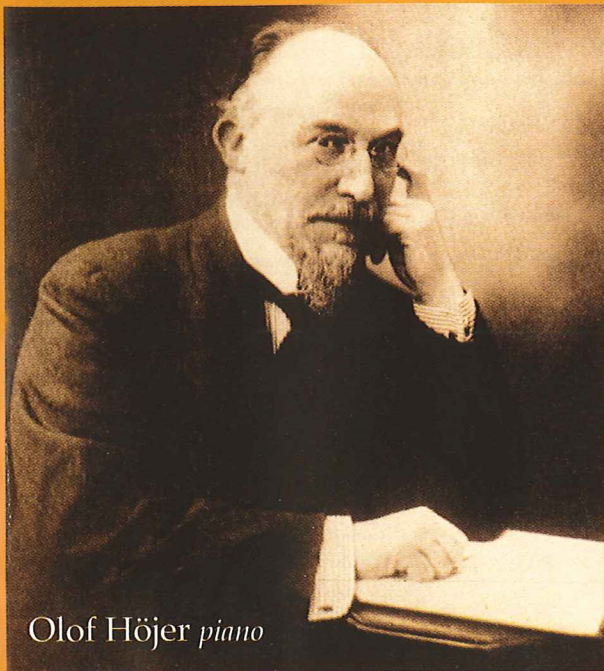


Erik Satie

THE COMPLETE PIANO MUSIC VOL. 5



SCD 1074



Olof Höjer *piano*

PIANO PIECES WITH STORIES 1912-1915

Véritables Préludes
flasques · Descriptions
automatiques · Croquis
et Agaceries d'un gros
Bonhomme en bois
Embryon desséchés
Chapitres tournés en tous
sens · Vieux Sequins et
Vieilles Cuirasses · Trois
nouvelles Enfantines
Menus Propos enfantins
Enfantillages pittoresques
Peccadilles importunes
Sports et Divertissements
Heures séculaires et
instantanées · Les trois
Valse distinguées du
Précieux dégouté
Avant-Dernières Pensées

Erik Satie

THE COMPLETE PIANO MUSIC VOL. 5

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"L'invisible"
Grand érasmarier

du D^r PAILLON - Sorcier

Drawing by Erik Satie.

PIANO PIECES WITH STORIES 1912-1915

Véritables Préludes flasques (pour un chien)

- | | | |
|---|-------------------|------|
| 1 | Sévère Réprimande | 0'47 |
| 2 | Seul à la maison | 1'15 |
| 3 | On joue | 0'49 |

Descriptions automatiques

- | | | |
|---|------------------|------|
| 4 | Sur un Vaisseau | 2'00 |
| 5 | Sur une Lanterne | 2'01 |
| 6 | Sur un Casque | 0'54 |

Croquis et Agaceries d'un gros Bonhomme en bois

- | | | |
|---|---|------|
| 7 | Tyrolienne Turque | 1'42 |
| 8 | Danse maigre (à la manière
de ces Messieurs) | 1'54 |
| 9 | Españana | 1'28 |

Embryons dessechés

- | | | |
|----|-----------------|------|
| 10 | d'Holothurie | 2'01 |
| 11 | d'Edriophthalma | 2'14 |
| 12 | de Podophthalma | 1'37 |

Chapitres tournés en tous sens

- | | | |
|----|---|------|
| 13 | Celle qui parle trop | 1'01 |
| 14 | Le Porteur de grosses Pierres | 2'05 |
| 15 | Regrets des Enfermés
(Jonas et Latude) | 2'14 |

Vieux Sequins et Vieilles Cuirasses

- | | | |
|----|---|------|
| 16 | Chez le Marchand d'Or
(Venise, XIIIe siècle) | 1'26 |
| 17 | Danse cuirassée (période grecque) | 0'49 |
| 18 | La défaite des Cimbres (Cauchemar) | 1'39 |

Trois nouvelles Enfantsines

- | | | |
|----|--------------------------------|------|
| 19 | Le Vilain petit Vaurien | 0'29 |
| 20 | Berceuse | 1'05 |
| 21 | La gentille toute petite Fille | 0'46 |

Menus Propos enfantsins

- | | | |
|----|---|------|
| 22 | Le Chant guerrier du Roi des Haricots | 0'58 |
| 23 | Ce que dit la petite Princesse
des Tulipes | 0'50 |
| 24 | Valse du Chocolat aux Amandes | 1'04 |

	Enfantillages pittoresques				
25	Petit Prélude à la Journée	0'42	43	Les Courses	0'21
26	Berceuse	1'36	44	Les Quatre Coins	0'35
27	Marche du grand Escalier	1'18	45	Le Pique-nique	0'27
	Peccadilles importunes		46	Le Water-Chute	0'37
28	Être jaloux de son camarade qui a une grosse tête	0'50	47	Le Tango perpétuel	1'20
29	Lui manger sa tartine	1'19	48	Le Traîneau	0'28
30	Profiter de ce qu'il a des cors aux pieds pour lui prendre son cerceau	0'30	49	Le Flirt	0'23
	Sports et Divertissements		50	Le Feu d'Artifice	0'24
31	Choral inappétissant	0'51	51	Le Tennis	0'33
32	La Balançoire	0'45		Heures séculaires et instantanées	
33	La Chasse	0'17	52	Obstacles venimeux	1'42
34	La Comédie italienne	0'33	53	Crépuscule matinal (de midi)	0'48
35	Le Réveil de la Mariée	0'26	54	Affolements granitiques	0'46
36	Colin-Maillard	0'42		Les trois Valses distinguées du Précieux dégouté	
37	La Pêche	0'43	55	Sa Taille	0'53
38	Le Yachting	0'50	56	Son Binocle	1'14
39	Le Bain de mer	0'33	57	Ses Jambes	0'42
40	Le Carnaval	0'25		Avant-Dernières Pensées	
41	Le Golf	0'28	58	Idylle	1'06
42	La Pieuvre	0'22	59	Aubade (à Paul Dukas)	1'11
			60	Méditation (à Albert Roussel)	0'53
				Total time: 61'11	

The recordings were made in the Rosenberg Hall, Malmö College of Music, 28-29 August & 28 November 1993, and 26 July & 18 September 1994. Instrument: Steinway D. Piano technicians: Leif Samuelsson & André Studencki. Recording engineer: Bertil Östberg. English translation: Isabel and Martin Thomson. Executive producers: Erland Boëthius & Stefan Nävermyr.

Erik Satie and the piano

BY OLOF HÖJER

“The piano, like money, is only pleasant to those who have the touch.”

Erik Satie (From Musings of a Mule)

The piano stands as a central pillar in Erik Satie’s strange composing career. From his first musical studies in his native Honfleur to the ballet projects with the Parisian avant-garde of later years, his production is in one way or another connected to the piano.

His earliest known work is a little *Allegro* for piano from 1884; his last piano piece — a classical *Menuet* — is dated 1920. More than half the music he wrote during his 40 years of composing was intended for the piano, or was first presented to the public in piano version. If one were to count separate movements and posthumously published sketches and fragments, this would represent some 200 pieces. One may even say that Satie’s music up until the ballet *Parade* (1917) was solely written for the piano. What he had composed in other genres to that point — theatre music, cabaret music and solo songs (along with individual attempts for orchestra amongst other things) — represents a relatively small part. Judging by existing sources, his fragmentary and incomplete studies at the Conservatoire de Paris seem to have mainly concerned piano playing. During certain periods of his life (especially from 1899 to circa 1909),

he earned a meagre income as a cabaret pianist. He would occasionally give piano lessons, and in later years appeared sporadically as a pianist performing his own newly-written pieces. As late as 1923, for instance, two years before his death, he played the *Trois Morceaux en forme de poire* for piano duet with the pianist Marcelle Meyer during a Dadaist happening in Paris.

However, though Satie’s relationship with the piano was a lifelong and productive one, it seems to have been quite problematic. Francis Poulenc, one of the young composers in Satie’s circles around 1920, indicated this in a reminiscence:

“Erik Satie very seldom played the piano. I may have heard him accompany some of his songs two or three times, at the most, and even then he tried to get out of it to the end. It was mostly Ricardo Viñes, Marcelle Meyer, Auric or I myself who played instead.”

As a composer, Satie was long described as an odd man out who tried to dissimulate musical plainness and incompetent technique behind a smokescreen of irony, verbal pleasantry and all

kinds of avant-garde pirouetting. Posterity retained a similar image of him as a pianist: an amateur bungler who had to depend on others to hear what his compositions sounded like — or an alcoholic teneur à gages (slang expression for dance pianist), a bounty player who had to be locked up a few hours ahead so that he could perform his duties at the cabarets of Montmartre.

Distorted images usually contain some grain of truth. This most certainly holds true for Satie. But the contention that he should be a complete amateur at the piano must be relegated to the rich flora of anecdotes and myths that surround this enigmatic, eccentric and charismatic figure. However, it would appear that he was completely uninterested in the piano as such, in the great pianistic tradition or in maintaining his skills in any way. Nor does he seem to have bothered to own an instrument in adequate condition himself. In the home of his parents he naturally had access to a piano, as well as in his first own home (on one occasion he advertised that he, as a former student at the conservatory, would receive piano pupils). His small bedsits up on Montmartre (1890-1896 and 1896-1898) were presumably too small to house an instrument; in any case the second, the so-called “closet”, was.

In his youth, Satie evidently displayed quite a gift as a pianist. At the age of 13 he was received as a pupil in a preparatory class at the tradition-bound and demanding Paris Conservatory. His choice to play a movement from a piano concerto by the Czech piano

virtuoso composer Jan Dussek at the audition seems nigh-prophetic. Dussek (1760-1812) was not only renowned for his delicate touch and singable playing, but was also something of a visionary, a forerunner of Chopin, Schumann and Brahms.

It was this singable quality, the beauty of tone and the elegance that were held as the most positive aspects of young Satie’s playing. But apart from that his teachers found him an increasing source of disappointment. His piano teacher thought that he should devote himself to composition, his theory teacher that he should concentrate on playing. Critical evaluations began to accumulate: he was mainly accused of “indolence” and was soon considered to be “the laziest pupil in the conservatory”. In June 1882 he had to leave the conservatory, the school rules stipulating that any student not selected for the public competitions three years running should end their studies. In the autumn of 1885 he auditioned again, this time with a Chopin ballad, and was admitted once more. He was taught by none other than the famous George Mathias, once a pupil of Chopin’s. However, after a year they had both grown tired, and Satie fled to do voluntary military service. In the final conservatory reports he was described as “a very unimportant pupil” and “totally useless”.

These frustrating experiences were doubtless the main cause of Satie’s ambiguous attitude to the piano, and to the musical establishment. In a letter addressed (though possibly

never sent) to the conservatory in the autumn of 1892, Satie eloquently tells, in the pompous and quasi-religious style he then cultivated, of the time he spent in this institution (which he had described elsewhere as “rather ugly to look at, a kind of local penitentiary bereft of outer beauty — or inner, for that matter”):

“As a child I attended your classes; My soul was so delicate you could not understand it... Despite My extreme youth and My exquisite suppleness you made Me detest the crude Art you teach with your unintelligence; your inexplicable strictness made Me long despise you... May the Lord forgive you; blessed be the unfortunate souls you have yet to teach...”

Of course, posterity has reason to be grateful for the fact that Satie could not bring himself to join the ranks of the soon-forgotten composing piano virtuosos (to whom one must count his teacher, Mathias).

The teaching of the time-honoured and time-consuming piano was thoroughly academic and branded with the strict French way of thinking. This was of course nothing for Satie, whether he was genuinely lazy, or, which is more likely, torn because he felt out of place. The compositions from this period — the *Ogives* and the *Sarabandes* — show him drifting towards a musical no-man’s-land. Here, the music is not shaped according to established dialectical manner on the time axis of tonality, but is rather

put together by melodic and chordal segments in static, timeless montages. Satie turned his back on the need of contemporary music for variation and linear development: he found another musical time, based on repetition and circularity, a ritual repetition of small units complete in themselves. In all this he also expressed another need, closely bound to the aesthetic of repetition and ritual, allowing all things to occur slowly, casting a spell on time. Practically everything he wrote during 1886 to 1899 was characterized by a slow, hypnotically grinding movement.

It has been said that this distinctive composition technique appeared as a solution *in extremis*, an escape from a paralysing technical incompetence. We shall never know the truth in this matter. In any case, the Conservatory’s view on music and how to compose for the piano, which was forced upon Satie, was of no use to him in this experimentation with musical “time” and development.

Nevertheless, Satie always conceived his music in terms of pianism. In spite of that, though, he never composed at the keyboard: this he did in his head, on walks or, quite frequently, at a café table. There is no evidence of his ever having revised the music to make it more pianistic. His course of action, especially in later years, was rather the contrary: anything superfluous was peeled away. His goal was evidently the utmost purity, clarity and precision. Nothing but the essential is there, no

ornaments or elegant tonal effects, few or no possibilities for the pianist to demonstrate further skills. At the same time, there is hardly any original piece for the piano by Satie that is un pianistic or written against the instrument. Even the simplest and starkest of his pieces bears witness to a genuine feeling for, and knowledge of the piano. Superficially, the pieces are not technically demanding and could certainly be learnt by any moderately talented schoolchild; some could even be used as beginner's practice. Yet Satie's piano music is a thankless task for the mediocre pianist. The process of denuding and purifying his work requires something similar in his interpreters. Any meaningful interpretation of his work demands a high level of technique, total control of tone and a long period of familiarisation with the music to create a condition of complete mental and physical readiness.

It can be noted that Satie's piano music, perhaps for these very reasons, has not been popular in the repertoires of pianists or in tuition. Nor does it seem to have established itself in the context of conventional concerts. This is certainly related to two other particularities: that the music is often linked to a function (dance, theatre, ritual, ceremony, etc.) and, perhaps most importantly, that of its need for, or coincidence with, a verbal sphere of expression.

Indeed, it would seem that Satie's need to express himself in writing was at least as deeply rooted as his musical creativity; his talent in that

area was also considerable. The verbal and musical sides of his creative personality are largely equal. As early as the late 1880s he started contributing articles to *La Lanterne japonaise* (the written organ of the cabaret *Le Divan japonais*) and also published madcap advertisements and announcements about his *Ogives* and *Gymnopédies*. During his rosicrucian period he was probably more famous for his verbal practical jokes and the quasi-religious verbal torrents that were sent from his "Church of Art" (see vol. 2) rather than his music. Later, during his time in Arcueil, he wrote causeries in the local socialist press and also the well-known autobiographical series *Memoirs of an Amnesic*. In the 1920s he was more active as a collaborator to various avant-garde cultural periodicals than as a composer. During all these years he also wrote down his thoughts on small pieces of paper, and made numerous drawings which he collected in cigar-boxes. Many of these commentaries — sometimes bitter, sometimes crushing and hilarious — can also be found in his musical scores.

In his piano music one often encounters this extremely original and often sparkingly witty verbal side in the curious titles, absurdist playing directives and the more or less coherent texts in the scores that complete and complicate the music. In the earlier works it may have been a way to "mystify" in a symbolic spirit, to find eccentric or poetically suggestive titles and wordings. To start with they may confuse or

block the pianist, but ultimately they challenge the sincerely interested interpreter to make up his mind and try to divine the composer's intention on his own.

Gradually, perhaps as he came to realize the twofold nature of his talent, texts of a different sort became an increasingly important means of expression. During the crisis years of 1898 to 1911, when he returned to the school-bench, he avoided his fictitious indications (but still indulged in his weakness for strange titles). Around 1912, when he once again found a way forward and a new style of his own, inspiration began to flow — and texts of varying kinds came to play a more extensive and independent part in the score.

In the series of “humorous” piano pieces of the years 1912-1915 (vol. 5), one finds illuminating little “sign-posts” as well as complete prose poems that sometimes seem completely screened off from the music. Here, he swings back and forth over the unclear borders between imaginative indications to the pianist and texts that may be of interest in the execution of the music but that might also just as well be left out. The audience itself is not expected to be aware of them — according to Satie they are a matter exclusively between the composer and his interpreter. This piano music leans two ways: the interpreter has his own private poetic and musical whole to face, and the audience gets the tonal structures that are partly condition to the pianist's interpretation of

Satie's ravings. Between the two are the strange, “mad” titles, which always seem to require either explanations or apologies. In that sense the audience inescapably becomes part of the poetic whole, but is at the same time not privy to the inspiration that certainly lies in the curious texts.

In this light it is not really surprising that Satie's piano music never became successful on the concert platform. Something within it counteracts the conventional concert custom, both in its stark, simple unobtrusiveness and its many layers of musical and verbal expression. It calls for a more intimate and personal context, which leaves space for a private communication.

Satie's own position in this respect is quite clear, however: he did not want to be seen as a buffoon or verbal mystifier, but recognized and heard as a composer. Perhaps the recording medium is the optimal way to convey these personal messages.



Self-portrait by Satie.

The Velvet Gentleman

Erik Satie's piano compositions 1912-1915

BY OLOF HÖJER

In January of 1911, Maurice Ravel and “Les Jeunes”, a group of young musicians and composers, organized a concert in Paris, at which Ravel played three early works by Satie (*Sarabande No. 2*, *Gymnopédie No. 3* and the first prelude from *Le Fils des Étoiles*). This was a bit of gerrymandering in musical politics, a manifesto against Vincent d’Indy and the Schola Cantorum, in which Satie was used as a pawn and presented as a “precursor of genius... a disturbing inventor of neologisms who spoke the bold musical slang of tomorrow already a quarter of a century ago”.

To Satie, who outwardly had held his silence as a composer for almost fifteen years, this concert represented a sudden and in many ways unexpected come-back:

“After three years of hard work I received the Schola Cantorum counterpoint diploma... Proud of my newly-gained knowledge, I started composing... Never before have I been so despised. Why in the world did I ever go to d’Indy? I who used to compose such charming things. But now? How sad! What rubbish! Whereat ‘the young’ started an anti-d’Indy campaign and started playing Sarabandes, Le

Fils des Étoiles, etc, the same things that used to be considered the results of my great ignorance — quite wrongly according to these ‘young’. Such, dear brother, is life. You can’t make sense out of it.”

*(From a letter to Conrad Satie,
January 17th, 1911)*

This double-edged attention must still have been welcome and was certainly fruitful to Satie’s creativity. During the four years from 1912 to 1915 piano music flowed from his pen. The works he wrote within other genres (stage music and songs) can be counted on the fingers of one hand. That he favoured piano music was of course due to the fact that the highly respected pianist Ricardo Viñes was now handling his compositions. In him, Satie found a prominent interpreter who understood him completely and sympathized with his intentions. Viñes was practically a living legend in the musical world of Paris. He not only first performed but also kept on his repertoire almost all new music, such as that of Ravel and Debussy. Moreover, he introduced much new music by contemporary Spanish and Russian composers. His most famous pupil Francis Poulenc said that if Viñes performed a piece it

was the safest guarantee for success. This volume's fourteen collections of piano pieces with "tales" in the notation, his *Œuvres fantaisistes* as they should be called, were introduced with *Véritables Préludes flasques* from August 1912. His three groups of pieces for children, "Enfantines", from October 1913, are usually also counted in among the collections, whereas his *Sonatine bureaucratique* from July 1917 (vol. 6), though it contains a humorous narrative text, should be seen as an independent piece of another kind, a neoclassicist sonatina "traced" on Clementi, a kind of musical joke, as Satie himself put it.

The collections all follow a similar pattern: a tight group of three short, differing pieces with different titles but collected under a common heading. The tempo is usually quick-slow-quick and the notation lacks time signature and bar-lines (presumably for decorative reasons since the time signature is always easily identifiable). The structure is thin and contrapuntally built (often in two parts) but with constant, characteristic changes between the different registers of the piano and sparkling parts in the treble clef and deep octaves in the bass clef, like significant strokes of paint.

To this picture one must add the many quotations from, and allusions to, other music, children's songs, operas and operettas, classics and military music. Most of this repertoire was still commonly known in Satie's day and much of it belonged to the French cultural circles. The

modern listener's associations may not be in line with Satie's intent, i.e. to talk directly to a musically knowledgeable audience without preconceived ideas, above the heads of the hated critics and the musical establishment.

In the earlier pieces, the texts strewn in among the notes are linked to absurdist performance indications of the kind seen before in *Gnossiennes* and *Pièces froides*, for instance. As Robert Orledge has put it, they often seem to be intended as little signposts to inform the pianist in different places of what the music is supposed to be about. (As in the "automatic description" of a ship in *Déscriptions automatiques*: "some spray from the waves... some more... the breeze... a little wave... a coast afar... some mischievous spray... the captain: a fine trip!... the ship jeers... anchoring at the docks"). As long as they do not constitute a larger part of the poetic-humorous-musical whole than this, the listener does not really miss anything of importance. They remain, true to Satie's intentions, a little game between him and his interpreter. But when they become coherent, independent surrealist poems, as they do in the later collections, a tension arises, accentuated by the fact that they appear to have less and less to do with the music, that follows its own path. But in this case too, Satie was of the strict opinion (as he made clear in the comments to *Heures séculaires*) that the music should be heard on its own terms. The text remain a matter between himself and the interpreter.

This is thus a unique body of work, not only in French music but also in piano literature. The forerunners to Satie's poetic/humorous attitude and imaginative titles are not hard to find, however: the French harpsichord composers, Couperin, Rameau and others; or bizarre, romantic outsiders like Charles Valentin Alkan; perhaps also Rossini and his later piano pieces. It seems evident that Satie in this respect upholds an old French tradition (that Debussy among others also contributed to). As regards the musical quotations and humorous texts, the researcher Grete Wehmeyer names a special source of inspiration: the cabaret and innumerable cabaret songs that Satie must have been in contact with during his years in this field. The parodic adaptation of satirical and humorous lyrics to well-known tunes was a mainstay of this branch.

Véritables Préludes flasques (pour un chien)

Sévère Réprimande · Seul à la maison · On joue

"They are composed for a dog... and dedicated to this animal. They consist of three short and unpretentious piano pieces. The title may be a bit original, but that is all." (Erik Satie)

"Véritables Préludes flasques is the introduction to a series of works for piano: Descriptions automatiques, Embryons desséchés, Chapitres tournés en tous sens

and Vieux Sequins. Here I have dedicated myself to the still pleasures of fantasizing. Of those who do not understand me I insistently request complete silence and a totally submissive and inferior attitude. It is the only real way for them." (Erik Satie)

These two prefatory notes, the first of which is quite humble and found among Satie's papers, the second more self-conscious and published in *Le Guide de Concert* before Ricardo Viñes' first performance on April 5th 1913 of "Real flabby preludes" (dated August 12-23, 1912), indicate that Satie with these pieces passed a limit in his career, not only in composition style but also in his inner and outer attitudes. The attention of the young composers must have given him a great deal of self-confidence, allowing him once again, as in the days of the Church of Art, to mask his inner insecurity with an outer arrogance.

The preludes were published in 1912 by Demets, in whose publisher's bulletin of December, 1914, Satie went even further:

"He is considered to be the strangest musician of our time. He classes himself among the Fantaisistes who are, in his opinion, 'highly respectable people'. He often says to his friends: 'Although born short-sighted I am long-sighted by inclination... Shun pride: of all the evils from which we suffer this is the most constipating. Let those unhappy people

*whose sight does not see me blacken their
tongues and burst their ears."*

As is so often the case with Satie the title raises both questions and hypotheses (which was certainly what he wanted). The fact that he called these pieces (and the four he wrote in June of the same year, vol. 4) "preludes" is evocative of Debussy, who published his first book of preludes in 1910 (often played by both Ricardo Viñes and Debussy himself), and was now completing a second. The addition "flasques" could certainly be construed as a friendly allusion to these impressionistic studies of billowing sails, sounds and scents in the evening breeze and sunken cathedrals. And that Satie, when Demets rejected his first four "flabby preludes", riposted by writing three "real flabby preludes" undeniably seems like the logical expression for his new-found self-confidence.

The dog they are dedicated to and who becomes the object of a "severe reprimand", who forlornly pads about "alone at home" and finally cavorts in a jolly game, has been traced by Ornella Volta back to French cultural history, to Rabelais, who in the introduction to *Gargantua* entreated the reader not to mind the strangeness in the text but follow the wise lead of the dog: not to care what the bone looks like but suck on it until it has delivered all its goodness (indeed an excellent attitude towards Satie's music). But there were perhaps closer and more prosaic models, such as the stray dogs

that Satie is said to have taken care of and sometimes let into his curious "artist reservation" in Arcueil.

There is hardly any flabbiness in this music, though, neither in expression or composition technique. There is rather a very precise equilibrium between strictly consequent construction and gay musicality.

In *Sévère Réprimande* ("Severe reprimand"), a kind of toccata reminiscent of baroque clefs and organ music, fiery figurations in the right hand are set against a choral-type melody in thundering octaves in the left. (In the manuscript is a note: "His master's voice!" — could this be an allusion to one of the harsh teachers (D'Indy, perhaps) at the Schola Cantorum? Is Satie the poor dog who is reprimanded when he has taken some liberty? It is, of, course, hard to teach old dogs new tricks.) The right-hand figures are based on minimal material: a minor triad with a major sixth (the notes D¹-F¹-A¹-B¹), constantly repeated but with the notes changed around and transposed.

Seul à la maison ("Alone at home") is a little two-part invention, constructed according to similar principles. Here the left hand wanders about aimlessly, repeating a six-note figure constantly commented upon by small melodic interjections in the right hand ("avec tristesse")

In *On joue* ("One plays"), Satie starts from the exact same basic material as in the first prelude, now transposed and formed as long chains of sequences for the right hand and with

the four notes moved to two harmonies (tritone and fourth). To this the left hand adds little interjections and happy “barks”. At recurring intervals the happy game is interspersed with ragtime-like episodes.

There is no narrative text here as yet but several imaginative indications for the pianist, many of them in Latin: “Epotus... Corpulentus... Nocturnus... Illusorius... Substansialis... Paulum... Opacus... Subitus...”

Descriptions automatiques

Sur un Vaisseau · Sur une Lanterne

Sur un Casque

These three pieces, dated April 21 to 26th, 1913, were very well received, according to Satie (in Demets’ bulletin), at their first performance on June 5th of that year. Ricardo Viñes performed them with “secretive esprit and irresistible hilarity” — perhaps a key phrase for the interpretation of many of the pieces of those years. Satie continues, in the above mentioned bulletin:

“I wrote Descriptions automatiques to celebrate my birthday. This work is a continuation of Véritables Préludes flasques. Obviously, the flattened, the unimportant and the pompous will not appreciate it. May they swallow their beards! May they dance on their stomachs!”

Taking into consideration that Satie, in his

fictitious autobiography *Memoirs of an Amnesic*, describes himself not as a musician but a “phonometrograph” and states that his music is “pure sound measurement” devoid of any musical idea and dominated by “pure scientific thought”, the title *Automatic Descriptions* seems quite adequate: with the “phonometre” he used to work “with joy and care” he of course “automatically” achieved musical descriptions of what he wanted!

Nevertheless, as Robert Orledge has shown Satie quite often got stuck over the titles of his pieces. In the present case he had pondered *Descriptions hypocrites* and later *Vocations électriques* (“Electrical Callings”). The first piece was at first intended as the hypocritical description of a wolf, then a tuna fish, finally to become an automatic description of a ship.

This toying with different, more or less absurd titles apparently took place after the music was written and sheds some light on his relationship to the interplay between music and text and the inner scenery that is created for the interpreter and listener by the choice of title. The first piece’s tango-like or habanera-like rhythm (which runs throughout the piece) may in itself suggest just about anything, the sea just as much as a prowling wolf. However, knowing that Satie finally decided on a ship and that the tune that gradually crops up (presumably as an after-thought) is a French children’s song with the lyrics “Maman, les p’tits bateaux qui vont sur l’eau ont-ils des jambes?” (“Mummy, the

small boats that go on the water, do they have legs?") naturally conjures up a vision: a little toy boat bouncing on the waves in a bathtub, surrounded by "spray" and "breeze".

In the "description of a lantern", the French revolutionary song *Dansons la Carmagnole* is quoted, but Satie may — as Alan Gillmor has proposed — have received the idea for a lantern from another revolutionary song, *Ça ira!*, which contains the cry "Les aristocrates à la lanterne!". The piece is to be played "nocturnement" and the pianist is given advice on the interpretative lighting: "Don't turn it on yet, there is still plenty of time... Now you can turn it on if you wish... You are holding your hand in front of the light... Take it away and put it in your pocket... Extinguish... Leave".

Booming bass drums, cutting bitonal trumpet fanfares and thundering drum rolls, deep down on the piano's lower register are the main ingredients in the hilarious pianistic parade of the guard, which is supposed to describe a helmet. Like the captions in a cartoon, the spectators' delighted reactions pass through the notation: "Here they come... How many people there are... How elegant... Look, the drummers!... And look, here is the handsome colonel, all alone". Here Satie quotes military fanfares ("En avant", "Forwards") and drum rhythms (perhaps also Debussy's piano prelude ... *Général Lavine* — *eccentric*). Finally the pianist is entreated to play "heavily-footed as an elephant... light as a feather".

Croquis et Agaceries d'un gros Bonhomme en bois

Tyrolienne Turque · Danse maigre (à la manière de ces Messieurs) · Española (sorte de valse)
"Sketches and teases of a Big Wooden Dummy", or "Sketches and irritations regarding an important, stodgy man"?

The title of these three pieces, dated July 28th, June 2nd and August 25th 1913, is hard to translate and ambiguous. The first alternative makes it self-ironic: if Satie could call himself "phonometrograph", then "Big Wooden Dummy" should do too, much like calling his music "sketches and irritations". The other option evidently directs the irony towards someone else. In the German edition of Satie's *Écrits*, Ornella Volta posits that it should be his friend Debussy, from whom Satie was at this time distancing himself. He was certainly important, but did Satie mean that his mind had become increasingly inflexible with time?

Satie quotes three composers in the music: Mozart, Debussy (or perhaps Cyril Scott) and Chabrier. In the "Turkish Tyrolean Dance", the pianist is at first entreated to yodel ("Dans le gosier") when playing the introductory, cleverly-caricatured tyrolean themes, then to play in a "very Turkish" manner and "very expressively and slower" when the music suddenly quotes the "octave theme" from Mozart's *Rondo alla Turca* (from *Piano sonata in A major, KV 331*), transposed to D major in an strangely distorted harmonic guise.

It is also difficult to determine who it is who dances the “Thin dance”. Robert Orledge associates it to Debussy and his piano prelude *Minstrels*. It is also possible that the word “thin” may be a metaphor for lack of substance or content, in which case the allusion would once again be one of self-irony, perhaps placed in Debussy’s mouth: gentlemen of Satie’s calibre achieved very “thin” music. As Alan Gillmor mentions, the *Danse maigre* may of course allude to Cyril Scott’s popular *Danse nègre*, which is supposed to have formed part of Ricardo Viñes’ repertoire. It was also he who first performed these “sketches” on March 28th, 1914.

The parodically distorted title *Españana* is a reference to Emmanuel Chabrier’s orchestra rhapsody *España*. Echoes of this stylish orchestra piece are transformed in a Satie manner to a waltz-like, pianistic “doll’s house version” with features from Bizet’s *Carmen* (partly moved to Paris) strewn among the notes. An elegant wink of the eye to the fashionable Spanish “postcards” of which not only Chabrier but also Debussy, Ravel and others had been the originators. Here too Satie places his little signposts in the music, so that the pianist will know exactly where he is and who he meets: “Under the pomegranate trees... Just like in Seville... The beautiful Carmen and Peluqueron... (here you must step over your fingers)... Puerta Maillot... The decent Rodriguez... Isn’t that the Alcade?... Plaza Clichy... Rue de Madrid... Cigar-vending girls... à la disposition de Usted...”

Embryons dessechés

*d’Holothurie · d’Edriophthalma
de Podophthalma*

These three musical portraits of actually existing marine animals are dated June 30th, July 1st and July 4th 1913, and were published by Demets the same year. They were first performed in January of 1914 by Georges Auric, a precocious young composing genius who had both flabbergasted and flattered Satie by writing a brilliant essay on him in *La Revue Musicale* at the age of thirteen. When Auric first performed the new pieces he was fourteen.

It is without doubt the scientific mind of the phonometograph from *Memoirs of an Amnesic* that created these zoological-musical pieces and provided them with the collective title “dried embryos” (an ironic statement of his position as a composer, meaning that the fruits of his imagination were dry and barren). The following, never printed introduction was found among his sketches:

“This work is completely incomprehensible, even to myself. It has tremendous depth and never ceases to surprise me. I wrote it against my will, my hand forced by destiny.

Perhaps I wanted to do something humorous. It wouldn’t at all surprise me, that would be quite consistent with my style. Still, I shan’t forgive those who won’t care about it. Just so as they know.”

On the holothurian (an echinoderm sometimes known as sea cucumber or sea sausage), Satie writes the following:

“Ignoramuses call them sea cucumber. The holothurian usually climbs about on stones and rocks. This marine creature purrs like a cat and also produces a revolting kind of silk. It dislikes light. I have seen a holothurian in the Saint-Malo bay.”

The music consists of a toccata-like movement in diminutive sonata form with “purring” semi-quavers (reminiscent of the so-called Alberti bass in classical music) in the left hand and melodious phrases in the right. The Holothurian seems to comment this development:

“A morning walk... It is raining... The sun has gone behind the clouds... Chilly... Pleasant... what a nice rock”

(Here the pianist's right hand plays the old popular tune *Mon rocher de Saint-Malo*)

“Life is wonderful...”

Here the music suddenly trickles out into nothingness — but after a short pause follows a series of musically meaningless sequences that should, according to Satie, sound “like a nightingale with tooth-ache”; this is in reality a little cadenza, a figuration of a dominant seventh chord which is to lead the music back to its G major key. The holothurian resumes his purring:

“Evening is falling... It is raining... The sun is gone... May it never come back again... Quite chilly... Pleasant... This is really a great rock! Really sticky!... Don't tease, sea-spray, you're making me laugh... I have no tobacco... How fortunate that I do not smoke...”

Finally the music leads to a series of persistently-repeated fortissimo chords, rather like in the ending of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, constantly luring the unprepared listener to raise his hands in polite applause only to be foiled by new chords.

It is easy to notice similarities between Satie and the holothurian. The fact that it is an echinoderm already raises an eyebrow, as do the facts that it hates the sun, like Satie, and loves rain. As regards the poor tortured nightingale whose appearance in the middle of the piece is so startling, Satie himself said, in *Memoirs of an Amnesic*: “it is clear that its artistic ambition is not on a level with its talent, and that the voice it lets forth in so foolhardy a manner time and time again is nothing but a very bad and insufficient instrument.”

On the edriophthalma, Satie says that they are “shellfish with sessile eyes, that is to say without stalks and therefore immobile. These shellfish of moody disposition live in cavities in the sides of cliffs, shielded from the rest of the world.” (Those who have seen the sculptor Brancusi's photograph, in Ornella Volta's *l'Ymagier d'Erik Satie*, of the stairway with the

narrow stone steps leading up to Satie's room in Arcueil will nod in recognition.)

To the text "They are all assembled", the pianist plays something that is at first reminiscent of Debussy's piano prelude *La Cathédrale engloutie* but that turns out to be Chopin's funeral march, here in A minor ("how sad it is!... a pater-familias takes the floor..."). The pianist then continues into the beautiful trio in the march (here Satie snubs his nose at the pundits by claiming it to be a quotation from Schubert's "famous mazurka"). "Poor animal!" Then the whole thing starts over again ("What a beautiful speech!... Much moaning and wailing") and the unique funeral procession wanders out of sight down the beach.

The whole piece is thus based on Chopin's famous *Marche Funèbre*, the third movement of his piano sonata in B flat minor Op. 35. Satie's hand in the matter is a kind of intended "decomposition", or perhaps even a trivialisation. Firstly, the music is transposed to A minor (in this context, a "flatter" key than B flat minor) and secondly, the broad tones of Chopin's style of composition are simplified in a manner not unlike the adaptations of popular classics for young students, a practise as thriving today as it must have been in Satie's day. But not only that: in the trio part, Chopin's melody is transformed into some sort of empty, high-flown phrases, deprived of all their original charm and genius. It can be compared to what he did to Clementi's famous sonatina in

C major when he transformed it into a *Sonatine bureaucratique*. But in that case, the tables were turned: a trivial "classic" became something highly personal and sophisticated (vol. 6).

Podophthalma, according to Satie, are "shell-fish with eyes on mobile stalks. They are skilful and tireless hunters. One finds them in all seas. The flesh of the podophthalma is a delicacy." In terms of composition technique, this piece is a kind of scherzo with trio and a final Cadence obligée (de l'Auteur). Set to the text "Out hunting... Up in the saddles... go and get them...", the music starts off with a galloping rhythm which is however soon interrupted by someone calling himself "advisor" and who introduces himself with a quotation from Edmond Audran's operetta *La mascotte*. In this context the quoted song is called the "orang-utan song" and concerns the hunt for an escaped orang-utan: "Fear not, we shall catch him". "He is right", a cry sounds out, and the pianist carries on to the scherzo's trio, a quotation from the French folk song *Il était une bergère*, in order to "attract the prey". But the wild chase soon continues. However, after a few more of the so-called advisor's attempts, it is finally stopped by the obligatory cadenza's virtuoso torrents of notes in which the unsuspecting listener is suddenly thrown into the final bars of Beethoven's eighth symphony.

Few of Satie's pieces have such an immediate and striking effect as these hilarious zoological studies with their allusions, easily

recognized by the educated public, to Beethoven, Chopin and various clichés and mannerisms in classical music. Presented in the correct manner, they constitute some of the few of Satie's compositions that succeed on the concert platform, a forum in which his music is generally felt to be out of place.

Chapitres tournés en tous sens

Celle qui parle trop · Le Porteur de grosses

Pierres · Regrets des Enfermés (Jonas et Latude)

The period between June and November of 1913 is one of the most productive in Satie's career. In these six months, no less than thirty-two pieces distributed among ten works were completed. Some of them seem to have been in production simultaneously. The *Españana* movement from *Croquis et Agaceries d'un gros Bonhomme en bois* and *Le Porteur de grosses Pierres* from *Chapitres tournés en tous sens* are even dated the same day. The three pieces that constitute these "chapters twisted in every direction" are dated August 23 and 25 and September 5, 1913; they were published by Demets the same year and first performed on January 14, 1914 at the Salle Érard by Ricardo Viñes.

Contrary to the previous collections, in which the pieces represented three aspects on a common theme (dogs, "automatic descriptions", dances and shellfish), the present one concerns such different things as the confrontation between a chatterbox wife and her poor husband who longs for a moment's

silence, a gentleman who impresses the children in his neighbourhood by dragging huge stones around and finally two people who, in different ways, for different reasons and in quite different periods, are locked up in complete darkness and have only one common obsession: getting out.

"The talkative lady" is illustrated to great effect by an unending stream of quaver triplets, that are in themselves as tedious and vapid as the conversation Satie lends her: "Let me speak! — Well, listen! — I do so want a hat in solid mahogany — Mrs. Chose has an umbrella made of bone — Miss Machin wants to marry a man who is as dry as kindling — but you're not listening!" Her husband defends himself with impatient grunts. Somewhat unexpectedly, he finally dies of pure exhaustion. The music fades away, "en un pauvre souffle" ("in a poor last sigh"), with a final, resigned quotation of his theme.

"The carrier of large rocks" is given the following introductory description: "He carries them on his back. He looks scornful and superior. The children are amazed at his strength. We see him carrying a stone a hundred times his size (it is a pumice-stone)."

In the indications to the pianist one can follow his path and the conclusion of the drama: "With great difficulty... Wait... Arduously and one step at a time... Trailing his feet... Wait... He feels he is losing the stone: it will fall to the ground... Stop... What did I tell you: there it

fell..." (In the music, a fortissimo, dissonant, whole tone cluster suddenly thunders.)

At recurring intervals he hums a quotation from Robert Planquette's operetta *Rip Van Winkle* with the lyrics "C'est un rien, un souffle, un rien" ("it's nothing, really nothing, a piece of cake).

The music depicts his arduous path with a series of slow quavers that suddenly halt here and there at the most unexpected and musically illogical places. Perhaps this is how Satie experienced his own path through life, dragging a huge burden that could not — from an artistic point of view — be said to weigh that much. Or it may simply be a depiction of his wanderings between Arcueil and Paris, with his personal bar of "soap" in his pocket: Satie never washed with soap and water, but used pumice stone instead.

In the "Complaint of the prisoners" one encounters two different personalities: Jonah in the belly of the whale and the French adventurer and jailbird of the Revolution, Jean-Henri Masers de Latude. "Many centuries set them apart", Satie informs us in the notes. Yet they seem aware of each others existence, for "Jonah says: 'I am the Latude of the seas'", wherent "Latude says: 'I am the French Jonah'" — perhaps a different example of Satie's interest in the upheaval of time. They sit "in the darkness"... "brooding"... "They think they see the dear old sun"... "they think only of escape"...

The whole piece is based on fragments from the French nursery song *Nous n'irons plus au*

bois ("We cannot walk in the woods anymore"), a sarcastic allusion to the two gentlemen's inability to "go to the woods". It may also be a veiled salute to Debussy, who quoted the song in some works for piano himself and whose marriage at this time is said to have become somewhat "cloistered": as a matter of fact, the piece is dedicated to Mme Claude Debussy.

Vieux Sequins et Vieilles Cuirasses

Chez le Marchand d'Or (Venise XIIIe siècle)

Danse Cuirassée (période grecque)

La défaite des Cimbres (Cauchemar)

Three "historic pictures", dated September 9, 14 and 17, 1913 and published the same year by Demets. Curiously enough, there is no known source information concerning the first performance. This could possibly indicate that they did not immediately interest Satie's "court interpreter" Ricardo Viñes. They have also remained relatively unknown to date. This obscurity is however undeserved. With their drastic contrast between the most precise composition technique, quotations from Romantic opera, old military songs and *For He's a Jolly Good Fellow* and breathtaking shifts in time and space between Venice, ancient Greece and the French Middle ages, these surrealist studies of "old sequins and old armours" are unique, even in Satie's production.

Confronted with the goldsmith of 13th century Venice, who is maniacally fixed by his wealth, the modern commentator's thoughts naturally

wander to the Walt Disney character Uncle Scrooge, wallowing among the coins in his huge safe:

“He caresses his gold... he covers it with kisses... He embraces an old purse... He puts ten thousand gold francs in his mouth... He takes a gold coin and speaks to it softly... he is as happy as a king... He rolls around in a safe, with his head at the bottom... He comes out, aching all over...”

Satie uses the same composition technique as for *Regrets des Enfermés* — here, the original material is *The Dance around the Golden Calf* from Gounod’s opera *Faust*.

The “armoured dance” from ancient Greece is a “ready-made” (term invented by Marcel Duchamp). Here Satie uses an old military signal that was sung as a marching song in the 1840s. The left hand “marches” against this tune — with the indication “Pas noble et militaire” — in bitonally resounding thirds and octaves. The text that is to inspire the pianist is of military curtness. Satie indicates the sequence of events: “There are two rows of dancers... the first row does not move... the second row remains unmoving... the dancers each receive a blow from a sabre that splits their skulls...”

In “The defeat of the Cimbri”, Satie uses razor-sharp musical precision and clearly-etched melodic lines to describe a child’s confused dreams about French medieval history. His introduction states:

“A small child sleeps in his little bed. Every evening, his aged grandfather is in the habit of giving him a sort of history lesson, culled from his unclear memories. He often talks of the famous King Dagobert, the Duke of Marlborough and the great Roman general Marius. Then the child has nightmares of how these heroes fight the Cimbri at the battle of Mons-en-Puelle (1304).”

(In reality, the Cimbri was an ancient German tribe that pillaged its way down to Italy and was defeated by General Marius at the battle of Vercelli in 101 B.C.)

Alan Gillmor has pointed out that Satie may have found inspiration for this curious historic battle in two songs. One, *Le bon roi Dagobert*, was very popular during the Napoleonic years as a royalist agitator’s song. The other, *Marlborough s’en va-t-en guerre*, tore through Europe during the late eighteenth century and was used by Beethoven, amongst others, in *The Victory of Wellington*. It is most well-known with a completely different text, however: *For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow*. These two tunes form the basic melodic material, adapted and fragmented in various ways according to principles largely similar to those of previously described works. The guiding text in the notes consists, as it has so often previously, of little labels that seem to indicate what is happening each instant: “a rain of javelins... portrait of Marius... Boïorix, King of the Cimbri... The

dragoons of Villars [!]... The sacrifice of Charles X (267 Bis)...”

This last indication (which labels the piece’s great finale, a grandiose quotation of the Dago-berth theme) has proven difficult to interpret. It may, as Alan Gillmor has suggested, be an allusion, in Satiean anachronistic fashion, to the ultra-reactionary last Bourbon king Charles X, who was crowned in 1824 but had to abdicate as a result of the July Revolution, provoked by himself. This “sacrifice” may have given some satisfaction to the historically well-read and convinced radical leftist Satie. Perhaps that is why he indicated that it should be played 267 times.

Trois nouvelles Enfantsines

(Beginning of October, 1913)

Le Vilain petit Vaurien · Berceuse · La gentille toute petite Fille

Menus Propos enfantsins

(October 10, 1913)

Le Chant guerrier du Roi des Haricots · Ce que dit la petite Princesse des Tulipes · Valse du Chocolat aux Amandes

Enfantillages pittoresques

(October 22, 1913)

Petit Prélude à la Journée · Berceuse Marche du grand Escalier

Peccadilles importunes

(October 26, 1913)

Être jaloux de son camarade qui a une grosse tête · Lui manger sa tartine · Profiter de ce qu’il a des cors aux pieds pour lui prendre son cerceau

These works may be grouped under the headline “Enfantins”, “childishnesses”. For those who have studied Satie’s existence in Arcueil to some depth, it is hardly surprising that he dedicated the whole month of October 1913 to completing three collections of small piano pieces for children. The commitment and time he spent in taking care of the children of the neighbourhood, especially the orphans and those of little means, are among the most touching chapters in the life of this strange sociable recluse. On Thursday afternoons he often took a group of children to the country and on Sunday afternoons he taught them solfeggio. There is no concrete evidence that he gave them piano lessons, but it is not unlikely that he did so. In his study *Erik Satie d’Arcueil* (1990), the Satie researcher Michel Robillard says that “for children, he composed melodies with often hilarious titles. He did so to make them laugh. He wrote several pieces especially for the secular patronage of the town of Arcueil.”

Though he often found himself on the brink of financial destitution he did all this for free — sometimes even contributing his own money to achieve what he wanted.

Both music for beginners and music about the world of children have been written for the piano since its incipience, but Satie did not follow in the steps of his predecessors. As Anne Rey so strikingly puts it in her biography: "To his predecessors, children were poets. To Satie, they mainly had small hands". The three collections that were published by Demets in 1914 (Nos. 2-4 above) exclusively consist of so-called five-finger pieces, that is to say in which both hands retain the same position on the keyboard within a span of five notes. At no point do the thumb or any other fingers have to pass. This principle is exquisitely clear and simple. It must have appealed to Satie and his feeling for constructive precision and he applied it with cold control and calculation in the nine pieces.

In *Menus Propos enfantins* the left hand is placed on the notes f-C¹ and the right on D¹-A¹. Only single notes occur, the rhythms are simple and the tempi moderate. The only alteration in the group is that the middle passage is placed an octave higher than the rest.

The middle passage is placed an octave higher in the other two collections as well. Apart from that, the rhythms are more varying in *Enfantillages pittoresques*, where thirds, fourths and fifths also occur, and in *Peccadilles importunes* the harmonics are more dissonant and the tempi more varied. Thus the music is gradually more advanced and the degree of technical difficulty increases.

At the same time, listener and interpreter alike may observe that the pieces are of a visibly naïve nature, almost as if Satie, despite his constructivist approach, had tried to create music that would sound as if it had been written by the children themselves.

The titles of the pieces are of course mainly intended for children. The text in the music suggests that Satie also wanted to give something to the teacher (and/or the parents). Here are delightful, "childish" poems such as the following:

*It's the most enormous staircase.
It has more than a thousand steps, all of
ivory.
It is very beautiful.
No-one dares use it, for fear of spoiling it.
The King himself has never used it.
To leave his room, he jumps out of the
window.
And he often says: I love this staircase so
much that I have it wrapped in straw.
Don't you think he's right?
(Marche du grand Escalier)*

Satie's Honfleur childhood and his eccentric Uncle Seabird, who never dared sail his beautiful boat, come to mind. Perhaps it is just in these "childish" pieces that one may divine the origin and psychological finesse in Satie's idea of enriching the music with various texts. Satie was, like most adults, a child at heart and was readily inspired by something that awakens

their interest and sets it in motion. The *Trois nouvelles Enfantsines* (posthumously published in 1972) were composed before the others. Satie presumably found them too difficult and insufficiently naïve. The first two especially have a flavour of two-part, chromatic inventions. Perhaps they were derived from material that had lain dormant since the days at Schola Cantorum.

In conclusion, one may say about Satie's "Enfantes" that they are music for little children written by a grown child, in such a way as the children might have liked to do themselves. It is significant that Satie left out his usual network of various musical quotations.

Sports et Divertissements

1. *Choral inappétissant*
 2. *La Balançoire*
 3. *La Chasse*
 4. *La Comédie italienne*
 5. *Le Réveil de la Mariée*
 6. *Colin-Maillard*
 7. *La Pêche*
 8. *Le Yachting*
 9. *Le Bain de mer*
 10. *Le Carnaval*
 11. *Le Golf*
 12. *La Pieuvre*
 13. *Les Courses*
 14. *Les Quatre Coins*
 15. *Le Pique-nique*
 16. *Le Water-Chute*
 17. *Le Tango perpétuel*
 18. *Le Traîneau*
 19. *Le Flirt*
 20. *Le Feu d'Artifice*
 21. *Le Tennis*
- Even though Satie outwardly wished to appear as a musician and composer, and indeed probably felt himself to be so at heart, his interdisciplinary talent was striking. His talents for poetry, literature, draftsmanship and calligraphy were considerable, as were his erudition and historical knowledge. It is significant, as has

been noted, that he preferred the company of artists and writers to that of professional musicians, and when possible, he chose to have his music performed in art galleries rather than the stolid, stifling concert-halls.

"Sports and Entertainments", which served as a musical-poetic "illumination" to drawings by the illustrator Charles Martin, is quintessential of Satie's different creative attitudes and has become one of his most famous piano compositions. This is a multimedial work of art in which picture, music, text and notation are meant to work together, and Satie's introduction states that "this publication consists of two artistic elements: drawing and music" and that it "forms a whole: an album", "a work of fantasy"; despite this, it can hardly be said that it is anything but Satie's music first and foremost that has made it a lasting work of art. What one loses when merely listening is marginal — such is the expressivity and precision of Satie's musical formulation.

The story of its origins is often retold: the publisher's Lucien Vogel had turned to the famous and popular Igor Stravinsky to order music from him to accompany a series of drawings by Charles Martin (1884-1934). Stravinsky declined, finding the fee too low. Someone then suggested Satie, who was offered the same amount. However, the hypermoral and radical leftist Satie found the fee unconscionably high and refused indignantly. It was only when the publisher's had agreed to

cut the fee to half the original amount that Satie accepted. From March to May of 1914 he composed these 21 miniatures with accompanying texts, that in this case seem to have been freed from their function as playing instructions and permitted instead to lead their own lives as delightful haiku-like poems. The notation often graphically illustrates the course of events in text and picture, and is written in exquisite hand with black and red ink (Satie's own MS was printed).

As Robert Orledge has shown, the complicated production was halted, presumably as a result of the outbreak of the Great War, and the work was first published in 1923. By then Martin had completed a new series of drawings on the same themes in a style more inspired by cubism and that did not always concord with Satie's texts. The first printing, a very exclusive bibliophile edition of only ten copies, therefore contained drawings from both 1914 and 1922. Furthermore, a slightly bigger edition was released containing only the later drawings (in colour). The edition that is now generally available (Dover, 1982) unfortunately only contains the 1922 drawings in black and white.

The famous pianist Marcelle Meyer first performed the work in January of 1922, though there are indications that Satie himself was responsible for a private, unofficial premiere in December of 1919 at the publisher's home. Unfortunately, there is no documentation on how the problem of picture/music/text was

resolved on either of these occasions. In the intimate 1919 performance, there was nothing to stop the audience from gathering round Satie at the piano, which would really be the only way to let the spectator partake of the album as a whole, but it is not known how Satie thought it should be presented at the 1922 concert. Was his relation to the pictures the same as that to his texts? (cf. with *Heures séculaires et instantanées* below).

Another documentation detail should be added: the sequence of the pieces in the different editions is not Satie's but the publisher's. His conserved manuscript shows that he had intended the following order instead (the figures refer to the list of contents above):

1, 8, 18, 17, 10, 5, 11, 7, 12, 21, 15,
13, 9, 3, 2, 16, 6, 14, 4, 20, 19.

Moreover, he suggested the following sequence to Marcelle Meyer:

1, 9, 16, 12, 6, 11, 19, 10, 21, 17, 5
8, 18, 3, 13, 14, 15, 7, 20, 2, 4.
(Quoted from Robert Orledge).

Space considerations naturally preclude a detailed description of each piece, so some characteristic examples will have to suffice.

The opening (which does not refer to any picture) is very Satiean in its function as a flag of warning to dissuade the unwanted listener. It is an "unappetizing choral" provided with the following introduction:

“For the Shriveled-up and the Stupefied I have written a serious and proper chorale. This chorale is a sort of bitter preamble, a kind of austere and unfrivolous introduction. I have put into it all I know about Boredom.

I dedicate this chorale to those who don't like me. I withdraw.

ERIK SATIE”

La Balançoire

Martin's 1922 illustration depicts a young lady standing on a swing, skirts flying. She is in a park filled with all sorts of enjoyments such as dancing, canoeing and a refreshments concession (where the beer apparently costs 0.75 francs). In Satie's music the left hand “ticks” forth staccato quavers, more reminiscent of a pendulum than a swing, while the right hand performs four melancholy melodic phrases that hardly seem to have anything to do with Martin's joyful atmosphere. The text reads:

“It's my heart that is swinging like this. It isn't dizzy. What little feet it has. Will it be willing to return to my breast?”

La Chasse

In an open landscape strewn with little pavilions and villas, three people are seen, dressed in elegant hunting-clothes and apparently busy shooting hares (or rabbits?).

Satie's text conjures up visions of a surrealistic forest interior:

“Do you hear the rabbit singing? The nightingale is in its burrow. The owl is nursing its children. The young wild boar is going to get married. As for me, I am knocking down nuts with rifle shots.”

This is illustrated by speeding music in typical hunting rhythm (i.e.6/8) with hunting-bugle fifths in the treble and a finishing, illusory gunshot in the bass — resulting in a Disney-like caricatural effect.

Le Golf

A game Satie declares to be for ageing English colonels:

“It is a sport for mature men who have retired. Old English colonels especially excel at it. Among two golfers, two are English and two are colonels, late of His Majesty's army. Golf, thus is an English military sport, in any case military and English. These gentlemen dress in Scottish tweed, as green as possible. They are followed by a “caddie” who carries the “bags” — the “bags” are sacks containing the “clubs”. “Clubs” are doughty bits of wood used to send balls into “holes”. These “holes” are just poor, harmless holes.” (From an unpublished text)

The exalted music sounds like a march caricature with a tune strangely prophetic of the then as yet unwritten *Tea for Two*. It leads into

Le Golf

Scotch

Il sera victorieux.

Le Colonel est vêtu de "Scotch Tweed" d'un vert violent.

son "caddie" le suit portant les "bags". Les rugges sont étonnés.

Le vicé qui assure le coup!

Les "holes" sont tout frémissants! Le Colonel est là!

son "club" vole en éclats!

ENK JATIE
20 Mai 1914

Autograph of *Le Golf* from *Sports et Divertissements*.

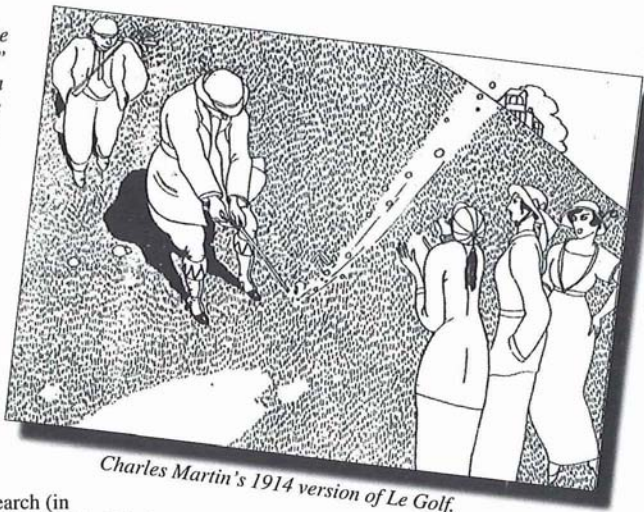
a flashing stream of notes, the object of which seems to be to illustrate how the colonel's club is smashed to a thousand pieces:

"The colonel is dressed in Scotch tweed of a violent green. He will be victorious. His caddie follows him, carrying the bags. The clouds are surprised. The holes are shaking

with fright: "the colonel is here!" Now he makes a fine swing: his club bursts into pieces!"

Martin's 1922 picture is a stylized cubist composition featuring two elegant young people in the foreground, a gentleman with his back turned, a lady with a deep dé-colletage and a broad hat and a golfer in the background. Thanks to Robert Orledge's research (in *Satie the Composer*) and Ornella Volta's collection of Satie texts, *A Mammal's Notebook*, it is possible to compare it with Martin's 1914 drawing, which is the one Satie wrote the music and text to.

In a more naturalistic, illustrative style, this indeed depicts a corpulent colonel in plus-fours holding the broken club in his hand, the caddie behind him, visibly taking malicious pleasure in his plight. In the foreground stand three delighted young ladies.



Charles Martin's 1914 version of *Le Golf*.

Le Tango perpétuel

"The tango is the dance of the Devil. It's his favourite. He dances it to cool off. His wife, his daughters and his servants get cool that way."

This is Satie's ironic statement on the Parisian tango craze that prompted the Bishop of Paris to brand the dance as ungodly and unfit for Christians — thus Satie makes it the dance of the Devil. "Perpétuel" may be an allusion to

the craze, during which one was confronted everywhere, eternally, with this dance music. Perhaps it follows that Satie's tango with its dull, monotonous strains and endless tango rhythm should also be played ad infinitum. Nevertheless, whether or not to interpret the word "perpétuel" as an absurdist directive of performance — perhaps the ultimate consequence of the æsthetic of dullness he had already alluded to in *Vexations* (vol. 2) — is a matter best left to each and every one to settle for himself.

In Martin's 1922 drawing there are no demons, however, but two couples dancing on a dance floor out of doors, with a small orchestra in the background, consisting of a drummer, a singer (?) and an intensely concentrated pianist.

The pieces Satie himself had intended as the final to this series of musical postcards was "The flirt" or "Italian comedy". In the 1922 edition it was, instead, "Tennis", for which Martin drew a sort of humorous cartoon: a gentleman and a lady have set up a tea-table in the immediate vicinity of a tennis court, and a lost ball from an ongoing mixed double lands in the middle of a tea-cup. Satie's music is full of bouncing balls and darting figures and his text seems to consist of observations from both players and spectators:

"Play? Yes! He has a good serve. What good-looking legs he has! He has a fine nose. A slice serve. Game!"

Satie has made sparing use of musical quotations in *Sports et Divertissements*, but some should be mentioned. In *Le Réveil de la Mariée* ("The Bride Awakens") one can hear a slightly distorted version of *Brother John*. *Les Courses* ("The Races") is abruptly ended by the beginning of *Le Marseillaise* (an allusion perhaps, to the punters who have bet on the wrong horse — the French?), and in *Le Flirt* the familiar French tune *Au Clair de la Lune* is quoted (at this point, the text states: "I'd like to be in the moon").

Heures séculaires et instantanées

*Obstacles venimeux · Crépuscule
matinal (de midi) · Affolements granitiques*

"To each and every one: I forbid reading of the text aloud during the musical performance. Whosoever has the audacity to flaunt this rule will incur my righteous wrath. There will be no exceptions."

This solemn proclamation appears as a footnote to these "Hours of a century and an instant" from June-July, 1914. If it is to be taken seriously (it is always hard to tell with Satie), it is a definite statement of position as far as the relationship between text and music is concerned: the text should in no way disturb the music — at least not in this piece. It is said that Satie had become visibly irritated when he learned that someone had taken it upon himself to declaim the text together with the music, and it

ter of fact, they were miles apart, both artistically and as individuals. Satie could never appreciate Ravel's music. An often quoted comment is his malicious reaction to hearing that Ravel had refused the Legion of Honour: "But all his music accepts it!" Ravel the man was described by Satie as "a little doddering dandy" (*A Mammal's Notebook*).

These "Three Distinguished Waltzes of the Disgusted Snob" (written in July, 1914 and first performed by Satie himself at a concert at the Société Lyre et Palette) have traditionally come to be seen as an ironic comment on Ravel, a renowned fashion snob, and his *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (which in their turn were comments to Schubert's *Valses nobles* and *Valses sentimentales*). Ravel's work was first performed by the composer at the very same 1911 concert during which he played music of Satie. He did not divulge who their composer was, and they were thus believed to be by Satie! One can imagine Satie's ambiguous reaction to this. There is presumably cause to see Satie's waltzes as a kind of double exposure with traits of both himself and Ravel.

The first waltz is slow, elegant and somehow self-mirroring. Its title — *Sa Taille* — is obviously ambivalent. It can mean both "His figure" and "His size" (his contemporaries quite clearly believed that Satie was referring to Ravel's short stature, perhaps both in a physical and artistic/human sense). Ambivalent too is the Epigram that Satie selected from the French

17th c. incisive moralist La Bruyère:

"Those who injure the reputation or the fortune of others rather than miss the chance of a clever remark deserve a degrading punishment. This has not been said before, and I venture to say it."

The dandy who dances this first waltz is humming a melody from the 15th century (!) and is flattering himself on his elegance, his sensitive heart and captivating figure while looking forward to the joys of existence:

"The beautiful Marquess? — She will fight it, but in vain. — Oui, Madame. Is it not written?"

In the second waltz, "His lorgnette", Satie seems to be quoting his own gymnopédies, perhaps in reference to Ravel's bold contention that he had written the fourth gymnopédie in his *Entretiens de la Belle et la Bête* (from the suite *Ma mère et l'oye*). Here too he provides the piece with an ambivalent motto, this time from Cicero's *De Republica*, on how the old custom of forbidding nubile young people to show themselves naked in their bath left deep traces of shyness in their minds (perhaps this was an allusion to the naked dance in the gymnopédie?). Then he describes the lorgnette, which he "polishes every day":

"A lorgnette of silver with smoke-tinted glass that was given to him by a beautiful

clasps his cerebellum in his right hand with the fingers spread out. From a distance, he resembles a distinguished physiologist. He is captured by four anonymous serpents,"

(four heavy chords played by the right-hand on the piano)

"clinging to the tails of his uniform, which is rendered shapeless by a combination of sorrow and solitude. On the riverbank, an ancient mangrove tree slowly bathes its roots, which are revoltingly filthy. This is not the hour propitious to lovers."

The music, which is to be played "blackly", is a kind of march, mainly performed on the lower, darker register of the piano.

In "Morning Dusk (at Midday)", also a march but mainly played in the treble clef, the following happens:

"The sun rose early and in a good mood. the temperature will be above average, since the weather is pre-historic and inclined to be stormy. The sun is high in the sky; he looks like a good chap. But don't let's trust him. Perhaps he's going to burn up the crops or land a mighty stroke: a sunstroke."

(a booming bass octave, followed by a melodic little "sparkle" in the treble)

"Behind the shed an ox is eating itself sick."

The last piece, "Granite Turmoils", is a quick, playful waltz, coupled with the following curious introductory playing directive: "Mean, unhealthy fumes playing with each other in the grass". But the text tells another story:

"The clock of the old abandoned village is going to strike hard: to strike thirteen hours.

(Thirteen "chimes" in the lower register)

"An antediluvian rainstorm emerges from the clouds of dust; the great mocking trees are tugging at one another's branches, while the rough granite stones jostle one another about, and don't know where to place themselves as to be a nuisance. Thirteen hours are just about to strike, under the guise of: One o'clock in the afternoon.

(Yet another thirteen "chimes" in the lower register, this time in octaves)

"Alas! This isn't legal time."

Les trois Valses distinguées du Précieux dégouté

Sa Taille · Son binocle · Ses jambes

Maurice Ravel was, as has been mentioned earlier, a driving force behind the rediscovery of Satie in the early 1910s. Though Satie was probably aware of his debt of gratitude to him, he also knew that Ravel's motives were probably not as pure as they seemed. As a mat-

music of the day (to which he had actually contributed thirty years previously with some waltzes, which must in his memory have been incarnated by his hated stepmother). It also indicates that Satie must have felt himself approaching the end of a chapter in his life. In 1915, when the pieces were written, his finances were in such a state that he implored the famous Paul Dukas to convey help through some charitable organization. The madness of the Great War deeply affected him: "This war is a sort of end of the world that is more stupid than reality", he wrote in his letter to Dukas.

These "Next to Last Thoughts" in the shadow of the end of the world are dated August 23rd, October 3rd and 6th 1915. They were published by Rouart-Lerolle in 1916, and first performed by Satie in May of the same year at a private concert given for Satie and Granados, combined with an exhibition of modern painting.

In *Heures séculaires et instantanées* from the summer of 1914, one could already divine the change in his tone by the almost nightmarish, surrealist, prehistoric settings. Even if the title of these "penultimate" pieces themselves sounds like cheerful irony, there is not much pleasantry in evidence, either in the strictly neutral sub-headings (unusual for Satie), the guiding prose poems or the music. From a purely musical point of view, these pieces are written with detached clarity and clockwork precision. In the first, *Idylle* (dedicated to Claude Debussy), the left hand plays an osti-

nato quaver pattern (h-C¹-D¹-a) through-out the piece while the right hand plays melodic phrases that are totally unconnected to this configuration or the text that runs parallel:

"What is it I see? The stream is soaking wet and the forest dry and inflammable as kindling. But my heart is very small. The trees look like great, shoddily-made combs; and the sun is surrounded by a swarm of beautiful, golden rays. But the back of my heart is freezing. The Moon has lost itself among its neighbours: and the stream is soaking to the marrow."

After this *Idyll* comes an *Aubade* dedicated to Dukas, a morning serenade (also meaning "cat music") where the right hand repeats a kind of guitar accompaniment in 3/4 throughout the piece, consisting of a B-minor chord followed by two D-major chords. Against this, the left hand plays melodic phrases in completely different keys. This has the flavour of the caricature of a little serenade in which nothing really concords, either the musical layers or the text, which seems to be a Satiean version of *Beauty and the Beast*:

"Do not slumber, Sleeping Beauty. Hear your lover's voice. He is playing a rigadon. He loves you so! He is a poet. Can you hear him? Is he laughing at you? No: he adores you, fair beauty! He does another rigadon and catches cold. Couldn't you love him? He is a poet, an old poet!"

lady — precious memories! But... our friend is so sad: he has lost its case!"

Could Satie be referring to himself? In *Memoirs of an Amnesic* he comments on the effects of composing on his life: "It was thus that I developed my taste for misanthropy, devoted myself to hypochondria and became the most heavily-minded of humans (heavy as lead). I was a sorry sight, even seen through a gold-plated lorgnette". The third waltz, "His Leg", is downright alive with cheerful resolve:

"He is so proud of his legs — they only dance some chosen dances — they are smooth — they are dressed in black in the evening — He would like to carry them under his arm — They glide forth, melancholy — Sometimes upset, sometimes incensed — He often kisses them and puts them on his back — He is so kind to them — He refuses to buy gaiters: it would be like a prison to them!"

The introductory motto comes from Cato's *De re rustica*:

"The first duty of the proprietor, upon arriving at his farm, must be to pay his respects to the household gods; then, on the same day, if he can spare the time, it is strongly recommended that he make a tour of his lands, that he learn the condition of his fields, and that, these tasks completed, he tackles those that are not."

In purely musical terms, Satie is standing on his own legs in these waltzes. Quotations from other music are quite absent and the structure is tight, compressed, a kind of distillation bereft of everything but the basic essentials. The third waltz, for instance, is based on a single theme: three tones, a second and a third, for example D-E-G, one of Satie's favourite themes, probably originating in Gregorian formula. And yet, no asceticism whatsoever emanates from the music.

Avant-Dernières Pensées

Idylle · Aubade · Méditation

In 1824, a little ländler-type waltz by Carl Gottlieb Reissiger was published. A copy of this waltz was found on the desk of Carl Maria von Weber after his death and issued under the title *Weber's Last Thought*. Gradually, the falsification triumphantly made its victorious way across musical Europe and no-one considered that it may have been written by anyone but Weber. It also spurred other salon music pieces to become known as someone's "last thought".

Perhaps it is these "Dernières Pensées" that Satie was alluding to in his last collection of "humorous" piano pieces. But Satie would not have been Satie had he not concurrently taken the opportunity to alter their emotional implications. With habitual irony he instead chose to call the pieces his "next to last thoughts".

The title, however, is not only his way of thumbing his nose at the sentimental salon

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Biographical summary 1912-1915

- 1912 Satie starts contributing to *Revue Musicale*, including his self-biographical *Memoirs of an Amnesic*. Composes *Préludes flasques (pour un chien)*, which are rejected by the publishers, whereupon he immediately composes *Véritables Préludes flasques (pour un chien)* which are accepted and printed.
- 1913 Writes the pre-surrealistic play *Le Piège de Meduse*. Gets more public attention, which inspires him to write a lot of new music. Composes five collections of piano pieces: *Descriptions automatiques*, *Croquis et Agaceries d'un gros Bonhomme en bois*, *Embryons desséchés*, *Chapitres tournés en tous sens* and *Vieux Sequins et Vieilles Cuirasses*.
- 1914 Does service as corporal in the Home Guard of Arcueil during the Great War. Befriends Sergei Diaghilev of the Russian Ballet, and becomes a member of the Socialist Party. Composes *Sports et Divertissements*, *Heures séculaires et instantanées* and *Les trois Valses distinguées du Précieux dégouté*.
- 1915 Has deep financial problems. Gets to know Jean Cocteau, and writes *Cinq Grimaces* for Cocteau's never realized setting of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Also composes *Avant-Dernières Pensées*.

In the last piece, a not very meditative *Méditation* (dedicated to Albert Roussel, who taught Satie counterpoint at the Schola Cantorum ten years previously), we encounter this bitterly disillusioned poet yet again:

"The poet is locked in his old tower. It is windy. The poet is meditating, though he doesn't look like it. Suddenly his skin breaks out in goose-pimples. Why? It is the Devil! No, it is not he, it is the wind, the wind around the genie who is darting like a draught through the room. The poet's head is full of it! He smiles maliciously though his heart is crying like a weeping willow. But the genius is there! And looks at him with the evil eye, a glass eye. And the poet shrinks and becomes red all over. He gets stomach pains, terrible stomach pains from bad blank verse and bitter disappointments!"

It is hard to imagine anything more desperate than this almost psychotic self-portrait. Here

we find most of Satie's narcissistic self-appraisals: the old (ivory) tower from *Memoirs of an Amnesic*, his unnoticed "meditations" (the artistic aspirations that go unsuspected in Arcueil) and the "Devil" (his paranoid tendencies and attraction towards the occult). He is a genius, and he is malicious despite the fact that his heart is crying. But his genius is also his evil eye, made of glass (Satie was an alcoholic). He is nothing, he is "red" (a communist?) and his poor compositions and many disappointments make him ill.

The music, however, relates nothing of this. The right hand whisks up a mechanical, constantly-repeated pianissimo triplet and the left hand contributes melodic interjections in other keys with an occasional flavour of "tone-painting" (when there is talk of the wind and the Devil).

This is a strange ending to all these decreasingly humorous piano pieces. Significantly enough, there are no amusing quotations from other music in this work.

Many thanks to Ornella Volta of Archives de la Fondation Erik Satie for invaluable help in this project.

is most probable that he was taking this occasion to clarify his position. It is certainly most significant, moreover, that he chose these pieces for this clarification. Here, the texts have a breadth and character that make them into independent poems. Thus it is certainly tempting to try to make the whole into a declamatory affair.

The pieces had to wait some time before they were published, in 1916. They were first performed by Ricardo Viñes in March of 1917, only a few months prior to the scandalous opening of the ballet *Parade*.

This delay may not only have been coincidental. There is a different atmosphere in these pieces which is quite foreign to the humorous, ironic and friendly tone of previous works and which may have caused some alienation. Here, moreover, the uniting game of musical quotations does not occur. But the music is hardly more bizarre than any other of Satie's — it is mainly the titles and lyrics that create this singular atmosphere.

The title of the collection already indicates that Satie is setting incompatible choral planes against each other in an absurdist way, reminiscent of the historic nightmare of “The Defeat of the Cimbri” (in *Vieux Sequins et Vieilles Cuirasses*), for instance. The lengthy dedication does little to cast further light on the matter:

“To Sir William Grant-Plumot, I gratefully dedicate this work. Up to now, two personalities have surprised me: Louis XI and Sir William — the first, by his weird

sense of humour; the second, by his perpetual immobility. I am honoured to pronounce, here, the names of Louis XI and of Sir William Grant-Plumot.”

There has been much speculation as to the identity of this Sir William. Grete Wehmeyer suggests Satie's old enemy from the 1890s, the critic Willy — Henry Gauthier-Villars — while Ornella Volta proposes Shakespeare — a very “immobile” star fixed on the heavens of world literature and indeed a “Grant-Plumot”, a great penman, plume being the French for “pen”. Satie also develops a “weird sense of humour” almost equal to that of the cruel king Louis XI in the lyrics, which run parallel to the music without having any visible connection to it, other than in certain key places.

In all three texts he paints surrealistic, antediluvian landscapes. “Poisonous Obstacles” is set in the following scenery:

“This vast region of the globe has only one inhabitant: a negro. He is so bored that he is ready to die of laughter. The shadows of the thousand-year-old trees indicate that it is 9:17 A.M.”

(Here the piano first announces nine crotchets in bass octaves. After a short bridging passage, seventeen quavers in the treble follow.)

“The toads are calling each other by their surnames in order to think better; the negro



Photo: Stefan Lindblom

OLOF HÖJER, born 1937, has long been praised for his intelligent interpretations, self-effacing musicality, and delicate touch. He has shown a particular interest in Swedish and French music — he made his breakthrough playing the complete piano music of Debussy — and is recognized as one of the finest Satie interpreters of our time.

He was educated in Stockholm; mainly by the Schnabel pupil Gottfrid Boon. Since his

debut he has performed in Sweden and Europe, and made numerous radio and TV appearances.

He has also made several recordings, including music of Satie, Wilhelm Peterson-Berger, Hugo Alfvén and several other Swedish composers, both past and contemporary. In 1992, the Swedish Government awarded Olof Höjer a 10 year artistic grant, allowing him to leave his post as a teacher at the Malmö College of Music and pursue a fulltime career as soloist.

Erik Satie

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Drawing of Erik Satie by Alfred Fruch.

Total time: 61'11



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