

Composers of Great Band Works

by Dr. Brian Harris, Director of Bands
McLennan Community College, Waco

Darius Milhaud (1892 - 1974)

Lifeline

- born in Aix-en-Provence, a town in southern France (September 4).
- was an only child.
- began violin lessons at age 7.
- at age 13, began studies in harmony with the conductor of the local army band.
- began studies at the Paris Conservatory as a violin student, then switched to composition.
- by his mid-20's, had established polytonality as the norm for his works.
- from age 24 to 26, lived in Brazil as a guest of the ambassador from France.
- on a visit to London, heard American jazz for the first time (age 27).
- at age 29, he toured the USA as pianist of his own works.
- married his cousin Madeleine at age 32.
- at 38, son Daniel was born.
- left France at age 46 when the Nazi regime took power, securing a teaching job at Mills College in Oakland, California.
- returned to France at age 54 as professor of composition at the Paris Conservatory (his alma mater) but retained his post at Mills College.
- at age 71, resigned his teaching duties due to failing health and moved to Geneva, Switzerland.
- died at age 81 in Geneva (June 22).



Anecdotes and Trivia

- last name is pronounced “mee - yo,” with stress on the second syllable.
- came from a wealthy Jewish family.
- both parents were musically talented.
- his father was an almond merchant.
- was a member of *Les Six*, a group of young French composers which included Honegger and Poulenc.
- early in his career, he was considered by the public as “an unprincipled exploiter of fashionable oddities” for his highly unusual harmonic treatments.
- several premieres of his works caused audience riots, necessitating the use of police to clear the house.
- his popular ballet score, *La création du monde*, was inspired from hearing authentic black jazz in Harlem.
- wrote his famous band work, *Suite française*, in 1944 using folk songs from various regions of France. Other works for band include *Introduction et marche funèbre* (1936), *Deux Marches* (1945), *West Point Suite* (1948), and *Musique de théâtre* (1970).
- composed 18 string quartets, two of which can be played separately or together.
- wrote a song cycle using as text an agricultural catalog’s description of farm equipment.
- enjoyed traveling despite severe rheumatoid arthritis (which necessitated the use of a wheelchair by age 40).
- was a prolific composer, completing more than 450 works, including 15 opera, 17 ballet scores, 12 symphonies, and music for about 30 films.



Sources

My Happy Life: An Autobiography by Darius Milhaud (1974)
The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (1980)
Conversations with Madeleine Milhaud by Roger Nichols (1996)