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### Erik Satie and his influence on music in France in the twentieth century

Lindsey Peters  
*University of Richmond*

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Erik Satie and his Influence on Music  
in France in the Twentieth Century

By Lindsey Peters

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## Chapter I

In nearly every period in musical history that is marked by dramatic change in thought and composition, there emerge figures whose contribution lies more in the philosophical and aesthetic influence than in the actual music they produced. It was true of the Florentine Camerata, whose influence did not reach musical fruition until Monteverdi. In late nineteenth and early twentieth century France, Erik Satie was a harbinger of directions French music was to take in the next fifty years. Although his music exhibits many advanced techniques, ideas revealed in Satie's writings and conversations with artists of all media were influential in the composition of almost every important French composer, and of many non-French composers from 1900 to the present day.

The son of a French ship broker and a London girl of Scottish descent, Satie spent most of his childhood with his grandparents in Honfleur. Here he encountered two decisive influences on his life. He studied counterpoint and piano with Vincent Vinot, who trained Satie to harmonize plainsong before he had heard enough tonal music to establish any habit for the major scale and its leading tone.<sup>1</sup> Satie's uncle Adrien, or "Sea Bird", was a man of great eccentricity. His hatred of sham and love for the

wild and adventurous was no doubt an important force in shaping Satie's personality.

In 1879 Satie began systematic musical instruction at the Conservatoire in Paris. Though his efforts met with general disapproval on the part of his instructors, his first piano works were published in 1887. Shortly afterward he became involved in the medievalism of the Rosicrucian sect. This organization, which originated in Germany as a Lutheran, anti-Catholic society in the seventeenth century, was organized in Paris in the 1890's by Joseph Péladan. One of its principal objects was to regulate the arts according to what was alleged to be the Wagnerian aesthetic.<sup>2</sup> Although Satie felt no kinship with Wagner and warned other French composers against his influence, he accepted the position of official composer for the organization. In connection with his duties he made a conscientious study of plainsong. Satie was only happy to use this group to perform his works, but he was not willing to let them hamper him. He did not conform to their aesthetic principles so he quit the group in 1895.<sup>3</sup>

After leaving the Rosicrucians he decided to form his own organization, "L'Eglise Metropolitaine d'Art Jesus Conducteur" appointing himself "Parcier" and "Mâitre de Chapelle." The aim of the organization was "to fight against those who have neither convictions nor beliefs,

no thoughts in their souls nor principles in their hearts."<sup>2</sup> These aims were indicative of his attitudes for the rest of his life. He distributed pamphlets fulminating against those responsible for the "moral and aesthetic decadence of our time" and edited a short-lived journal, "Le Cartulaire de l'Eglise Metropolitaine d'Art de Jesus Conducteur."<sup>4</sup>

In Paris he frequented the bohemian circles of Montmartre, his home. He earned a living playing accompaniments in cabarets, where he made some of his most important acquaintances including Debussy and Dyran Victor Fumet, pupil of Franck, whose compositions and improvisations stimulated Satie to his first adventures in unresolved ninth chords, fourth chords and other sorts of dissonance. Fumet's interest in alchemy probably encouraged Satie in his eccentric literary and religious interests.<sup>5</sup>

In 1898 he moved from Montmartre to the semi-industrial suburb of Arcueil-Cochan outside southern Paris, where he lived alone until his death in a somewhat shabby dwelling, the inside of which very few ever saw. He made daily trips on foot across Paris to Montmartre.

In 1905, at the age of 39, Satie enrolled in the Schola Cantorum to study under Roussel and d'Indy. The award of a diploma inscribed "très bien" helped silence critics who had regarded him as a blagueur.<sup>6</sup> In 1911 the Société Indépendante Musicale presented a concert of Satie's early works. This concert, organized by Ravel and attended

by many of the outstanding musicians of France, was decisive in establishing his reputation as an artist.<sup>7</sup>

During the early years of the first World War Satie became close friends with Diaghilev, Picasso, and Cocteau, and with them he was able to realize his aesthetic ideals in stage productions, particularly in ballet. He spent the remainder of his life involved in the artistic movements in Paris--cubism, surrealism, dadaism, and neo-classicism, at the same time never avowing any doctrine or patronizing any dogma. He was frequently associated with the leading Parisian figures in music, painting, and poetry. He devoted much of his efforts to encouraging young composers, especially the group termed "Les Six"--Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, George Auric, Germaine Tailleferre, Louis Durey, and Arthur Honegger, and later the "Ecole d'Arcueil" including the composer Henri Sauget and the conductor Roger Desormier.

## Chapter II

Satie grew up in a musical period in France dominated on one hand by academicism (Saint-Saens and d'Indy) and by Wagnerianism and post-Wagnerian romanticism on the other (Franck). By his nature he was opposed to academicism in any form. He also felt France should free herself from German domination in music.<sup>8</sup> He neither cared to nor was able to adapt his personality and artistry to either camp. Instead he struck out alone in completely new directions. The result was the invention of a mode of expression uniquely his own. His personality and his music are inextricably mixed.<sup>9</sup>

Satie possessed one of the shrewdest, most critical intellects of his time, sharing at least one characteristic with the great geniuses of history--absolute emotional honesty and integrity and purity of response.<sup>10</sup> He was opposed to anything and anyone that smelled of sham or hypocrisy. His personality as well as his music was marked by a conscious innocence, not fostered by naivete, but by a striving for honesty of expression and thought. It is an innocence not incompatible with mature irony.<sup>11</sup> His sympathies were always with youth and childhood. It was not nostalgia that motivated his sympathies, but a respect for the honesty and lack of sophistication of a child's

response. He said once: "Our ~~epoch~~ epoch is favorable to youth . . . one need not be very astute to notice that people of a certain age always talk about 'experience'. . . however memory is very short . . . ." <sup>12</sup>

There was a duality in his artistic personality. He was a classically-minded musician on one hand and an inveterate humbug on the other--like Edward Lear or Louis Carroll. However, whereas Lear and Carroll kept their two sides separate, the wag in Satie always intruded upon the musician--"taking a perverse pleasure in turning the sublime to the ridiculous." <sup>13</sup> His artistic position placed him in a double role, the loneliness of which he felt strongly: first as a creator looking through the candid eyes of a child (pungently expressed in one of his most famous "mots", "Je suis venu au monde très jeune dans un temp très vieux.") and secondly a cynic with a profound mistrust of his fellow man and his so-called wisdom or experience ("Quand j'étais jeune on me disait: 'Vous verrez quand vous aurez cinquante ans.' J'ai cinquante ans; je n'ai rien vu.") <sup>14</sup> This loneliness gave rise to a certain timidity, so that at no time in his life was he absolutely "sure" of himself and his powers. <sup>15</sup>

Satie and his Parisian disciples were determined not to let music take itself too seriously. They rejected all of what they contemptuously called "rhetoric" in music. The moral fervor and Weltschmerz of Wagner and its French



counterpart, the redemptive passion of Franck, all received this designation from Satie and his followers. They were interested in what had been the ideal of French court music in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They wanted compositions that were charming, lucid, well-ordered, and, most of all, entertaining.

Romanticism had viewed music as an inspired utterance and the composer as poet and prophet of the noble and sublime. With such an attitude, termed by Milhaud "le sérieux à tout prix",<sup>16</sup> it was inevitable that composers of the twentieth century would turn to satire, irony, and humor. Allying music with humor enabled composers to give expression to the bitterness of their time. Cleverness and spoofing held the place once guarded by pathos and passion. Although much of the music in this vein had a short-lived success, the attitude prompting it expressed a true need to bring music down to earth and clear the air of a great deal that had lost its meaning and usefulness.

Satie was blessed with a sharp wit which he employed in writings and conversations as well as music. In 1912 he wrote a series of almost Dadaistic essays for the Journal of the Société Internationale de Musique, under the title "Memoires d'un Amnésiaque" in which he describes a scientific device for measuring sound as the answer to composition. "In Praise of Critics" contains two lectures, "Intelligence and Appreciation of Music Among Critics" in

which he compares the two subjects to the critic's disfavor. In describing his humor he says: "My humor resembles that of Cromwell and I also owe much to Christopher Columbus because the American spirit has occasionally tapped me on the shoulder and I have been delighted to feel its ironically glacial bite."<sup>17</sup> He habitually jotted down sayings and witty remarks such as: "We specialize in repairing music"; "All our modern music has been carefully retouched by our employees"; "A symphony? Here you are madam."<sup>18</sup> One of his most amusing creations was a piece of nonsense music scored for the following ridiculous instruments: 2 flutes a piston in F sharp, 1 cello overcoat in C, 1 spring-lock in E, 2 slide clarinets in G minor, 1 siphon in C, 3 keyboard trombones in D minor, 1 double bass made of skin in C, and chromatic tub in B. "These instruments belong to the marvelous family of cephalophones, have a compass of thirty octaves, and are absolutely unplayable. An amateur in Vienna (Austria) in 1815 once tried to play the siphon in C; after executing a trill, the instrument burst, broke his spinal column, and scalped him completely. Since then no one has dared to avail themselves of the powerful resources of the cephalophones and the state had to forbid these instruments to be taught in the Municipal Schools."<sup>19</sup> Satie's humor found its clearest expression in the titles and commentaries of his piano works which will be discussed later.

Satie was directly opposed to the Wagnerian aesthetic and its influence, which stressed the redemptive, revealing character of art. Typical of his position on this issue is the remark, "I have always declared that in art there is no truth--no unique and absolute Truth, I mean."<sup>20</sup> Artists throughout time have noted the important relationship between art and religion--both striving for similar goals and expressing similar emotions. Satie's music is of documentary interest because it is completely unreligious and almost completely unsentimental.<sup>21</sup> It has been said of Satie, however, that he thought of music not necessarily as an art but as "a method of connecting life with art as though life were more important than music."<sup>22</sup>

In the same manner Satie was opposed to the preciousness of impressionistic aesthetic as well as the luscious harmonies cultivated by Debussy and his followers. He strove for unaffected music stripped of non-essentials down to its "bare bones" as he put it. He described the new music, "It teaches us to aim at emotional simplicity and a firmness of utterance that enables sonorities and rhythms to assert themselves clearly, unequivocally in design and accent and conceived in a spirit of humility and renunciation."<sup>23</sup> "All great artists," he said, "are amateurs."<sup>24</sup>

World War I changed ideas in music toward a need for reality, security, and certainty assigned the arts.

Satie's hour had come.<sup>25</sup> During this time he found a close aesthetic ally in the mind of Jean Cocteau. After the scandal precipitated by their joint production, "Parade," Cocteau published a pamphlet "Le Coq et L'Arlequin" stating the tenets of the new aesthetic and defending it from its critics. In this pamphlet and the several others that followed it, we see Satie's ideas most clearly developed and spelled out. The cock symbolizes the authenticity of art based solely on Gallic sources and traditions. Harlequin represents confusion of an art which includes pedal-notes (constants) basically belonging to other peoples (German and Russian), which when introduced into French art only distorts and weakens its character. The pamphlets attack Wagnerianism and warn against Russianism in "Sacre du Printemps" although they maintain respect for Stravinsky.<sup>26</sup> Cocteau is trying to break the spell of Debussy and sets Satie as a model against Ravel and Debussy. He calls Satie a composer of "music to walk on," "music of everyday." "Satie never stirs up the mud."<sup>27</sup> He says, "Enough of clouds, waves, aquariums, nymphs, and perfumes of the night. We need a music that is down to earth--an everyday music."<sup>28</sup>

Cocteau attacked the so-called serious music--the kind one listens to "with ones head in one's hand"<sup>29</sup>--and the "Russian pedal" influenced by Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov. He called for a decisively French music--"music with a punch" proclaiming the era of the circus and

music hall--an aesthetic rid of Weltschmerz.<sup>30</sup> He warns musicians to rid their music of tangles, deceits, and sleight-of-hand tricks and force it to stay as close as possible to the audience.<sup>31</sup> By close to the audience he means close to their understanding and comprehension, not their sympathies, for he felt music should be an objective art, detached from the individual.

The cult of the ballet during the war years was to some extent an effort to escape the self, and much of its appeal lay in its impersonality. It was the clearest external expression of the aesthetic ideals to which Satie, Cocteau, Picasso, and Picabia adhered. At the time "Parade" was produced the Dada movement had just been born. The war had engendered a feeling of hopelessness in the artists of Europe, who felt the old forms of expression had become meaningless and needed to be thrown into a melting pot in order that a new spirit could arise that would meet the moral and material needs of the changed world.<sup>32</sup> The nihilism of Dada is not strongly evident in "Parade" but its resulting technique, cubism, is closely kin to the aesthetic technique of "Parade." Satie did not aim at "pure" music in "Parade" but at a purity of emotional response. By shedding the "human" element, by dealing with depersonalized puppets, Satie and his colleagues tried to reestablish contact with "things" responding to things as they are "in themselves," not as they are seen

through a subjective, conventional, or sentimental haze. "They tried to lose their personalities in the things that make up the material of everyday life and in so doing to render those things rich and strange."<sup>33</sup>

After the war Satie's efforts with Cocteau and Picabia took another aesthetic turn resulting in what was called "musique d'ameublement" (furnishing music). It originated from a statement of Matisse who declared he dreamed of an art without any distracting subject matter, which might be compared to an easy-chair.<sup>34</sup> It was first used at a picture exhibition for the entr'acte of a play by Max Jacob. It was introduced this way:

We present for the first time, under the supervision of MM. Erik Satie and Darius Milhaud and directed by M. Delgrange, 'furnishing music' to be played during the entr'acte. We beg you to take no notice of it and to behave during the entr'acte as if the music did not exist. This music . . . claims to make its contribution to life in the same way as a private conversation, a picture, or the chair on which you may or may not be seated.<sup>35</sup>

Satie had invented Musak! Unfortunately at this first performance the audience insisted upon listening instead of mumbling while Satie frantically ran around trying to get people to make conversation.<sup>36</sup> Melodically "musique d'ameublement" does not depend on extended themes, but on short, flexible phrases repeated in more or less flexible patterns over a mechanical percussion. Occasionally a broader tune with a popular twang is introduced, but only

as part of the dynamic scheme without sentimental or pictorial associations. Function and art have become synonymous.<sup>37</sup> The first presentation had fragments of popular refrains from "Mignon" and "Danse Macabre." They were isolated phrases repeated over and over forming a wall-paper-like background. Satie wrote another ritournelle d'ameublement for a Mrs. Eugene Meyer of Washington entitled "Musique pour un cabinet préfectoral." For its full meaning it had to be played over and over forming a part of the furniture of her library like her Manet still-life.<sup>38</sup> This is a far cry from Wagner, who wanted his music performed only in specially constructed temples.

One of the most startling yet refreshing observations one makes when studying Satie is that he never remains content with a specific musical technique or aesthetic ideal, regardless of its success or failure. He refused to ride the wake of the dramatic wave made by "Parade." Instead of satisfying the paying public's curiosity about cubism in ballet, he went on to a completely different utterance, "musique d'ameublement" and Socrate. He may be said to have anticipated artistic tendencies which others shaped into dogma. In the 1920's he was being recognized as a pioneer of Dadaism ("Le Piège de Meduse") and cubism ("Parade") but he belonged to none of these movements and would not let himself be labelled.<sup>39</sup> In an article in "Le Coq et L'Arlequin" in 1920 Satie said: "Satieism

could not exist. I would be hostile to it. There should be no slavery in art. With each new work I have always made an effort to throw off imitators of my style or material. This is the only way an artist can avoid becoming the leader of a school, that is a pawn."<sup>40</sup> Like Socrates he was an inquisitive, questioning gadfly searching for honesty of thought and expression. Stanislas Fumet said Satie examines music to ask it one simple question, "Etes-vous, Madame, dans votre bon sens?" And truly it is necessary to admit that the lady has indeed been disturbed.<sup>41</sup>



## Chapter III

Satie's compositions consist mostly in piano music, songs, and music for the stage (ballet and operas.) He wrote no purely symphonic music. He was most prolific in his compositions for piano and it is in these works that his style can be most easily examined. He never went beyond small forms, but remained a miniaturist, believing the virtue of music to be in its power to suggest to the imagination more than it actually states.<sup>42</sup> Jean Cocteau said, "Satie's smallest work is small like a keyhole. Everything changes if you bring your eye close."<sup>43</sup>

Although his style made marked changes throughout his career, there are several constant characteristics in his music. He uses simple rhythmic patterns persisting past the point of unintentional monotony making a sort of hypnotic effect without dynamic emphasis. The trait of rhythm is exaggerated to an immobility that seems either sublime or maddening.<sup>44</sup> Phrase lengths are irregular, like those in plainsong. Melody is the most prominent and fundamental element. Rhythm is simple and clear, allowing concentration on the melody. Upward motions are light; downward motions heavy. Articulation is clear and natural. The accompanying chords enhance the harmonic peculiarity of the melody. Most are triads, but their connections are

seldom common. Richer chords are dispersed among the triads disregarding rules of part-writing.<sup>45</sup> In 1918 Satie formulated his harmonic principles in a sketchbook quoted by Roger Shattuck:

To have a feeling for harmony is to have a feeling for melody. The serious examination of a melody will always constitute for the student an excellent exercise in harmony. A melody does not have its 'harmony' any more than a landscape has its 'color.' The harmonic situation of a melody is infinite, for melody is only one means of expression in the whole realm of Expressions. Do not forget that the melody is the Idea, the contour just as much as it is the form and content of a work. Harmony is lighting, an exhibition of the object, its reflection. In composition the parts no longer follow 'school rules!' 'School' has a gymnastic purpose and no more; composition has an aesthetic purpose in which taste alone plays a part.<sup>46</sup>

Satie's harmonic intuition rivals that of such a great explorer of unsystematic chord progressions as Mussorgsky.<sup>47</sup> He deviates much farther than Debussy from the past. He does not accentuate tonality like Debussy or confuse it like Reger but simply neglects it. He showed that a short piece could have satisfactory form without unifying tonality.<sup>48</sup> In some of his piano music, beginning with "Gnos-siennes", he omitted barlines as well as time and key signatures, a daring step in the 1890's.

At heart Satie had returned to the classic spirit which gave life to Couperin's works: the spirit of balance, vivacity, fitness, and simplicity which is the soul of all great French classics. Satie created a style that

was not superficially, but basically and spiritually French. It was not French in the way of d'Indy, who made use of French folk song but remained strongly in the Romantic tradition.<sup>49</sup> It derived its spirit from the popular Parisian culture that produced Emmanuel Chabrier. He admired the simpleheartedness of the traditional French humor exhibited in Chabrier, but he was not a devotee in the same way. The general French aspect of his art is in no way incompatible with his solitary, objective classicism. "In the apparent irrelevant harmonies and juxtapositions of lyrical figures wherein lie the secret of his austerity, lies the means whereby so dispassionately ironic a tang is given to the succulence of music-hall melodies."<sup>50</sup>

Another subjective observation can be made about Satie's music. There is a feeling of reflective solitude and loneliness pervading his music. It is not the romantic loneliness of Chopin or Liszt, for theirs is a loneliness of a particular person in a particular situation. "The music of Satie has no human population; the balanced phrases unfold infinitely in an empty room of which the walls are built of parallel mirrors. There is nothing to indicate the passing of time."<sup>51</sup> The music of the early dances reveals the spiritual solitude through pure musical intelligence; the music of the period of "Parade" embodies the ironic contemplation of that solitude; finally in Socrate and the "Nocturnes" the irony has again disappeared

and the music is the incarnation of the pathos and suffering inherent in the negation that the isolation implies. The suffering is always completely impersonal.<sup>52</sup>

Most of Satie's contemporaries viewed him as a blagueur (humbug) with little talent for composition. They took neither him nor his music seriously. Fauré said of him, "It is clear . . . that when his spontaneous vein failed him, eccentricity was the screen he used to conceal his impotence."<sup>53</sup> The humor of his music is indeed eccentric in that it appears as much in the visual aspects, the lithography of the music, as in the music itself. Satie adopted the practice of attaching humorous titles, subtitles, and directions to the performer in his piano music. He has such titles as "Desiccated Embryos," "Old Sequins and Old Armor," "Sketches of a Big Wooden Simpleton." One movement of "Sports et Divertissements" is called "Unappetizing Chorale" another is "dedicated to those who don't like me." Notations of interpretation are in this vein: "Open the head," "arm yourself with clairvoyance," "a little bloodily," "like a nightingale with a toothache," etc. Strangely enough these directions have little or no bearing on the musical substance of the composition. The music is very straightforward. The comments are placed often at random about the music in the midst of phrases and in most improbable locations musically, further emphasizing the notion that they have little bearing on the

actual performance of the music. There has been considerable speculation among music scholars as to the purpose of Satie's seemingly "Dadaistic" humor. Helm says "his nature was not surrealistic and one should view the titles as a good joke rather than as having deep significance."<sup>54</sup> Rollo Myers gives three possible explanations for the commentaries: 1. He felt he had something new to say and was secretly unsure of himself. He gave music grotesque titles to disarm the critics in advance. If they were discerning enough, they could appreciate the real values of the music underneath, otherwise, they would dismiss it as a joke. 2. He desired to parody the somewhat "precious" titles favored by Debussy and the Impressionists like "Girl with the Flaxen Hair" or "Sunken Cathedral." 3. He could always claim to be following the example of the 18th century clavichordists like Couperin who liked such titles as "Le tic-toc choo au les Maillotines" and "Les Barricades Mystérieuses" for their rather abstract music.<sup>55</sup> Cortot says the commentaries are an essential part of Satie's intention--not just an attempt to warn off the critics. He illustrates with reference to the poetry in "Sports et Divertissement" which Satie specifically says is not to be read aloud in performance. Cortot says these descriptions are in Satie's own unique style and inseparable from the music.<sup>56</sup> The verbal comments appeared mostly in the piano music between 1900 and 1915. An undocumented story is often told

of Satie that Debussy noticed a lack of form in his early music. Satie in reply presented him:

3  
Morceaux  
en forme du Poire  
(a 4 mains)  
avec une  
Manière de commencement,  
une prolongation du même,  
& un En Plus,  
suivi d'une Rédition

Poire means not only pear but also, in slang, the dupe of a hoax. "Is this music a hoax? or is Satie saying that he himself is a dupe? or Debussy?"<sup>57</sup> The only thing humorous about the music is the title. The "Véritables Préludes Flasques (pour un chien)" of 1912 belie their name completely. The music is bony and muscular rather than flabby. It has been suggested that the dedication to the dog indicates that the title is like a bone thrown to a dog to distract his attention just as the titles of his works are for the amusement of those that do not understand the music.<sup>58</sup> In "Embryons Dessèches" the music is supposed to portray embryos of three entirely imaginary crustaceans invented by Satie and described in nonsensical terms similar to those of Edward Lear.<sup>59</sup> In "Heures Séculaires et Instantanées" isolated verbal quips are replaced by a kind of recitation or monologue which is an integral part of the composition. The music somewhat illustrates the narration, but, Satie warns against reading it on any account. The visual aspect of "Sports et Divertissement", referred to earlier,

is interesting for many reasons. It was published in 1914 in a two-color facsimile of Satie's elaborate calligraphy along with colored drawings by Charles Martin. Satie's preface reads as follows

This publication is composed of two artistic elements, drawing and music: The drawing part consists of lines--animated lines; the musical part is represented by dots--black dots. These two parts put together--in one volume--make a whole: an album. I recommend that you turn its pages with a tolerant thumb and with a smile, for this is a work of fantasy. Let no one regard it otherwise.

For the 'dried-up' and the 'stultified' I have written a chorale, sober and suitable. This makes a sort of bitter prelude, a kind of introduction quite austere and unfrivolous. Into it I have put all I know about boredom. I dedicate this chorale to those who do not like me. And I withdraw. E.S.<sup>60</sup>

This work also has commentaries amounting to prose poems. There is no relation between music and words or between music and pictures while the relation between words and pictures is unexpected.

Occasionally Satie's music, too, contains humorous allusions. The "Sonatine Bureaucratique" is a parody of a famous Clementi sonatina. In the closing bars of "Affolements Grantiques" Satie indulges in one of his favorite tricks, disguising a perfectly ordinary scale passage and a common chord in an outlandish and arbitrary notation.



instead of in the left:



Rollo Myers divides Satie's works into three general periods: 1886-1895, period of mysticism and mediæval influences; 1896-1915, period of eccentricity; 1916-1925, period of musique d'ameublement.<sup>62</sup>

The music of the early period contains germs of the later ones. Most of the music is priestly or religious in character. It was at this time that Satie was involved with the Rosicrucian movement. The music is technically linked with plainsong and organum--not in an antiquarian spirit, but rather because Satie saw in chant an aloofness and remoteness from subjective dramatic stress--qualities which helped define his rather lonely utterance. Of all musical idioms, plainsong is most remote from the lush climate of French romanticism of the 1890's. The music of this first period is decorative and static, and relied on a certain hypnotic quality induced by repetition and use of harmonies derived or evocative of plainsong.<sup>63</sup>

Satie often groups pieces in threes in this period. Usually it is an attempt to present a central musical idea from more than one angle as in "Gymnopédies," "Sarabandes," and "Gnossiennes." In this early music the harmonic innovations of the "Sarabandes" (1887) are of



particular interest. These were composed before Debussy's mature impressionism and contain unresolved 9th chords and a hint of chords built on fourths. The "Gnossiennes" (1890) were the first of Satie's pieces written in barless notation without key or time signature. Also his famous humorous notations over the music appear here for the first time. There is no thematic development in these pieces. Melody predominates and dictates the pattern of the harmony.

During the last part of the 1890's Satie spent a great amount of time writing "pot-boilers" for the music-hall singer Paulette Darty. He no doubt derived a certain satisfaction from being able to write in a vein in which nothing is required of the music except that it shall give pleasure.

The middle period marks the composition of most of Satie's piano music. With the exception of a few minor stage works and a few songs, the piano works comprise his total output. The technique of the early part of the middle period retains the basically homophonic character of the early period. The major difference is that the religious character of the first period is replaced by sharp wit and irony. The "Pieces in the Form of a Pear" (1904) represent more than a joke; they indicate an important change in Satie's aesthetic outlook and stylistic development. In these pieces we find a certain irony, complete

absence of pathos, sophisticated simplicity, desire to speak briefly and frequently ironically--qualities that can be said to mark the beginning of modern French music.<sup>64</sup>

After 1908 the effect of Satie's study at the Schola Cantorum is shown in spare texture based largely on counterpoint. One need only look superficially at the score of "Véritables Préludes Flasques" as compared with "Gnossiennes" to see the difference. "Aperçus Désagréables" (1908) is a pastorale, chorale, and fugue in which the composer waggishly introduces the countersubject before the subject. At the entry of the subject he notes "Smile."<sup>65</sup> The diatonic harmonic texture of this period banishes the early chromaticism. The basis for most of the compositions is a set of simple, diatonic chords whose originality consists in their unusual context. The part-writing is very free: unresolved appoggiaturas or polytonal combinations appear often. When complex dissonances occur, their context is such that they give the appearance of being part of the stock harmonic vocabulary. The tritones and minor ninths at the end of "Sur un Vaisseau" and the flowing tritone figure in the middle of "Sur une Lanterne" (both sections of "Descriptions Automatique" of 1913) illustrate this point. The extreme economy of means demonstrated in this period has been described as symbolic of Satie's preoccupation with childhood. He was not nostalgic, but saw in childhood an ideal of emotional security which he looked

for in vain in the adult world around him.<sup>66</sup>

Satie's last creative period is devoted almost exclusively to stage works. It is during this time that he was in close association with Cocteau, Picasso, and Picabia. To meet Diaghilev's challenge "Surprise me!" Cocteau envisioned a new kind of musical theater.<sup>67</sup> The result was the ballet "Parade," for which Satie wrote music, Picasso designed sets and costumes, and Leonid Massine directed choreography. The effects of the production on Satie's career were vast. Like "Sacre du Printemps," "Parade" created one of the infamous, but intensely popular Parisian scandals. The press went so far as to accuse the authors of trying to introduce German ideas into wartime France. To one of the critics Satie wrote the famous postcard reply, "Sir and dear friend, you are only an arse, but an arse without music" for which he was given a suspended jail sentence. Satie was overjoyed by the scandal. At last he had his revenge after thirty years of anonymity. He had taken the lead of a movement in music and had become the standard-bearer of youth. As noted previously, it was in defense of the aesthetic of "Parade" that Cocteau began writing "Coq et L'Arlequin."

The subject of the ballet is a circus parade outside the main tent. We see three major figures of the circus: a Chinaman, an American girl, and an acrobat with the circus manager. The artistic endeavor bordered cubism. The dancers had stylized costumes making them look like puppets.

Satie's music is of metronomic, almost mechanical precision in which every hint of "expression" in the 19th century sense is eliminated. Of the short parodistic fugal passage which begins the work Satie says, "I love this sort of thing--slightly banal and falsely naive."<sup>68</sup> The same kind of harmonic monotony so characteristic of his early piano works appears throughout this work--especially in the manager's theme and Chinaman's theme. Satie has retained only the characteristic inflections of traveling show music: the abrupt outburst of brass, muffled punctuation of the tuba, piercing timbre of the clarinet in the high register. He has eliminated all vulgarity. "'Parade' is not music-hall music; rather it sketches its portrait."<sup>69</sup> The slide-trombone "Ragtime du Pacquebot" ("Steamboat Ragtime") duplicates almost verbatim Irving Berlin's "That Mysterious Rag." The music presses the popular idiom a serious mold. This technique and frame of reference had important effects on later composers.

There is a "wallpaper" quality in this work foreshadowing musique d'ameublement. There are several notable harmonic innovations. The march makes use of the pentatonic and whole tone scales. The acrobat's number has polytonal effects like those in "Petrushka." The orchestration breaks all the rules. There is no brilliance or striving for color. It is scored for a typewriter, steam whistle, dynamo, roulette wheel, and other noisemakers,

none of which were used in its actual performance.<sup>70</sup> It was his masterful use of such mundane techniques that caused comments such as the following by Krênek: ". . . Erik Satie, that precursor of French modernism who possessed the remarkable gift of lending completely empty and worn-out material an exaggerated profundity."<sup>71</sup>

Just as important as "Parade", if not more so, in its effect on the tide of French music, and in revealing the nature of its composers, is Socrate, a symphonic drama for four sopranos and ensemble. It is a setting of the dialogues of Plato translated by Victor Cousin. Part I from "The Banquet" is Alcibiades' portrait of Socrates; Part II from "Phaedrus" is called "The Banks of Illysus"; Part III from "Phaedo" describes the death of Socrates. It is the work of the mature Satie. The irony of his earlier works is absent. "It is the apotheosis of that 'linear' conception of music which Satie, except during his Rosicrucian period, had deliberately cultivated, and in so doing had prepared the way for the neo-classic involvement which was fashionable in the years following his death."<sup>72</sup> The music is utterly simple and non-descriptive; voices sing as if reading, with careful pains taken to follow the natural curves and inflections of speech. It is certainly a far cry from the Wagnerian melody which is so often contrived to fit the symphonic drama coming from the orchestra pit. Socrate is dedicated to ideals totally different from

Wagnerian-impressionistic-romantic ideals. It is a work of cool objectivity and modesty of means. The difference is emphasized by the role of the orchestra, which merely accompanies and rarely has the melody line. Although it is symphonic drama, the play is expressed according to laws of purely symphonic musical structure.<sup>73</sup> The language is contrapuntal; the melodies conjunct; the harmony sparse and clear. The music generally pursues its course without any superficial connection with the text. The closest connection comes in the death scene where the music takes on an eerie, impersonal sadness.

P. D. Templier in his biography of Satie suggests that the work might never have been written if Debussy were still alive, for it was only after his death that Satie dared take the risk of being judged on his merits as a wholly serious composer.<sup>74</sup> It is evident that Satie took great pains with the work and was worried that he could not meet the challenge he had set himself. In a letter to Valentine Hugo dated January, 1917 he said, I am now busy with the 'Life of Socrates.' I am terrified of making a mess of this work in which I should like to reveal the whiteness and purity of antiquity."<sup>75</sup> Before its first performance he published the warning: "Those who are unable to understand are requested by me to adopt an attitude of complete submission and inferiority."<sup>76</sup>

Satie's last stage works "Mercure" (1924) and

"Relâche" (1924) are true musique d'ameublement. The music of "Relâche" is a collection of popular songs chosen for their "evocative" quality as being most in keeping with the "unbuttoned" nature of the scenario. It was a ballet intended to shock Parisians.<sup>77</sup> The score is interspersed with film clips. The background music is a number of decorative rhythmic cells--like a wallpaper design. The music for the entr'acte has action on a screen accompanied by musical phrases cut into lengths constantly repeated and juxtaposed without any attempt to illustrate the meaning of the visual images. The music performs somewhat the same function as a picture frame, allowing the viewer to concentrate on the picture.<sup>78</sup> Great advance publicity stirred Paris. When the crowd arrived on the designated evening, they found an empty theater. Picabia, who had produced it, felt he had duped all of Paris. Three days later the show was produced. There was a shot of Satie on the gargoyles of Notre Dame and other outlandish pictures. Picabia placed slogans about saying, "Down with all forms of academicism." "Art becomes a pleasure." etc.<sup>79</sup> Satie completed the evening by making a curtain call driving a small car on stage waving his bowler to the audience.

Satie became avant-garde by engaging in rear guard action. He challenged nineteenth century conceptions by reverting to the eighteenth century ideals of Haydn and Mozart, and before them, Couperin. What he

accomplished in terms of musical technique was comparable with the achievements of the cubists in terms of visual symbols. He took the traditional model and diatonic materials of European music, splintered them in a new way fresher than that of a world which seemed to him to have had its day. He was not a subversive composer. His music is "built of traditional bricks placed in eccentric combinations at odd angles."<sup>80</sup>



## Chapter IV

Measuring the influence of any composer on his contemporaries and descendants is difficult because it involves speculation as to conscious and, most deceptive of all, unconscious motivation of the composer. How can we say which aesthetic trends were simply a product of the times and which were the direct result of one man's mind? The task is not so difficult if the discussion centers on specific techniques or sounds--things that can be proven empirically. The case of Erik Satie, however, is largely an aesthetic one involving the Why? behind the techniques and sounds. Statements of composers revealing the conscious influence of another on them are, of course, basic to research of this kind. It is fortunate that there have been many such testimonies among the followers of Erik Satie, and these provide the core of the discussion of his influence.

Although the new aesthetic spirit of Satie's music is more influential on modern music than any specific techniques he developed, one can find in the works of later composers, including those not subscribing to his aesthetic ideals as well as those who do, techniques originating in Satie's music. In the "Sarabandes" (1887) Satie links ninth chords by way of fifths--freely without

preparation or resolving, foreshadowing Debussy's "Pelleas."<sup>81</sup> The "Gymnopédies" (1888) point backward to old French traditions and a generally modal style exemplified in the later works of Ravel and Debussy. In "Le Fils des Etoiles" (1891) there are parallel six-note chords built on fourths in anticipation of Schoenberg's first step away from classical harmonic tradition.<sup>82</sup> The "Préludes Flasques" of 1912, with their linear austerity, heralded the neo-classic vogue. "Le Piège de Meduse" (1913) anticipated Dada by eight years and "Heures Séculaires et Instantanées" (1914) especially in conjunction with its text, can be seen to be of surrealist inspiration.<sup>83</sup>

"Parade" was the precursor of much mechanistic music characteristic of Post-War Europe. In 1896 while Debussy was still writing on Wagnerian lines, Satie tried to get permission from Maeterlinck to compose an opera for his "Pelleas et Melisande." The work would, of course, have been very different from that of Debussy, but it indicates Satie's insight into the kind of drama suitable for modern French music.

Satie's predilection for the medieval modes and his ignoring of the function of the leading tone in the major scale made him one of the pioneers in the movement away from major-minor tonality. His sparse orchestration "without sauce," as he called it, helped usher in a style of writing dominating the 1920's and 30's.<sup>84</sup>

Varèse said that the Kyrie in the "Messe des Pauvres" reminded him of Dante's Inferno and struck him as a kind of pre-electronic music.<sup>85</sup> It has been suggested that the melodic line of "Socrate" that so carefully follows the natural curves and inflections of speech is an anticipation of Sprechgesang.<sup>86</sup> An interesting note might be added here concerning Satie and Schoenberg. During the time when Schoenberg was active in Vienna, he became very much attracted to Satie's small piano works and planned to have them performed. However, he was going to have the remarks translated into German and declaimed in a rhetorical manner from the platform during the performance. Satie, when told of this venture, is remarked to have said "Ah le fourneau!" (Ah the fathead!)<sup>87</sup> Even though he may have misunderstood their full intent, Schoenberg obviously was familiar with Satie's compositions. Observations concerning Satie's influence of Sprechgesang or electronic music, however, could easily be the result of post hoc, propter hoc logic of one who has a thesis to prove.<sup>88</sup>

It is with his "ésprit nouveau" that Satie was most influential. He described it in these terms:

It (ésprit nouveau) teaches us to lean towards a simplicity of emotion and a firmness in shaping our emotions which allows the sonorities and rhythms to affirm themselves clearly, directly, by the design, the accent, and the conception in a spirit of humility and resignation.<sup>89</sup>

He was able to give expression to what was latent in his world. The honor role of French artists: Debussy, Ravel, Picasso, Braque, Cocteau, Milhaud, and many others who took a lead in replacing Wagnerianism with truly French art, were all close friends of Satie and responded to his intellectual stimulus. His 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, meaning, of course, that music could only express itself.<sup>90</sup> The history of music has seen a constant swing back and forth between burning subjectivism and reserved objectivity. Satie helped set the twentieth century pendulum in motion.

In 1891 Satie met Debussy in a cafe and the two became close friends. Aesthetically they basically had little in common, for Satie stood for pure classical expression, whereas Debussy was always a romantic. Debussy was the older of the two by four years and his musical ideas were more in keeping with the older generation. Debussy very much admired Satie's early works. Debussy's orchestration of the first and third "Gymnopédies" is probably more famous than the originals. Their friendship became strained around 1910 or '11 but was reconciled shortly before Debussy's death. In a public lecture on Debussy

in 1922 Satie made this statement:

Debussy's aesthetic is connected with symbolism in several of his works; it is impressionistic in his work as a whole. Please forgive me--am I not a little the cause of this? So they say. Here is the explanation. When first I met him, he was all absorbed in Mussorgsky, was searching avidly for a path not easy to find. In this search I was far ahead of him: the prize of Rome or other critics did not impede my progress, since I carry no such prizes on my person or on my back, for I am a man of the race of Adam (of Paradise) who never carried off any prizes--a lazy fellow no doubt. I was just then writing 'Fils des Etoiles' on a text of Joseph Peladan and I explained to Debussy the need for a Frenchman to give up the Wagnerian adventure, which did not correspond to our natural aspirations. And I made him note that I was not at all anti-Wagner, but that we ought to have a music of our own--without Sauerkraut, if possible. Why not use the means of representation introduced to us by Claude Monet, Cezanne, Toulouse-Lautrec, etc.? Why not transpose those means musically? Nothing simpler. Aren't these all expressions?

Just there was a point of departure for almost sure achievements, fruitful even . . . . Who could show him examples? reveal discoveries? point out the field to be explored? supply him with tested observations? Who? I don't want to answer: this no longer interests me.<sup>91</sup>

Whether or not his influence was actually this specific is hard to determine. Debussy did indeed develop a music "without Sauerkraut" but Satie remained opposed to its basically romantic inclinations. It is known that the two frequently discussed opera together. Debussy repeated to Jean Cocteau a phrase of Satie's which he declared determined the aesthetic of "Pelleas":

There is no need for the orchestra to grimace when a character comes on stage. Do the trees in the scenery grimace? What we have to do is create a musical scenery, a musical atmosphere in which the characters move and talk. No 'couplets'--no Leitmotifs, but aim at creating a certain atmosphere that suggests Puvis de Chavannes.<sup>92</sup>

Probably each owed the other more than either cared to admit. Debussy's prestigious position in music circles no doubt gave Satie some feeling of inferiority, if only subconsciously. When Debussy did not attend the opening of "Parade," Satie suffered from a case of hurt feelings. Satie maintained that it was not Debussy's impressionism that he opposed, but the Debussyites, whom he described in an issue of "Coq et L'Arlequin" as pundits (deceivers of the public and critics).<sup>93</sup>

Satie's influence can be felt to a lesser degree on the other giant of impressionism, Ravel. It was Ravel, of course, who directed the first important concert of Satie's works for the Société Indépendant Musicale in 1911. The modal character of Satie's early piano works can be felt in many of Ravel's later works. Ravel, in fact, quoted the theme of the "Gymnopédies" in his "Valses Nobles et Sentimentales." In reply to an article by Cocteau lauding the intrinsic merit of Satie's works Ravel stated in a lecture in 1928:

His was the inventor's mind par excellence. . . . Simply and ingeniously Satie pointed the way, but as soon as another musician took to the trail he had indicated, Satie

would immediately change his own orientation and without hesitation, open up still another path to new friends of experiment . . . . While he himself may perhaps never have wrought out a single complete work of art, nevertheless we have today many such works which might not have come into existence if Satie had never lived.<sup>94</sup>

Ravel probably received heavier criticism from Satie than did Debussy. Satie was opposed to the kind of music found in such works as "Gaspard de la Nuit" full of technical difficulty and bravura yet lacking clarity of musical ideas. Satie also felt that Ravel had made too great a compromise with the Wagnerian aesthetic in some of his works with very complex harmonic schemes.

Satie's most direct influence can be seen in the works of the group known as "Les Six." The name was given to Germaine Tailleferre, Louis Durey, Georges Auric, Darius Milhaud, Arthur Honegger, and Francis Poulenc by Henri Collet in an article analyzing growing trends in music published in Comaédie called "The Russian Five, the French Six, and Erik Satie." A group aesthetic was attributed to them that did not actually exist. It was thought that The Six were a group of happy friends aspiring to no greater heights than music-hall art and devoting their talents to comedy and buffoonery. In his autobiography Milhaud tries to explain the actual relationship of The Six:

Quite arbitrarily he (Collet) had chosen six names . . . Auric and Poulenc were partisans of Cocteau's ideas, Honegger derived his from the German Romanticism,

and I from Mediterranean lyricism. I fundamentally disapproved of joint declarations of aesthetic doctrines and felt them to be a drag and an unreasonable limitation on the interpretation of the artists who must for each new work find a different, often contradictory means of expression.<sup>95</sup>

The Six, nevertheless, shared the spirit of the new generation and its plight in a mechanistic world of music halls, advertising, automobiles, airplanes, locomotives, and circuses. "Parade" was the embodiment of the sentiments of these young composers who wanted active music which would be simple and direct without forfeiting its nobility. The poet Blaise Cendrars assembled these artists in June 1917 and sponsored a concert of the works of Satie, Auric, Durey, and Honegger. After the concert Satie proposed forming a group called the Nouveaux Jeunes, which Tailleferre and Milhaud, and later Poulenc, joined. Cocteau's "Le Coq et L'Arlequin" provided their holy writ and Satie was their high priest. Milhaud said of him, "Satie was our mascot. The purity of his art, his horror of all concessions, his contempt for money, and his ruthless attitude toward the critics were marvelous examples for us all."<sup>96</sup> They met weekly to discuss aesthetic and musical problems and perform their works. Often painters and poets of the Parisian avant-garde met with them. They never sought to develop a common style, but like Satie they searched for a simpler, clearer, more forthright means of musical expression.



They admired the economy of means and effectiveness of the music hall where no gesture or pose is extraneous to the "act." The coarse nature of such music also appealed to them because it was contrary to impressionism, which they abhorred. Jazz was one of their favorite idioms. The change in the size of the orchestra was indicative of their change in ideas. They wrote many works for small bands of instruments--like circus bands or Negro jazz bands. Brevity is certainly the soul of their wit, for like Satie, they indulge in many smaller forms, stressing clarity and terseness of ideas. Most important was the Gallic drollery that seemed to pervade their music. "Moving in a modern sense to recapture the balance which the eighteenth century began to have and the nineteenth century nearly lost; the capacity of seeing in everything great and little, one thing; of being light without being trivial; of not forgetting amid the tragic and solemn aspects of life the sly, winking joke of it all."<sup>97</sup>

They felt a necessity for making music more sharp and sudden in its decision. They wanted a music full of the strength of men that choose to act and face the consequences. Like Stravinsky and Cezanne their music moves toward masculinity and solidity and away from effeminate impressionism. Debussy's irresolution, his tendency toward evasion, his preference for the solitary dream repelled them just as did the conflicting tensions of Wagner or

Brahms.<sup>98</sup> They wished to render as exact an image as possible of what actually exists, irrespective of tradition. They desired a musical expression that would speak firmly and directly--not beat around the bush. They are very anxious to add, however, "Look, we are not saving the world!"

The biggest joint endeavor of The Six was the ballet "Les Mariées de la Tour Eiffel." Honegger's contribution was a funeral march that is an amusing burlesque of Wagnerian grandiloquence. After a limping passage of some horribly Mahleresque triplets, the brass blares forth like the Götterdämmerung orchestra with the "Walsung" motif during Siegfried's death train.<sup>99</sup> Such ill-mannered "nose-thumbing" is typical of their attitude toward music they consider "impure."

It is difficult to speak very specifically about The Six as a whole, for their artistic personalities were quite different. The effect of Erik Satie on them can be seen clearly. As so often occurs with disciples, they enlarged upon his ideas almost to the point of dogma. No one was safe from their biting wit. In many cases, however, they were able to express more clearly what Satie had hinted or implied. In general their musical genius and skill at composition exceeded that of their master, allowing more facility for expression of his ideas as well as their own.

Of The Six, Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) remained closest to the ideals of Satie and Cocteau. He was an avid

practicer of Debussy's famous maxim: "Music should humbly seek to please."<sup>100</sup> He wishes to amuse, to charm, to be gauche in a well-mannered way, but above all to please. In describing himself he is reported to have said, "I am a French composer." He always remained faithful to the double strain of innocent purity and something approaching Rabelaisian humor that is founded in the ancestry of French music and specifically Satie. Poulenc noted the character of French music in a statement to Roland Gelatt in 1950:

You will find sobriety and color in French music just as in German or Russian. But the French have a keener sense of proportion. We realize that sombreness and good humor are not mutually exclusive. Our composers, too, write profound music, but when they do, it is leavened with that lightness of spirit without which life would be unendurable.<sup>101</sup>

As a composer Poulenc's major interest, like that of Satie, is melody. His compositions for voice included 150 songs and many choral works. The influence of Satie is felt most strongly in his early works, particularly in "Cocardes" (1919), "Le B<sup>est</sup>iaire," and the sonata for horn, trumpet, and trombone. One sees Satie in Poulenc's extreme simplicity of composition and his vein of wildly extravagant humor. "Cocardes" is written to poems of Cocteau and suggests the streets of Paris. The accompaniment resembles a street band. There is no old-fashioned sentiment. The words follow each other in free association in the manner of Gertrude Stein while the music proceeds with child-like

simplicity with an occasional gaucherie. Particularly noticeable is the sparse texture using only the most necessary notes--quite a contrast with impressionism. His "Mouvements Perpétuels" were written at about the same time. They are unpretentious, amusing pieces for the piano. In these he adopts, to a limited extent, Satie's practice of adding amusing titles and directions to the performer. The second movement is marked "indifferent." The third movement has a music-hall flavor.

In later years Poulenc has composed several stage works that feel the influence of Satie. "Les Mamelles de Tiresias" is a farcical work of almost surrealist proportions. In it one is reminded a bit of "Le Piège de Méduse." Also in the spirit of Satie, Poulenc composed several little fanfares for fife and drum such as might appropriately be performed, outside the walls of a side-show, at a country fair, or by itinerant musicians at a crossroads.<sup>102</sup>

In Darius Milhaud (b. 1892) one also finds a truly French composer whose lineage traces from Couperin, Rameau, Berlioz, Chabrier, and Satie. His music, urbane and distinguished, bears the imprint of a master craftsman. He has a practical attitude toward his art. He writes to eat, and his output is enormous. His creative personality is apparent throughout his works, not as a result of exploiting personal quirks, but through good taste, restraint, and efficiency.<sup>103</sup> One does not find in Milhaud the broad and

pointed humor of Poulenc or Satie. He said once that he did not believe that musical language lent itself to an expression of the comic.<sup>104</sup> The French wit is still there, however, but it is more refined.

He wrote a song cycle called "Catalogue de Fleurs" which is a musical setting of words that might have come from a seed catalogue. The second song reads as follows: "Begonia, aurora, double blossom apricot mixed with coral, very pretty, rare, and unusual." There is something impertinent about setting words like these to music when one remembers the hundreds of "flower" poems of the romantics.<sup>105</sup> After seeing a catalogue of farm machinery he composed a suite for singer and seven instruments with such titles as: "La Faucheuse" (the reaper), "La Lieuse" (the binder), etc. When critics accused him of legpulling, he remarked, "I have never been able to fathom why sensible beings should imagine that any artist would spend his time working with all the agonizing passion that goes into the process of creation with the sole purpose of making fools of a few of them."<sup>106</sup>

Milhaud led the movement away from the Wagnerian influence in French music. In his autobiography he commented: "Wagner was worshipped like the golden calf. And I hated his music more with every day that passed, for it represented a type of art that I detested."<sup>107</sup> His ballet "Le Boeuf sur le Toit" and his "Six Petites Symphonies"

each in one movement, their title meaning "sound pieces," were important in releasing the French musical idiom from its Teutonic masters.

Milhaud also rigidly opposed impressionism, which he felt was guilty of "preciosity, an excessive attention to prettiness of detail, a super-sensitive response to the beauty of sound for its own sake." This "decadent" aesthetic, he believed, could lead nowhere.<sup>108</sup>

Like Satie, he was a firm believer in the importance of melody. "The important thing is the vital element--the melody--which should be easily retained, hummed, and whistled on the street. Without this fundamental element, all the technique in the world can only be a dead letter."<sup>109</sup> This statement is also indicative of Milhaud's desire to make music relative to people--to bring it down to earth. Stressing melody, the aspect of music one most easily assimilates, stresses the need for making music accessible to people--all people. The same feeling is in operation in the emphasis and wide use of dance rhythms--particularly jazz and the jazz band sound. Milhaud made extensive use of this technique.

In the ballet "L'Homme et son Désire" there is mechanical music as in "Parade." The brass loudly roars a brutal Brazilian dance while sandpaper hisses and boards are beaten. A drum rhythm imitates an exhaust and human voices moan and sob like nightmare-ridden sleepers.<sup>110</sup>

Satie's influence is most evident in Milhaud's two ballets "Le Boeuf sur le Toit" and "La Création du Monde." Milhaud describes the action of "Le Boeuf" in his autobiography. It is a sort of dadaistic affair in a speak-easy in America during prohibition where such inane things as an electric fan cutting off a policeman's head occur.<sup>111</sup> The music is anything but appropriate to the outrageous libretto. It consists exclusively of South American popular music: tangos, rhumbas, sambas, fados, etc. with a rondo-like theme recurring between each two of them. Milhaud noted that the character of the music might be suitable as an accompaniment for a Charlie Chaplin film.<sup>112</sup> Milhaud's close connection with the spirit of Satie is evident in his remark ". . . both public and critics agreed that I was a clown and a strolling musician--I who hated comedy and in composing "Le Boeuf" had only aspired to create a merry, unpretentious divertissement in memory of the Brazilian rhythms that had so captured my imagination and never--no never--made me laugh."<sup>113</sup> In this ballet Milhaud uses the same kind of repetition--both harmonic and melodic--almost to the point of boredom, that is so characteristic of Satie. By the time the famous refrain returns for the thirteenth time the listener is apt to feel, if not say, "No, not again!" The orchestration also bears Satie's imprint. The brass section is very heavy, calling to mind a cafe jazz band. Milhaud

uses the technique of polytonality in this work, not as much as a technique as for effect. Because of the French distaste for formulas, polytonality remained only a device to be adopted or rejected at will, imposing no obligation on the composer.<sup>114</sup> Milhaud's use of it in "Le Boeuf" seems to be almost an attempt at portraying a cabaret band playing out of tune.

"La Création du Monde" resulted from Milhaud's visit to Harlem in New York City. "The music I heard was absolutely different from anything I had ever heard before and was a revelation to me. Against the beat of the drums the melodic line crisscrossed in a breathless pattern of broken and twisted rhythms. The authentic music had its roots in the darkest corners of the Negro soul . . . . More than ever I was resolved to use jazz for a chamber work."<sup>115</sup> "La Creation" has some things in common with Stravinsky's "Sacre du Printemps." The same kind of primitive spirit exudes, but the differences in conception show how post war aesthetic (and perhaps economics) differed from pre-war days. Where Stravinsky used a large orchestra, Milhaud used seventeen instruments. Whereas Stravinsky's music was an attempt to recreate the actual primitiveness of Russia, Milhaud presents a strictly modern sound. It is the difference between late romantic and early 20th century music.<sup>116</sup> "La Création" opens with a simple Satie-like figure in the saxophone. It continues



to intricate counterpoint with a Dixieland flavor. Milhaud makes frequent use of simultaneous major-minor chords. As in "Le Boeuf" melody predominates. Although further removed from the Satiean aesthetic than "Le Boeuf", "La Création du Monde" is an effort at simple, direct, and accessible music. It is an attempt to bring the purity and spontaneity of a popular idiom into serious music. Even though it is not music to make us smile, it is music that pleases and does not preach.

Satie's influence of the works of Igor Stravinsky (1882) is more difficult to determine than his influence on The Six. The two probably only saw each other once or twice, but they were both very aware of each other's aesthetic ideals. Their connection can be best understood as having common enemies, e.g. Wagnerianism and impressionism. A quote by Alfred Cortot helps explain their position:

Evasion, whatever its nature, has no place in Stravinsky's aesthetic methods. With this position, and maintaining proper proportions--replacing intentions with accomplishments--he espoused the aesthetic convictions of Satie. He emphasized the importance of their role, moreover asserting that their example opportunely contradicted the 'looseness of decaying impressionism' by using 'firm, clear musical language stripped of all ornamental imagery.'<sup>117</sup>

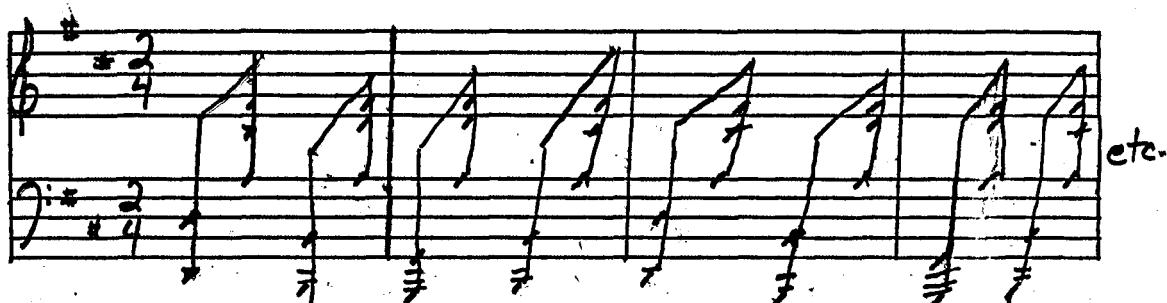
The two met in Debussy's home in 1916 and after the visit Stravinsky remarked what a clever person Satie was and that of his compositions he preferred Socrate above all and a few pages of "Parade."<sup>118</sup> In 1917 he saw "Parade"

and commented in his autobiography: "'Parade' confirmed me still further in my conviction of Satie's merit in the part he played in French music by opposing the vagueness of a decrepit impressionism with a precise and firm language stripped of all pictorial embellishments."<sup>119</sup> After the scandal of "Parade," Auric recalls: "When all this had been forgotten and Diaghelev remounted 'Parade'--finally received by a friendly public--Igor Stravinsky confided to me on leaving the theater: 'There are Bizet, Chabrier, and Satie . . . .'"<sup>120</sup>

Satie saw in Stravinsky one of the most remarkable geniuses that music has ever known. This was at a time when Stravinsky's Mavra was causing a sensation, since it indicated a reverting to an elementary conception of opera and had no stylistic resemblance to his previous works. Satie laughed at the critics.<sup>121</sup> He also encouraged Stravinsky's experimentation with the pianola.<sup>122</sup> In 1915 Stravinsky wrote three little pieces for piano duet (with easy second part) the second of which was dedicated to Erik Satie.<sup>123</sup>

The objectivity of Satie's music, particularly as evidenced in Socrate seems to have influenced Stravinsky's early period--particularly Mavra and the two suites for small orchestra. The introduction to Mavra contains an unmistakable Satiean shadow.<sup>124</sup> The first variation in the Sonata for two pianos seems to be almost an arrangement

of the first "Gymnopedie." The lines in the second piano are exactly identical to the first "Gymnopédie."



Satie's "Gymnopedie" is as follows:

An aesthetic kinship between the two composers is visible in Stravinsky's "L'Histoire du Soldat." Stravinsky's music is entertaining, like music of the eighteenth century suite and divertimento. Like Satie, he has transmitted surrealism into the field of music by distorting old material into new structure. The text accompanying the work aids this procedure. Instead of actually writing a march or a ragtime, he paints their picture. The march is a grotesque tune in various meters ranging from <sup>3</sup>4 to <sup>11</sup>8. It is one step removed from an actual march. We recognize it because of the oom-pah of the tuba and the rattle of the drums, but it does not fit the traditional mold. The same is true of the rag-time, whose rhythm and orchestration (slide trombone predominating) indicate its character

clearly, even though one would never consider dancing to it. The same technique was used in "Parade", which paints the picture of a music hall. In the triumphal march of the devil in "L'Histoire" the triumph is for percussion. Little by little all instruments are silenced. The violin holds out longest but it too succumbs. "It is as though Stravinsky had stripped every ounce of flesh from his music, reducing it to the bare bones leaving only its rhythm."<sup>126</sup> This is certainly in compliance with Satie's ideas whether it was intentional or not. The work concludes with a great chorale which is a majestic distortion of "Ein'feste Burg." The practice of closing with a chorale is frequently practiced in satirical music of the twentieth century. "Parade" closes this way, as does "Three Penny Opera" of Kurt Weill. It has been pointed out that Satie's "Le Piège de Méduse" (1913) employs a combination of instruments very like that of "L'Histoire." Stravinsky replied to this observation that he was totally unaware of "Le Piège de Méduse" when he composed "L'Histoire" and that his choice of instruments was influenced by his discovery of American jazz and because of economic factors brought on by wartime austerity.<sup>127</sup> The question is indeed moot, but considering the similarity of ideas in the two works, aesthetic ideas that is, one could probably make a clear case for a connection of the two.

Stravinsky became very much attracted to jazz,

that had become so popular after the war. He "decided to create a composite portrait of the new dance music, giving the creation the importance of a concert piece as in the past composers of their periods have done for the minuet, waltz, mazurka, etc."<sup>128</sup> The result was the "Ragtime for 11 Instruments." His approach to jazz was based on the idea that each instrument is a solo. The syncopated rhythms of this work are used freely but still in a characteristically dance-like fashion. Again Stravinsky has adopted a similar procedure to Satie's ragtime in "Parade." He has stripped the ragtime to one dimension beyond an actual dance. It is not the same practice as a Mozart minuet or a Chopin mazurka. These composers have actually written dances. Whether or not they are meant to be danced to is irrelevant. They are dances. Stravinsky's ragtime is the picture of a ragtime seen through his eyes and recreated according to his impressions. He also composed "Piano-Rag" in the same kind of style.

In Stravinsky's more recent works we sense the austere neo-classicism of Satie, particularly as revealed in Socrate. "The severity and classicism of Orpheus and of the Mass achieved through a natural evolution in his own works takes us back hundreds of years to the old Flemish contrapuntalists. The ultimate linear austerity of Satie as he reveals it in 'Socrate', although different in spirit, brings us back to the same point."<sup>129</sup>

Although it may be difficult to pinpoint in empirical terms, the influence of Erik Satie on French music of the twentieth century is unavoidable. Like Stravinsky, he dabbled in almost every mode of expression of his time, so that his successors could not help but be aware of him. It is probable that he is more important for what he hinted at and pointed toward than what he actually stated. He seemed to be able to give expression to the thoughts of the world around him. "He was an interpreter of the world of its own subconscious (aesthetic) dreams and aspirations."<sup>130</sup>

When asked to give his evaluation of Satie, Coc-teau replied with the following story:

When someone asked Rossini who was the greatest musician, he responded 'Beethoven' and when they said 'and what about Mozart?' he responded, 'you asked me who was the greatest. You did not ask me who was unique.' If one asked me in our age, I would reply without a doubt the greatest are Stravinsky and Debussy. And I<sup>131</sup> would add: 'Mais Satie est l'unique!'

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>William M. Austin, Music in the Twentieth Century from Debussy Through Stravinsky (New York, 1966), p. 161.

<sup>2</sup>Rollo Myers, Erik Satie (London, 1948), p. 23.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>5</sup>Austin, p. 162.

<sup>6</sup>Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians 5th Edition, 1955 IV, p. 416.

<sup>7</sup>Austin, p. 157.

<sup>8</sup>Everett Helm, "The Man with a Mask," High Fidelity, XIII (December, 1963), p. 55.

<sup>9</sup>Myers, p. 111.

<sup>10</sup>W. H. Mellers, "Erik Satie and the 'Problem of Contemporary Music,'" Music and Letters, XXIII (July, 1942), p. 210.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 217.

<sup>12</sup>Myers, p. 65.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>16</sup>Joseph Machlis, Introduction to Contemporary Music (New York, 1961), p. 157.

<sup>17</sup>Austin, p. 158.

<sup>18</sup>Everett Helm, "Satie—Still a Fascinating Enigma," Musical America, LXXVII (February, 1958), p. 27.

- <sup>19</sup>Myers, p. 119.
- <sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 117.
- <sup>21</sup>Mellers, p. 211.
- <sup>22</sup>Lothar Klein, "Twentieth Century Analysis: Essays in Miniature," Music Educator's Journal, LIII (December, 1966), p. 26.
- <sup>23</sup>Machlis, p. 211.
- <sup>24</sup>Myers, p. 117.
- <sup>25</sup>Paul Collaer, A History of Modern Music, trans. from the French by Sally Abeles (Cleveland, 1955), p. 212.
- <sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 219.
- <sup>27</sup>Austin, p. 166.
- <sup>28</sup>Machlis, p. 209.
- <sup>29</sup>Darius Milhaud, Notes Without Music: An Autobiography, trans. from the French by Donald Evans and edited by Rollo Myers (New York, 1953), p. 97.
- <sup>30</sup>Machlis, p. 216.
- <sup>31</sup>Collaer, p. 219.
- <sup>32</sup>Myers, p. 61.
- <sup>33</sup>Mellers, p. 218.
- <sup>34</sup>Myers, p. 60.
- <sup>35</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>36</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>37</sup>Mellers, p. 224.
- <sup>38</sup>Sam Morgenstern, editor, Composers on Music: An Anthology of Composer's Writings from Palestrina to Copeland (New York, 1956), p. 476.
- <sup>39</sup>Myers, p. 63.
- <sup>40</sup>Collaer, p. 224.



<sup>41</sup>Stansislav Fumet, "Eironeia," Revue Musicale, No. 214 (June, 1952), p. 221.

<sup>42</sup>Myers, p. 36.

<sup>43</sup>Collaer, p. 212.

<sup>44</sup>William Austin, "Satie Before and After Cocteau," The Musical Quarterly, XLVIII (Spring, 1962), p. 221.

<sup>45</sup>Austin, Music in the Twentieth Century, pp. 159-60.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>47</sup>Austin, "Satie Before and After Cocteau," p. 221.

<sup>48</sup>Austin, Music in the Twentieth Century, p. 160.

<sup>49</sup>Helm, "The Man with a Mask," p. 55.

<sup>50</sup>Mellers, p. 214.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 222.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Edward Lockspeiser, compiler and translator, The Literary Clef: An Anthology of Letters and Writings by French Composers (London, 1958), p. 128.

<sup>54</sup>Helm, "Satie—Still a Fascinating Enigma," p. 28.

<sup>55</sup>Myers, p. 45.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

<sup>57</sup>Austin, Music in the Twentieth Century, p. 161.

<sup>58</sup>Collaer, p. 208.

<sup>59</sup>Myers, p. 79.

<sup>60</sup>Austin, Music in the Twentieth Century, p. 164.

<sup>61</sup>Myers, p. 87.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

- <sup>64</sup>Helm, "The Man with a Mask," p. 56.
- <sup>65</sup>Collaer, p. 208.
- <sup>66</sup>Mellers, p. 216.
- <sup>67</sup>Austin, Music in the Twentieth Century, p. 165.
- <sup>68</sup>Helm, "The Man with a Mask," p. 56.
- <sup>69</sup>Collaer, p. 216.
- <sup>70</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>71</sup>Morgenstern, p. 543.
- <sup>72</sup>Myers, p. 55.
- <sup>73</sup>Collaer, pp. 221-3.
- <sup>74</sup>Myers, p. 58.
- <sup>75</sup>Lockspeiser, p. 164.
- <sup>76</sup>Myers, p. 57.
- <sup>77</sup>Ibid., p. 64.
- <sup>78</sup>Ibid., pp. 60-1.
- <sup>79</sup>Ibid., p. 64.
- <sup>80</sup>Mellers, p. 212.
- <sup>81</sup>Collaer, p. 203.
- <sup>82</sup>Donald Ferguson, A History of Musical Thought (New York, 1959), p. 585.
- <sup>83</sup>Rollo Myers, "Satie dans la Musique Contemporaine," Revue Musicale, No. 214 (June, 1952), p. 81.
- <sup>84</sup>Machlis, p. 211.
- <sup>85</sup>Lockspeiser, p. 160.
- <sup>86</sup>Ferguson, p. 585.
- <sup>87</sup>Edward Lockspeiser, "The Mixture that is Milhaud," High Fidelity, II (March, 1961), p. 103.

<sup>88</sup> Abraham Skulsky, "Erik Satie: The Non-French Generally Fail to Understand His Influence," Musical America, LXX (November 15, 1950), p. 36.

<sup>89</sup> Myers, "Satie dans la Musique Contemporaine," p. 80.

<sup>90</sup> Klein, p. 26.

<sup>91</sup> Austin, Music in the Twentieth Century, p. 163.

<sup>92</sup> Myers, Erik Satie, p. 32.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>94</sup> Austin, Music in the Twentieth Century, p. 167.

<sup>95</sup> Milhaud, p. 97.

<sup>96</sup> Morgenstern, p. 415.

<sup>97</sup> Paul Rosenfeld, Musical Chronicle 1917-1923 (New York, 1923), pp. 160-1.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> John Green, "Poulenc: A Duality in the French Composer is Reflected in his Religious and Secular Music," Musical America, LXXX (April, 1960), p. 48.

<sup>101</sup> Morgenstern, p. 515.

<sup>102</sup> Rosenfeld, p. 149.

<sup>103</sup> Peter S. Hansen, An Introduction to Twentieth Century Music (Boston 1961), p. 134.

<sup>104</sup> Lockspeiser, p. 98.

<sup>105</sup> Hansen, p. 120.

<sup>106</sup> Milhaud, p. 124.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>108</sup> Lockspeiser, p. 98.

<sup>109</sup> Machlis, p. 220.

- 110 Rosenfeld, p. 148.
- 111 Milhaud, p. 120.
- 112 Ibid., pp. 101-2.
- 113 Ibid., p. 104.
- 114 Ferguson, pp. 587-8.
- 115 Machlis, p. 202.
- 116 Hansen, p. 130.
- 117 Collaer, p. 128.
- 118 Igor Stravinsky, Stravinsky: An Autobiography  
(New York, 1936), p. 58.
- 119 Ibid., p. 146.
- 120 Morgenstern, p. 520.
- 121 Myers, Erik Satie, p. 117.
- 122 Ibid., p. 118.
- 123 Stravinsky, p. 88.
- 124 Myers, Erik Satie, p. 129.
- 125 Ibid., p. 98.
- 126 Roman Vlad, Stravinsky, trans. from the Russian by Frederick and Ann Fuller (London, 1960), p. 66.
- 127 Robert Craft and Igor Stravinsky, Expositions and Developments (Garden City, 1962), p. 103.
- 128 Stravinsky, pp. 122-3.
- 129 Skulsky, p. 129.
- 130 Myers, Erik Satie, p. 127.
- 131 Jean Cocteau, "Satie," Revue Musicale, No. 214 (June, 1952), p. 18.

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