Satie, Erik Alfred Leslie (1866-1925)

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Abstract

Erik Satie's compositions, writings, and humor played an important role in many modernist movements of the twentieth century. Experimenting with simple forms, neoclassicism, mysticism, satire, and Dadaism, Satie collaborated with prominent artists, musicians, and institutions including Vincent Hypsa, Jean Cocteau, Pablo Picasso, Rene Clair, Francis Picabia, Claude Debussy, Man Ray, the Ballets Russe, the Ballets Suédois. Most recognized today for early his modal, pseudo-antique dances, the Gymnopédies and Gnossiennes, Satie also composed popular tunes, humorous piano works that mocked musical conventions, avant-garde ballets, as well as numerous mystical, irreverent, and nonsensical writings and drawings. His works and persona, sometimes whimsical, arcane, gothic, mystical, or Dadaistic inspired later generations of modernist artists and composers such as Les Six, Virgil Thomson, and John Cage.

Summary

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Education and Early Development

Erik Satie was born May 17, 1866, in Honfleur, France to a Norman father (Alfred) and a Scottish mother (Jane). Upon the death of his mother in 1872, he lived with his paternal grandparents before reuniting with his father in Paris in 1878. In Paris, Satie enrolled in piano classes at the Paris Conservatoire, where he performed so poorly that his teacher called him, "the laziest student." After failure at the Conservatoire, Satie enlisted in the army, which did not suit him either. After leaving the military in late 1887 (he deliberately contracted bronchitis to shorten his service), Satie rented an apartment in the Montmartre district of Paris where he frequented cabarets, including the famous Le Chat Noir, and socialized with avant-garde humorists Rodolphe Salis, Dynam-Victor Fumet, and Alphonse Allais. Early cabaret culture greatly influenced Satie's musical output. Popular tunes appear throughout his work, and the absurdist poetry and whimsical theatrics popular at Le Chat Noir informed Satie's own absurdist writings.
At this time he also forged a strong friendship with Claude Debussy and became associated with the mystical cult of Sâr Joséphin Péladan, becoming the official composer and chapel master of Péladan's mystical *Ordre de la Rose-Croix Catholique, du Temple et du Graal*.

His most well-known works, the *Trois Gymnopédies* (1888) and the six *Gnossiennes* (1889–91 and 1897) come from this period as well. Both sets evoke ancient Greece through their titles. Satie claimed that Flaubert's 1862 novel *Salammbô*, set in an exotically ancient Carthage, inspired the *Gymnopédies*' hypnotic undulating lines and their stark simplicity, lilting waltz rhythm, and modal harmony paid homage to the ancient Spartan ritual dance. The mysterious and similarly modal *Gnossiennes* also suggest a stark exoticism, with repeated accompaniments and raised fourth scale degrees. These dark, enigmatic dances may also take their title from Greek mythology or from an interest in Gnosticism. Also of note are the strange, nonsensical performance indications Satie included in the score. The composer's first biographer, Pierre-Daniel Templier, described the *Gnossiennes* as "bathed in this curious mixture of Orientalism and Gregorian mysticism" (12). Satie's works from this period were almost exclusively for voice and piano or solo piano.

In 1895, the composer received a small inheritance with which he purchased seven identical chestnut-colored corduroy suits, an episode that is noted by his biographers as marking the end of his Rose-Croix period with Sâr Joséphin Péladan and the beginning of his "Velvet Gentleman" period (see FIGURE 2). The composer's eccentric costumes demarcated periods in his life and Satie was one of the first modernist artists to merge his own fashion esthetic with his musical works. Three years later he would move from Montmartre to the suburb of Arcueil-Cachan, presumably to gain complete isolation. During his "Velvet Gentleman" period Satie wrote most of his cabaret songs, including the popular *La diva de l'Empire* (1904), *Tendrement* (1902) and *L'omnibus automobile* (1905), along with the famous four-hands piano work, *Trois morceaux en forme de poire* (1903). The latter (written as a quirky response to Debussy's criticism that his music lacked form) is actually comprised of seven pieces derived from Satie's popular songs. The witty lyrics and jaunty rhythms of all these works owe a great deal to popular café culture.
Perhaps due to Debussy's criticism, Satie enrolled at the Schola Cantorum at the age of 39 to study counterpoint, analysis, and form with Vincent d'Indy and Albert Roussel. At about the same time, he replaced the velvet gentleman look with a bourgeois attire complete with bowler hat, wing collar and umbrella, which he maintained for the rest of his life (see FIGURE 3). His music at this point took on a contrapuntal texture, and he worked tirelessly at perfecting his chorale and fugal techniques.
Humorous Works, Stage Works, and Dadaism

In 1911, a concert organized by Maurice Ravel for the SMI (Société Musicale Indépendante) showcased the early works of Satie, and the composer received much praise and attention for his already forgotten compositions. More works akin to his early humorous pieces were composed after this concert, including Préludes flaques (pour un chien) (1912), Véritables prélices flaques (pour un chien) (1912), Le piège de Méduse (1913), Embryons desséchés (1913), and Sports et divertissements (1914). Embryons desséchés pokes fun at musical conventions through its parodies of Romantic era works of Chopin and Beethoven. In these short miniatures Satie often employs out-of-place grandiose musical gestures to mock the rigidity and presumed stuffiness of mainstream music of the time.

Once war broke out in Europe in 1914, Satie joined the Socialist party, met Serge Diaghilev, forged relationships with Jean Cocteau, Pablo Picasso, and Igor Stravinsky, and broke off his friendship with Claude Debussy. His interest in leftist politics mirrored a further shift toward radically anti-establishment musical works. The war years also witnessed the succès de scandale of Satie's ballet, Parade, ballet réaliste (1917), a collaboration between Satie, Pablo Picasso, Leonide Massine and Jean Cocteau for the Ballets Russe. Notable for its use of popular music (ragtime), noise-making instruments added by Cocteau (typewriter, revolver), and Picasso's cubist costumes, Guillaume Apollinaire coined the word "surrealism" to describe the ballet.

In 1917, Satie became artistic sage to a group of six young French composers under the watchful eye of Jean Cocteau: Georges Auric, Louis Durey, and Arthur Honegger at first, then joined by Germaine Tailleferre, Francis Poulenc, and Darius Milhaud in 1918. During these years, Satie was busy working on Socrate [Socrates], an ode to the martyred philosopher, for chamber orchestra and four sopranos. Constructed out of texts from Plato's dialogues that chronicle the life and death of Socrates, Satie employed clear, simply adorned musical lines that presaged an emerging neoclassical, modernist, abstract, and even proto-minimalist aesthetic. In 1918 Jean Cocteau published Le coq et l'arlequin, an essay on the future of French music extolling Satie and Les Six, identifying their chic, modern, and popular esthetic as quintessentially French and an antidote to the hyper-romanticism of Richard Wagner and the lushness of Debussy.

By late 1919, Satie had begun to communicate with the Dada movement, and his socialist tendencies were quickly turning to a more Bolshevist position. In the 1920s, the composer finally joined the Communist party, making friends with several Dada artists: Tristan Tzara, Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray and others involved in the Paris Dada movement. He presided over the infamous mock Dada trial of André Breton in 1922 and in his last years, produced a number of nonsensical and Dada ballets (Mercure and Relâche) that widened the gulf between him and many of his more conservative friends. He died in 1925 from complications from cirrhosis of the liver. When his brother and friends went to clear out his apartment they discovered cigar boxes filled with the composer's quirky illustrations and notes, music notebooks, his compositions, and umbrellas amidst piles and piles of garbage.

Satie's Legacy

Satie traveled in avant-garde circles throughout his life. Collaborating with humorist bohemian artists and poets in his youth, and modernist artists in his mature years. Artists such as Man Ray, Constantin Brancusi, and Georges Braque took inspiration from Satie's life and compositions. Virgil Thomson, John Cage, Francis Poulenc, Igor Stravinsky, and Darius Milhaud all claimed to owe
something to Satie's works, be it clarity of line, simplicity of counterpoint, or use of popular idioms. While Satie mostly composed in small forms (works for solo piano, voice and piano, etc), he did complete a number of innovative large-scale works for the Ballets Russes and Ballets Suédois and was an important ambassador of the musical avant-garde for artistic colleagues in the visual arts, literature, theater, and design.

List of Work

- **Entr’acte** (René Clair's film 'interval' in Relâche) Link: https://www.google.com/url?q=http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UnXdYxvBHf8&sa=U&ei=El_xT8-YBcyj-gbP4P WuAw&ved=0CACQFjABOAg&client=internal-uds-cse&usg=AFQjCNefrA5gO1hmxCtMDImbrylS28LPQ

- **Relâche** (full score by Erik Satie) Link: https://www.google.com/url?q=http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dvjt9jn hoOxhAf5spSXQ&ved=0CA8QFjAF&client=internal-uds-cse&usg=AFQjCNFif5AhIzj0PzHFvgQ7Zor2HcC-mFA

Further Reading


- Davis, Mary E. (2007) *Erik Satie*, London: Reaktion Books. (This comprehensive biography pays special attention to Satie's engagement with popular culture.)


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Man Ray (1890-1976)

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Paz, Juan Carlos (1897–1972)