



twentieth century analysis: essays in miniature

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INTRODUCTION. Analysis has always occupied a superior place in musical curricula. Whereas the study of harmony and counterpoint serve as introductions to the working materials of music, formal analysis demonstrates personal applications of these abstract tools. Nothing can be more stimulating to the young music student than tracing the master composer's imaginative manipulation of materials and concepts. One learns secrets usually withheld in theoretical studies—the difference between theory and practice. At its best, analysis reveals the composer at work; one is shown the moves involved in the aesthetic chess game of creation.

In ages of musical calm, when the musical mind accepts the dictates of convention, analysis becomes a happy experience for academe because creative right and wrong can be "tested." Periods of musical upheaval disrupt secure methods of analysis, making it difficult to find musical sense. Of course, the disintegration of established styles is symptomatic of new musical exploration. No period of music history has been as elusive as ours, styles changing with ever increasing rapidity; the very fabric of music has been rewoven at least twice during the past two decades (twelve-tone music of Viennese vintage, post-war serialism, chance music,

electronic music, to name but a few). More difficult still is comprehension of the varying musical perspectives carried in the wake of new techniques.

It will not be the task of these essays to coin new analytical jargon or to unravel the technical mysteries of recent compositional rituals. Nor will they propagandize. Their purpose is only to introduce works crucial to the vicissitudes of twentieth-century style, and in so doing they will assume the tone of Dr. Johnson's didactic style which "instructs but does not persuade." To accomplish this the investigations will equally stress technical innovations and the dialectic of contemporary expression. The works selected for this series are available on recordings.

ERIK SATIE: a commentary. Although more discussed than performed, Erik Satie's influence on the course of twentieth-century music is immense. Satie is, in the profoundest sense (he would have laughed), "The Father of Modern Music." Born in 1866, Satie was contemporary with everybody and every artistic movement. *Tristan* had just been premiered, Rimbaud had not yet run away to write poetry and smuggle guns, and Brahms was to wait ten years before publishing his first symphony.

By the time of his death in 1925, there had been our first world war, Stravinsky was already in his neo-classic period, Charlie Chaplin was a millionaire and Mussolini had launched fascism. Satie's lifetime experienced Charles Péguy's 1913 observation: the world has changed more in the past thirty years than it has since Jesus Christ.

Satie was the chief strategist in the struggle between German and French aesthetics. Wagner's music of the future aimed at total musical supremacy. Even Claude Debussy — self-styled *Musicien Française* — was nearly conquered, had it not been for Satie's counsel. Satie's Gallic sensibilities were a perfect foil for German romanticism. An honor roll of French artists numbering Debussy, Ravel, Picasso, Braque, Cocteau, and Milhaud eventually took the lead in the international arts replacing the cult of Wagnerianism. All were close friends of the composer and all have responded to his ideological tutelage. Satie's intellectual guerrilla tactics toppled a dictatorship threatening to make music the slave of other arts. Satie and Wagner are music's David and Goliath.

It is useless to comment on any specific work, for Satie's work eludes musical analysis. One must contemplate the whole oeuvre and the thought behind it; comprehend-

ing this, the swerving movements of modern music can be followed more easily. It is not an exaggeration to claim that Satie's ideas have in one way or another affected all contemporary arts, for the man is a corroding link between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In marked opposition to nineteenth-century symphonic music, the bulk of Satie's output is for the piano. The music is anti-romantic in sound, length, and intention. Virtuosi pass it by, its brevity is an intense distillation, and some of it is more at ease in the cabaret than the moonlit salon. Satie pointed out that musical quality can be measured neither in quantity nor duration. This logical, essentially classical maxim subjected Wagnerian histrionics to dispassionate appraisal. The reigning musical conviction of the time, possibly epitomized by *Parsifal*, depended for its effect on blurring the divisions between music, theater, and philosophy. Satie's *Sarabandes* and *Gymnopédies* of 1887 seek independence; they exude a powerful simplicity through a detached expression of self-sufficiency. Pure music and program music were waging an aesthetic tug-of-war. Although Satie's early music is not as overtly revolutionary as was Wagner's, Satie was becoming avant-garde by engaging in rear guard actions. Nineteenth-century conceptions were being challenged by a reversion to the eighteenth-century ideals of Haydn and Mozart. The attempt to penetrate the intrinsic nature of music through cool-headed scrutiny is a basic factor in the psychological make-up of twentieth-century music. This belief elicited Stravinsky's famous remark that music is incapable of expressing anything. Stravinsky meant, of course, that music was capable only of expressing itself. The history of music has always swung back and forth between burning subjectivism and reserved objectivity; the pendulum of twentieth-century music was set in motion by Satie.

However, Satie was quite aware of music's ineffable substance and this insecurity forced him to become a true revolutionary. His later works (from 1912 on) are usually termed eccentric, obscure, or humorous (by the kindly disposed). Composed without barlines, painstakingly cal-

liographed in a lithe Gothic hand, brief, with bizarre accompanying performance directions ("like a nightingale with a toothache"), all descriptions are apt. These pieces, all for piano, often display a running montage of surrealist narrative underneath the music; for example, "this vast globe has only one inhabitant—a Negro. He is so bored he is ready to die of laughter. The shade of the thousand-year-old tree shows it is 9:17 a.m. In order to think better the Negro holds his cerebellum in his right hand." (*Heures Séculaires et Instantanées*, 1914). Whatever interpretation we choose to give these interjections, one fact is inescapable. We are in a private world of absurdities where the performer supplies his own reality. Paradoxically, this world proceeds by its own illogical logic. For the listener, music and words remain separate (the words are not meant to be read aloud), while for the performer lines and music offer disconnected yet simultaneous impressions. The composer has successfully captured a concept of creation combining music, painting, and poetry on a single page, yet the visual and audio demands made on a single mind are as impossible to absorb as thinking two thoughts at once. It follows logically that these pieces defy performance. One naturally asks "what's the use?" Satie's reply might be that a totally impossible art has been realized.

This conceptual dialectic, subjecting music to the parry and thrust of incise intellectual criticism is typical of music since Satie. The French musical mind deemed Wagner's grandiose mystical gestures fraudulent, and a crash diet was forced on fat romanticism. An *Art depouillé* resulted—a music skinned to essentials.

Tired of music's metaphysical pretensions, Satie sought to make music a commonplace pleasure. Listening to music was to become like sitting on a comfortable sofa. The answer was *musique d'ameublement* or furniture music. Satie wanted "to establish a music designed to satisfy useful needs. Furniture music fills the same role as light and heat. Furniture music for law offices, banks, etc." The idea was not farfetched. Satie was completely twentieth-centuryized; he invented Muzak. The utilitarian ap-

proach took root in Hindemith's *Gebrauchsmusik* and in the Satie-dictated manifestos of John Cage. All of today's mass-produced avant-garde owes a heavy debt to this bespectacled Frenchman who looked like Toulouse-Lautrec. Whatever antics our avant-gardists conjure up will be antiquated by Satie's role in the 1925 ballet *Relâche*. On this occasion, Satie made a curtain call by driving a small car on stage, merrily waving his bowler to the audience. The original idea of furniture music was honest, but ridiculous; nevertheless, it caught on. It is nice to have music while buying macaroni.

Satie is not above criticism. His production is small and much of it is purposely awkward. This clumsiness, thumbing its nose at scholastic compositional lustre, flaunts primitivism as a highly prized individual trait. It is almost as if Satie were obeying Dostoevski's proverb "be stupid but be original." In expressing the simple, the complex and the naïve, Satie comments on all music already composed and that yet to be composed. His *esprit nouveau* is perennial for he wanted to teach music to "aim at an emotive simplicity and a firmness of utterance enabling sonorities and rhythms to assert themselves clearly, unequivocal in design and accent, and contrived in a spirit of humility and renunciation."

If Satie's ideas and life hold more interest than his music, it is because he desired to create an honest music in a self-conscious age. He seriously wondered what kind of music a one-year-old child would compose. Roger Shattuck's penetrating study of Satie in *The Banquet Years* observes: "The more one learns about Satie, the more one comes to see him as a man who performed every contortion in order to keep sight of his childhood. Like a child who twists his shadow, Satie made sure that the most treasured part of his past was always at his side." Satie once remarked, "I came into the world very young in a time which is very old." Satie's personal and musical eccentricities are attempts to laugh in an age where laughter is difficult. For Satie, music was not necessarily an art, but a method of connecting life with art. It was as if life were more important than music. ■