



**Vienna Art Orchestra
The Minimalism Of
Erik Satie**

H.K. Gruber, Vienna, May 1984

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Erik Alfred Satie was born in Honfleur in 1866 and died in Paris in 1925. He gave French music the strongest impulse in the struggle to free itself from its dependence on the German romantics, especially on Wagner. Stravinsky's musical development as well as that of the group "Les Six" (especially of Auric, Milhaud or Poulenc, among others) and of the "Ecole d'Arcueil" (of Henri Sauguet, among others) was influenced by his aesthetics without leading to a musical school in which one would have found Satie, in his own words, "as an opponent." Today he is considered to be the catalyst that sparked alternative models of music and presentation. The present recording by the Vienna Art Orchestra is presented in this light.

The digression we have here contains the didactic ulterior motive, already hinted at in the title, of assimilating substantial affinities between Satie and today's musical currents – not only jazz.

Satie wanted music without sauerkraut – "sans choucroute." He was looking for a completely new aesthetic which should not only generate new compositional techniques, but also lead to the abolition of the distinctions in music between "serious," "high" or "gracious" art and so-called light music which is considered to be inferior. His vision consisted of music without expression, without development – static, "blanc et immobile." He saw no possibility of linking up with existing musical currents and at first used medieval models such as parallel Organum and Gregorian chant as points of reference as well as the freely floating melodies and irrational rhythms in folk music from Eastern Europe, modern Greece and the Orient. Dynamic specifications are by and large left out, and, through the use of modal keys, he avoids the tensions between dominant and leading notes which characterize the major/minor system. He develops a kind of modular construction technique by assembling, dismantling and reassembling finished units (similarly to Duchamp's "Readymades") in – for the listener – an unpredictable way, possibly inspired by random results. Out of this grow ribbons of sound with a characteristic structure which is homogeneous in itself. Towards the end of his life Satie summarized his endeavours under the notion of "musique d'ameublement" (furniture music – static music in which moment follows moment). In 1924, together with Francis Picabia, he wrote "Relache" subtitled "Ballet instantanéiste." In November 1924, Picabia co-founded with Duchamp and Dermée, as the last offshoot of Dadaism, "Instantaneism," a direction in art marked by singling out an instant and holding on to it. Cubism, too, took this direction, and another variant of this idea can be found today in "Minimal Music," etc.

The fact that Satie remained immune to all the luxury and technical comfort of "art music" [as opposed to folk music – Transl. Note] was certainly not only due to his personal talent but also to his political instinct. Even then, after all, certain attempts to use achievements related to purely compositional technique as a means of dominating other intentions became apparent. Satie must have felt the enormous general misery of man which was hiding behind such requirements. Last but not least, this is an explanation for his

distrust of "seriousness" in music and of the notion of quality his time adhered to. Later in his career Satie – as a former experienced cabaret pianist – overcame these notions by recognizing the un-alienated quality of everyday music as being useful for his fundamental conceptions and by employing it in his time in a way similar to medieval parody. His leaning towards circus music, towards the "Café chantant" and the "Music Hall," towards popular songs and jazz but no mere attitude and comes not from a presumptuous distance but from the desire to protect this "poor" music from the mockery of bourgeois art dogmatists. Satie's music constitutes the foundation for what Mathias Rüegg calls "Reflections on ...". What we have here is a pendant to Stravinsky's "Pulcinella," an arrangement of a piece by Pergolesi, and therefore thoroughly independent compositions using a musical x-ray of the original as their point of departure. According to Satie's intention there is no sticking to the original and no psychological interpretation. The cycle represents a musical environment commenting on the composer Satie, and objectifies what in the original music is so amazing and charming. "Jazz is screaming its sorrow into our faces and we don't give a damn about it," writes Satie. "That is what makes it so beautiful, so real." Jazz – by now an emancipated musical form – returns the sympathies of "Monsieur le Pauvre," the (nick-)name Satie liked to give himself, and in its turn makes use of the composer's ideas for its own innovations. The musicians' sensitivity in the improvised parts is to such an extent tuned-in to the "material" interpreted by M. Rüegg as an invitation to contemplation that not a single interchangeable improvisational cliché arises. The composer's instinct has arranged the notated parts around the imaginary hints of the "Maitre d'Arceuil."

Rüegg's instrumentation favours the independence and linearity of the parts. Except for well-aimed percussive effects there is no continuous drumming. Lauren Newton's soprano is used in a purely instrumental way, and the extreme artfulness of the tuba-part as well as its outstanding performance by John Sass as substitute for a double-bass accomplishes two things: A most transparent outline in the whole bass range, and an allusion to the Twenties where the tuba was central to the sound of jazz or light music.

The first four pieces stem from a series of pieces for piano which are supplied with stories and are thought of as parodies of the "Face-pulling" of incidental music. They originated in Satie's

own creative period and represent imaginary scenes. On the one hand every nuance in the text is echoed in the music, while on the other there appears an ostinato part which remains totally unimpressed by the hysterical objections. In order not to spoil the absurd impression of attacks purely caused by a plan, Satie explicitly forbids us to read the stories aloud. On the topic of music and the stage he says: "The orchestra should not make any grimaces when a person enters the stage. Do the trees on the set pull faces?"

"Aubade" (from "Avant Dernières Pensées" as well as "Méditation" and "Idylle") is dedicated to Paul Dukas (Solos: Wolfgang Puschig, flute, and Christian Radovan, trombone). The "Face-pullers" are unmistakably led by John Sass' tuba.

The soloists in "Méditation" (dedicated to Maurice Ravel) are Lauren Newton, vocals, and Karl Fian, trumpet. Two further ostinato patterns are added in the finale: the one from "Aubade" and – in anticipation – the one from "Idylle" (tenorsax). Here, too, the tuba has an insistent role.

"Sévère Réprimande" (from the "Véritables Préludes Flasques," 1912) is dedicated to a dog. Pianists love to play this piece twice as fast, yet Satie certainly did not intend to make virtuoso fodder. The Vienna Art Orchestra sticks to his metro-nomic indication (=120) and strides through the piece three times whereby subtle harmonic interpretations serve as a foundation – in the second and third round – for Harry Sokal's solo on soprano sax. Thus a hidden meditative-ritual basic mood is underscored.

"Idylle" (dedicated to Debussy) is a pure "head arrangement." First Woody Schabata (vibes) points at thematic structures that are supported by an ostinato pattern (played by Wolfgang Reisinger on kalimba and Wolfgang Puschig on flute). Then the theme is taken over by the remaining musicians and carried to the beginning of the piece by way of a collective-improvised return.

In the "3 Gnossiennes" (Songs from Knossos, 1890) Satie made use of the Greek chromatic scale. He was possibly alluding to the sorrowful history of the Greek people who had been fighting for freedom against Turkish rulers since 1770. From then on political sympathies in Western Europe and Philhellenism mingled with veneration for Ancient Greece and its culture. Parallel to that a renewed interest in the ancient world and an enthusiasm for the Orient developed.

"Gnossienne No. 3" is a pure arrangement comparable to the instrumentations of Satie's pieces by Debussy, Poulenc, Milhaud or Cerha (Leading voices: Lauren Newton and Harry Sokal).

"Gnossienne No. 2" illustrates the independence of the freely floating melody from the accompaniment. Towards the end this relationship is further condensed by the interweaving of parts of phrases from "Gnossiennes No. 1 and No. 3." Solo: Roman Schwaller, tenorsax.

"Erik Satie ist mir im Traum 3 x nicht erschienen" composes the final title of this circle. It's a genuine composition by Mathias Rüegg with no material provided by Satie. In a kind of conspiracy the musicians stride solemnly across the musical patterns of Satie (Harry Sokal, sopranosax), but this time as through empty, until recently inhabited spaces.

It is quite unusual in jazz to let three soloists (Wolfgang Puschnig, Roman Schwaller and Lauren Newton, accompanied by Woody Schabata) fashion on their own, and without any influence of the leader on the sound-dramaturgy, originally two sides of a two-record album within the context of an orchestra recording, in this case "Vexations." With remarkable intuition and imaginative power, the three (male and female) musicians decode a clandestine letter with a couple of chords scribbled on it, which has been secretly handed to them. "Vexations" comes from the cycle "Pages Mystiques" (1892-95). A theme in the bass is played once on its own and once together with two treble parts. At this point we find a sign about which Satie remarks that it is "common" to introduce the theme here in the bass whereupon the accompaniment with the two treble parts follows, but this time with their positions reversed, until the aforesaid sign appears again, and so on ... Satie prescribes 840 repetitions at a "very slow pace." The first performance in 1963 was realized by John Cage and a team of several pianists in 19 hours. "Experts" believe he would have required 28 hours had he played at the "correct pace." It is probable that Satie is here making fun of deadly seriousness or false mysticism, though his exact intention is (fortunately) unknown. But his jokes generally have serious undertones – the chord progression is far too interesting to be dismissed as a mere "gag." Satie would certainly have been pleased by the version by the Puschnig-Schwaller-Newton team: They accept his litany as an invitation to meditation.

(translated by Stephan Cuny)

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Lauren Newton *voice*; Karl "Bumi" Fian *trumpet, flugelhorn*; Hannes Kottke *trumpet, flugelhorn*; Christian Radovan *trombone*; John Sass *tuba*; Harry Sokal *soprano, tenor saxophone, flute*; Wolfgang Puschnig *bassclarinet, alto, soprano saxophone, flute*; Roman Schwaller *tenor saxophone, clarinet*; Woody Schabata *vibes*; Wolfgang Reisinger *gongs, kalimba, tarabuka, triangle*; Ina tambura *on 8*; Mathias Rüegg *leader, conductor, arranger*

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|---|---|------|
| 1 | Reflections on Aubade
(Aubade by Erik Satie 0:50/
Reflections On by Mathias Rüegg/SUISA 2:07)
Christian Radovan <i>trombone</i>
Wolfgang Puschnig <i>flute</i> | 2:57 |
| 2 | Reflections on Méditation
(Méditation by Erik Satie 1:00/
Reflections On by Mathias Rüegg/SUISA 2:35)
Lauren Newton <i>voice</i>
Karl "Bumi" Fian <i>trumpet</i> | 3:35 |
| 3 | Reflections on Sévère Réprimande
(Sévère Réprimande by Erik Satie 1:25/
Reflections On by Mathias Rüegg/SUISA 1:32)
Harry Sokal <i>sopranosax</i> | 2:57 |
| 4 | Reflections on Idylle
(Idylle by Erik Satie 1:08/
Reflections On by Mathias Rüegg/SUISA 2:53)
Woody Schabata <i>vibes</i> | 4:01 |
| 5 | Gnossienne No. 3 (by Erik Satie) | 3:00 |
| 6 | Reflections on Gnossienne No. 2
(Gnossienne No. 2 by Erik Satie 1:50/
Reflections On by Mathias Rüegg/SUISA 2:36)
Roman Schwaller <i>tenorsax</i> | 4:26 |
| 7 | Reflections on Gnossienne No. 1
(Gnossienne No. 1 by Erik Satie 3:30/
Reflections On by Mathias Rüegg/SUISA 2:23)
Wolfgang Puschnig <i>sopraninosax</i>
Wolfgang Reisinger <i>tarabuka</i> | 5:53 |

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|----------------------------------|---|-------|
| 8 | Satie ist mir im Traum 3 x nicht erschienen
(by Mathias Rüegg/SUISA)
Harry Sokal <i>sopranosax</i> | 6:24 |
| 9 | Vexations 1801
(Vexations by Erik Satie 2:00/
Vexations 1801 by Roman Schwaller 6:52)
Roman Schwaller <i>tenorsax</i>
Woody Schabata <i>vibes</i> | 8:52 |
| 10 | Vexations 1611
(Vexations by Erik Satie 2:00/
Vexations 1611 by Lauren Newton/GEMA 7:45)
Lauren Newton <i>voice</i>
Woody Schabata <i>vibes</i> | 9:45 |
| 11 | Vexations 2105
(Vexations by Erik Satie 4:05/
Vexations 2105 by Wolfgang Puschnig/
AKM 19:16)
Wolfgang Puschnig <i>bassclarinet</i>
Woody Schabata <i>vibes</i> | 23:21 |
| Total Time ADD ²⁴ Bit | | 75:11 |

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