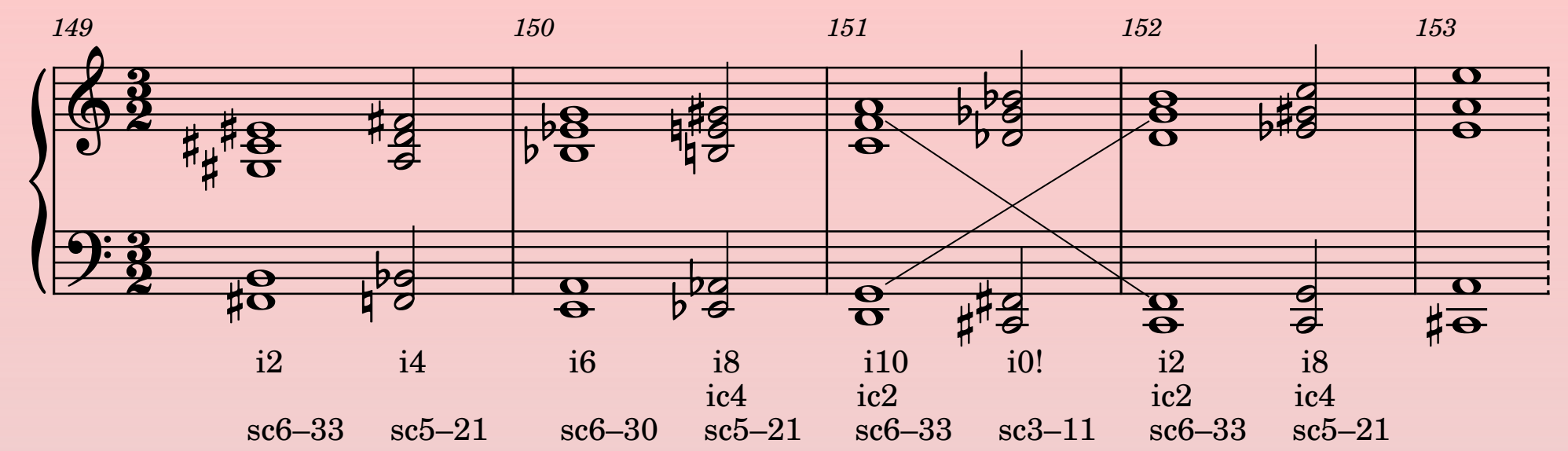


Les Six's New Sound

Harmony, Identity, and Antisemitism in the Interwar Period

1 Project Description

In 1920s Paris, a group of young composers known as “Les Six” were the face of the French musical avant garde. But no one, not even the composers themselves, knew why critics called them a group in the first place. Using archival and analytical evidence, this project argues that one of Darius Milhaud’s compositional techniques became a model for his companions, as well as the target of antisemitic criticism from those with narrower visions of “Frenchness.” That technique, which I call “dissonant combination,” juxtaposed chords, melodies, and later, forms from different keys to push the boundaries of tonal music. In the wake of the Great War, the Group of Six offered a French “polytonal” response to the German “atonal” system.



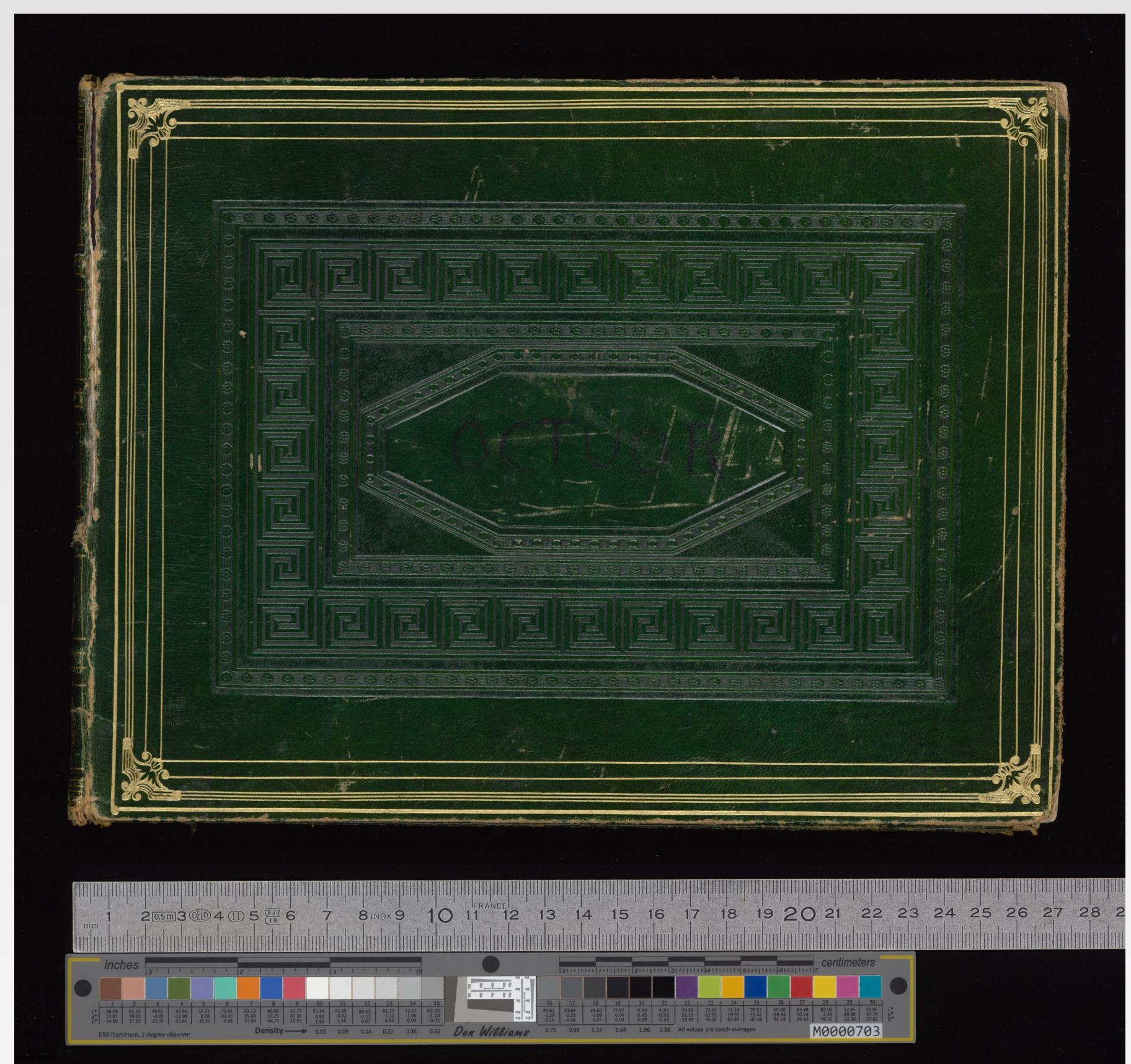
Milhaud, String Quartet No. 2, V. Très rythmé, mm. 149–53.
Strategic combination of harmonies creates voice exchange effect.

2 Grant Activities

During my grant period, I spent five weeks at the archive of the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel, Switzerland (left), which recently acquired Milhaud’s nachlass from one of his son. In addition to viewing his correspondence and typescripts of unpublished lectures, I examined autograph manuscripts for nearly all his string quartets, which he considered the “primary vehicle” for his experiments in polytonality. Upon arriving, I discovered the manuscript book for Milhaud’s *Octet* (below), a piece famous for directing its eight musicians to perform his *Fourteenth* and *Fifteenth* quartets simultaneously. Since the piece demonstrates Milhaud’s technical facility at combining tonal structures—two entire compositions, in this case—much has been written about its manuscript even though few have seen it.

3 Project Outcomes

After returning from the archive, I finished a first draft of an article on the analytical and historical significance of Milhaud’s string quartets, which I am planning to revise and submit to a leading, peer-reviewed journal in musicology this academic year. I will also be presenting my research at the international conference, “Modality in French Music at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” in Paris in March 2026, sponsored by the Sorbonne University, McGill University, and the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, among others. I am also planning to apply for subsequent grants to return to the Paul Sacher Stiftung to complete another article project on Milhaud’s correspondence and text manuscripts.



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