

39 Erik Satie

No composer of the early twentieth century did more than the Frenchman Erik Satie (1866–1925) to deflate the artistic pretensions of the immediate past, something he accomplished with a detached, ironic tone that was itself an important aspect of his new esthetic. The stark simplicity of Satie's music, his humorous indications to the performer ("very seriously silent"), and the absurd titles of his works ("Three Pieces in the Form of a Pear") all mock the expressive and programmatic excesses of the nineteenth century. These three brief prose pieces, originally written between 1912 and 1914, for the French periodical *La revue musicale S.I.M.* and later collected in the characteristically titled "Memoirs of an Amnesiac," brilliantly display the proto-surrealistic quality of Satie's mind, revealing his delight in satirizing the artistic enterprise and his refusal to take even himself too seriously.

FROM Memoirs of an Amnesiac

WHAT I AM (1912)

Everyone will tell you that I am not a musician. That is correct.

From the very beginning of my career I classed myself as a phonometrographer. My work is completely phonometrical. Take my *Fils des étoiles*, or my *Morceaux en forme de poire*, my *En habit de cheval* or my *Sarabandes*—it is evident that musical ideas played no part whatsoever in their composition. Science is the dominating factor.

Besides, I enjoy measuring a sound much more than hearing it. With my phonometer in my hand, I work happily and with confidence.

What haven't I weighed or measured? I've done all Beethoven, all Verdi, etc. It's fascinating.

The first time I used a phonoscope, I examined a B-flat of medium size. I can assure you that I have never seen anything so revolting. I called in my man to show it to him.

On my phono-scales a common or garden F-sharp registered 93 kilos. It came out of a fat tenor whom I also weighed.

Do you know how to clean sounds? It's a filthy business. Stretching them out is cleaner; indexing them is a meticulous task and needs good eyesight. Here, we are in the realm of phonotechnique.

On the question of sound explosions, which can often be so unpleasant, some

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cotton-wool in the ears can deaden their effect quite satisfactorily. Here, we are in the realm of pyrophony.

To write my *Pièces froides*, I used a caleidophone recorder. It took seven minutes. I called in my man to let him hear them.

I think I can say that phonology is superior to music. There's more variety in it. The financial return is greater, too. I owe my fortune to it.

At all events, with a motodynamophone, even a rather inexperienced phonometrologist can easily note down more sounds than the most skilled musician in the same time, using the same amount of effort. This is how I have been able to write so much.

And so the future lies with philophony.

THE MUSICIAN'S DAY (1913)

An artist must organize his life.

Here is the exact timetable of my daily activities:

Get up: 7.18 am; be inspired: 10.23 to 11.47 am. I take lunch at 12.11 pm and leave the table at 12.14 pm.

Healthy horse-riding, out in my grounds: 1.19 to 2.53 pm. More inspiration: 3.12 to 4.07 pm.

Various activities (fencing, reflection, immobility, visits, contemplation, swimming, etc. . . .): 4.21 to 6.47 pm.

Dinner is served at 7.16 and ends at 7.20 pm. Then come symphonic readings, out loud: 8.09 to 9.59 pm.

I go to bed regularly at 10.37 pm. Once a week (on Tuesdays) I wake up with a start at 3.19 am.

I eat only white foodstuffs: eggs, sugar, scraped bones; fat from dead animals; veal, salt, coconuts, chicken cooked in white water; mouldy fruit, rice, turnips; camphorated sausage, things like spaghetti, cheese (white), cotton salad and certain fish (minus their skins).

I boil my wine and drink it cold mixed with fuchsia juice. I have a good appetite, but never talk while eating, for fear of strangling myself.

I breathe carefully (a little at a time). I very rarely dance. When I walk, I hold my sides and look rigidly behind me.

Serious in appearance, if I laugh it is not on purpose. I always apologize about it nicely.

My sleep is deep, but I keep one eye open. My bed is round, with a hole cut out to let my head through. Once every hour a servant takes my temperature and gives me another.

I have long subscribed to a fashion magazine. I wear a white bonnet, white stockings and a white waistcoat.

My doctor has always told me to smoke. Part of his advice runs:

—Smoke away, my dear chap: if you don't, someone else will.

PERFECT SURROUNDINGS (1914)

Living in the midst of wonderful Works of Art is one of the greatest joys anyone can know. Among the precious monuments to human thought which my limited fortune has obliged me to choose as my life companions, I would single out a magnificent fake Rembrandt, wide and deep, so good to press with one's eyes, like a fat but unripe fruit.

You could also see, in my study, a canvas of undeniable beauty, a unique object of admiration: the delicious "Portrait attributed to an Unknown Artist."

Have I told you about my imitation Téniers? It's adorable, a lovely thing and a real rarity.

Aren't those divine, those gems mounted in hardwood? Aren't they?

And yet, there is something which surpasses these masterly works; which crushes them beneath the colossal weight of its majestic genius; which makes them grow pale with its dazzling radiance—it is a forged Beethoven manuscript (a sublime apocryphal Symphony by the Master) piously purchased by myself ten years ago, I think.

Of all the works of this grandiose composer, this 10th Symphony, which nobody knows, is one of the most sumptuous. Its proportions are on a palatial scale; its ideas are fresh and plentiful; the developments are exact and appropriate.

This Symphony had to exist: the number 9 just wouldn't suit Beethoven. He liked the decimal system: "I have ten fingers," he used to explain.

Certain admirers who came dutifully to take in this masterpiece with thoughtful and attentive ears, quite wrongly felt it to be one of Beethoven's inferior works and went so far as to say so. They even went further than that.

In no way can Beethoven be inferior to himself. His form and technique are always portentous, even in his slightest works. In his case the word rudimentary cannot be used. As an artist he can easily stand up to any counterfeit attributed to him.

Would you think that an athlete, who had been famous for years and whose skill and strength had been acknowledged in many a public triumph, was made any the less worthy because he was easily able to carry a bouquet of mixed tulips and jasmine? Would he be any less admirable if a child helped him as well?

Of course not.