), dossier n^o 40). Although Robert clearly identifies in his introduction the sources used and presents himself as the simple "transcriber and annotator of these memoirs", their fusion as a single, linear text, fully written out in the first person, gives an impression of unity that prevents the reader from telling what came from which source, or from editorial intervention. The document has nevertheless been used heavily in studies of Tailleferre, with the authenticity of its statements often taken for granted.

In publishing these *Mémoires*, the editor of the *Revue internationale* - and *a fortiori* Frédéric Robert - claimed no other goal than that of documenting the life and career of a neglected composer. The text is presented as a chronological autobiographical narrative, from Tailleferre's childhood to the end of her life. It is organised into periodic sections, with the boundary dates indicated at the head of each, but within which the narrative is only loosely chronological, with numerous doublings back and anticipations and anecdotal asides. This superposition of temporal and narrative threads can lead to confusion, especially since the narrative

makes little reference to historical events and is not free of chronological errors (Shapiro has identified contradictions between the memoirs and Tailleferre's interviews).

Like any autobiography, Tailleferre's *Mémoires*, composed first in writing and orally and then recomposed by the editor, allow the author to construct her own narrative and present the reader with a selective portrait. The composer was not above a certain romanticisation and mythification of her family and personal history; her attempt to trace her family name back to the legendary buffoon Taillefer of the Battle of Hastings is one example among many. The narrative nevertheless tries to be honest: the author does not shy away from the realities of life for a woman and composer or her personal and professional difficulties, including the toll taken on her composing by the need to earn a living as well as her romantic disappointments. Though not alluded to directly in this text (by contrast to many of her other interviews), the difficulties related to her status as a woman appear several times in the subtext. Beyond the obvious impact on her productivity of the violence and jealousy of her two husbands and the time devoted to the education of her daughter, certain details mentioned, such as Paul Claudel's preference for female collaborators (supposedly more docile than men), offer a glimpse of the obstacles presented to her sex, despite her apparent neutrality on this subject.

Among the "myths" in this autobiography, Tailleferre's path to composition holds an important place. The composer presents her musical career as the inevitable result of an innate musical gift, developed through sheer pluck unbeknownst to her father, adamantly opposed to her musical studies. His comparison of the Conservatoire to prostitution - "For my daughter, being at the Conservatoire is the same as working the Boulevard Saint-Michel" - has often been cited to illustrate the difficulties encountered by aspiring female composers. Ultimately, the part devoted to her creative process and aesthetic ideas remains rather limited: Tailleferre prefers to concentrate on the circumstances that led to the creation and performance of her works (encounters with collaborators, changes to choreography, etc.), leaving the work of musical creation to her "gift". Only a few collaborations that left an impression on her are related in detail, including her work with Les Six, the Ballets suédois, Paul Claudel, and Paul Valéry. Tailleferre's discretion about her own creative work could be due to the extreme lack of confidence in herself and in her work that transpires throughout the memoirs. Between the lines, the reader can glean certain ideas about music: a love of melody, a play with styles according to the purpose of the music, a taste for a certain simplicity.

Tailleferre gave a leading place in her narrative to description of the artistic and society worlds of her times, making these memoirs a precious document on the avant-garde from the 1920s to 1950s, which Tailleferre frequented assiduously in the United States as well as in France, and thus was able to portray from the inside.

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11/12/2023

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Further Reading

Stéphan Etcharry, « Germaine Tailleferre, compositrice des Années folles aux années 1970. Un talent « évidemment essentiellement féminin », dans Mélanie Traversier & Alban Ramaut (éd.), *La musique a-t-elle un genre ?*, Paris, Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2019, p. 163-184.

Robert Shapiro, *Germaine Tailleferre : a bio-bibliography*, New York, Greenwood Press, 1994.

Germaine Tailleferre : Dossier biographique, Bibliothèque nationale de France, notice FRBNF45903609.

Germaine Tailleferre, *La femme et l'art* (« Connaissance de l'homme »), ORTF, vendredi 13 mars 1970, 12 minutes 40, Fonds INA (transcription de Stéphan Etcharry).

Germaine Tailleferre, *L'heure des connaisseurs*, « Germaine Tailleferre a 80 ans », France Musique, mardi 18 avril 1972, 53 minutes, ORTF, Fonds INA (transcription de Stéphan Etcharry).

Archives du XX^e siècle, « Germaine Tailleferre », rushes, émission du mercredi 1^{er} janvier 1975, INA (transcription de Stéphan Etcharry).

Germaine Tailleferre, [*Entretiens avec Germaine Tailleferre*], n^o1 à 10, diffusés entre le 2 et le 16 janvier 1975, Fonds INA.

To quote this article: Fauve Bougard, "Germaine Tailleferre: Mémoires à l'emporte-pièce (1986)", Dictionary of Composer's Writings, Dictéco [online], ed. E. Reibel, last edited: 11/03/2025, <https://dicteco.huma-num.fr/book/63995>.