**SATIE, Erik Alfred Leslie (1866-1925)**

Samuel N. Dorf

**Summary**

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 the *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.

**Education and Early Development**

Erik Satie was born 17 May 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 poorly. After failure at the Conservatoire, Satie enlisted in the army, which did not suit him either. After leaving the military in late 1887, 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 (see FIGURE 1). It was also at this time that he forged a strong friendship with Claude Debussy and became associated with the mystical cult of Sâr Joséphin Péladan, becoming the official composer and chapelmaster of Péladan’s mystical *Ordre de la Rose-Croix Catholique, du Temple et du Graal*.

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 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 aesthetic with his musical works. Three years later he would move from Montmartre to the suburb of Arcuiel-Cachan, presumably to gain complete isolation. During this 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.

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 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 Préludes flaques (pour un chien)* (1912), *Le Piège de Méduse* (1913), *Embryons desséchés* (1913), and *Sports et divertissements* (1914).

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 scandal* 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 aesthetic 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.

**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, Constanin 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 own something to Satie’s works, be it the clarity of line, simplicity of counterpoint, or use of popular idioms.

**Reference and Further Reading**

Cage, John (1973) “Erik Satie,” in *Silence*, second edition, Middeltown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press (An imaginary conversation Cage constructed between Satie and himself using quotes, letters, writings, and other sources of Satie’s prose).

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

Orledge, Robert (1997) “Debussy and Satie,” in *Debussy Studies*, ed. Richard Langham, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Orledge delves into the close relationship between the composers, which began around December 1891 at the Auberge du Clou cabaret in Paris, followed by regular meetings to exchange ideas. He discusses their cross influences on each other, frictions in their friendship, leading to their falling-out and reconciliation).

Orledge, Robert (1995) *Satie Remembered*, trans. Roger Nichols, Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press. (A chronological arrangement of accounts of various aspects of Satie’s life, music, dress, manners, and personality told by his contemporaries including Satie’s siblings, Stravinsky, Milhaud, Varèse, Valentine Gross, Man Ray, Blaise Cendars, Sylvia Beach, and Brancusi).

Orledge, Robert (1990) *Satie the Composer*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

(provides an examination of Satie’s compositional process. The author relies chiefly on manuscript and notebook analysis, but utilizes the composer’s letters, writings, drawings, as well as incorporates biographical considerations into the analyses).

Satie, Erik (1996) *A Mammal’s Notebook: Collected Writings of Erik Satie*, ed. Ornella Volta, trans. Anthony Melville, London: Atlas Press (a comprehensive collection and translation of Satie’s writings into English including many of Satie’s publications, aphorisms, talks, articles, calligraphy and drawings).

Templier, Pierre-Daniel (1932) *Erik Satie*, Paris, Editions Rieder [trans. Elena and David French, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1969] (The first scholarly biography of Satie written after his death).

Whiting, Steven Moore (1999), *Satie the Bohemian: From Cabaret to Concert Hall*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (A comprehensive survey of Satie’s work in the cabarets and music halls from 1888 to 1909).

**Moving Image and Music Material**

*Entr’acte* (René Clair’s film ‘interval’ in *Relâche*)

https://www.google.com/url?q=http://www.youtube.com/watch%3Fv%3DUnXdYxvBHf8&sa=U&ei=El\_xT8-YBcyj-gbP4PWuAw&ved=0CAcQFjABOAg&client=internal-uds-cse&usg=AFQjCNEfrA5gO1hmxGtMDImbryfLs28LPQ

*Relâche* (full score by Erik Satie)

https://www.google.com/url?q=http://www.youtube.com/watch%3Fv%3DKvc6vIWQxT8&sa=U&ei=DVjxT9jnHoOxhAfS5pSXDQ&ved=0CA8QFjAF&client=internal-uds-cse&usg=AFQjCNFi5AHIZj0PzHFvgQ7Zor2HcC-mFA