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Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection

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Saturday, June 6th, 2015, 5:00-6:00 p.m.

Jacques Ibert 125th Anniversary

Jacques Ibert (1890-1962). [The Ballad of Reading Gaol](#) (1920)

Ibert. [Escales](#) (1922)

Ibert. [Divertissement](#) (1929)



Since his name is not Debussy or Ravel or Satie, and since his name was not in a group called “Les Six,” the overlooked French composer of the 20th century’s first half may well be Jacques Ibert. But since 2015 is the 125th anniversary of his birth, this is a good time for Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection to assess his music.

Critics have often called Jacques Ibert “eclectic,” but that may have more to do with their not being able to pigeon-hole him into one school of music or another. What stands out most of all about Ibert, though, is that he is a remarkably resourceful composer. His efficiently scored works are always beautiful, and more often than not have a theatrical flair.

He knew what he was doing from the beginning. He had already won the top prize, the *Prix de Rome*, at the Paris Conservatory, but then went into the French Navy during the First World War. Even through these years, however, his compositional gifts were percolating.

He began a substantial orchestral work based on the Oscar Wilde poem, “The Ballad of Reading Gaol,” at this time. Wilde, who had been imprisoned at Reading, witnessed the hanging of a husband who had murdered his wife. One line in the poem has become famous: “Each man kills the thing he loves.”

The 1922 premiere of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was conducted by fellow composer Gabriel Pierné, and was a success. Another success immediately followed it. *Escales*, or *Ports of Call*, is inspired by Ibert’s naval experiences in the Mediterranean. He salutes Rome and Palermo in the first movement, the Tunisian cities of Tunis and Nafta in the second, and gives over the final movement to the Spanish port of Valencia.

Ibert composed *Divertissement* as incidental music for a 1929 theatrical comedy, but within a year produced a concert version. It and *Escales* are his two most popular orchestral works, and along with *Reading Gaol* made a name for Ibert, opened doors to publishers, and eventually led to the directorship of the French Academy in Rome, where he spent much of his life as an ambassador in Italy for all things French. He composed operas, piano music, film music (even for Gene Kelly and Orson Welles), and much else.

His life was not without setback, however. World War II interrupted his stay in Italy, and then the Nazi-allied Vichy government ruling France banned his music. He ended up in Switzerland, but returned to France—and his beloved Italy—when peace returned to Europe.

So for the 125th anniversary of the birth of Jacques Ibert it’s two familiar works, and (because it’s Discoveries) something not so. All in all, it’s the hard-to-label but nevertheless gorgeous music of Jacques Ibert.

Hosted by [Kile Smith](#), former curator of the Fleisher Collection, and [Jack Moore](#), program director of [WRTI](#). In *Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection* we uncover the unknown, rediscover the little-known, and take a fresh look at some of the remarkable treasures housed in the Fleisher Collection of Orchestral Music, at the Parkway Central Library of the [Free Library of Philadelphia](#). The Fleisher Collection is the largest lending library of orchestral performance material in the world. For recording details, please go to our [web page](#). For a detailed list of all our shows, please visit our [archives](#). (215) 686-5313, fleisher@freelibrary.org.