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The Musical Quarterly, Vol. 69, No. 1. (Winter, 1983), pp. 104-119.

Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0027-4631%28198324%2969%3A1%3C104%3AESATCO%3E2.0.CO%3B2-E

The Musical Quarterly is currently published by Oxford University Press.

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ALAN M. GILLMOR

IT is undeniable that Erik Satie possessed a creative imagination of a most distinctive kind and that the innovations and aesthetic attitudes of the ingenuous citizen of the grimy Parisian suburb of Arcueil-Cachan provided a stimulus for a great deal of contemporary artistic activity. By the standards of the great Austro-German tradition and its direct extensions, Satie, in his lifetime, had to be considered a composer of little consequence, and unfortunately the type of buffoonery with which his name is irrevocably associated has long militated against his general acceptance by critics, causing his achievement to remain at best misunderstood and at worst shrouded in obscurity. As Wilfrid Mellers has pointed out:

> Probably no other figure in modern music has been subjected to such persistently ignorant denigration as Erik Satie. Fear of responding to something which is genuinely new or disturbing to their complacency has led people with only the most superficial acquaintance with his work to dismiss Satie as an incompetent *blagueur*, an eccentric who wrote odd sentences over his music, whose compositions can be ignored with cheerful irresponsibility or at worst dismissed with some such epithet as "thin."[1]

Throughout his life Satie eventually rejected each group of young composers which gathered around him. Through this process he managed to remain continuously in the vanguard, and his frequent alliances with younger men explain, in part, his infantile and artless nature while pointing, perhaps, to a deep-rooted and lifelong insecurity. Writing in Jean Cocteau's ephemeral broadsheet, *Le Coq*, Satie declared that a school of Satie did not exist and that it never would for

[1] "Erik Satie and the 'Problem' of Contemporary Music," *Music and Letters*, XXIII (1942), 210. Parts of this article, including a slightly abridged version of the passage quoted, appeared in "The Classicism of Erik Satie," *The Listener*, XVIII (August 11, 1937), 318.

"Sateism" was not possible. He added that if such a school were to appear, he would be opposed to it. Satie went on to note that submission in art was impossible. In each composition, he asserted, he tried to use the structure and content that would confuse his followers. In that way an artist could not become a pedant or a founder of a school.[2] Through his association with the latest trends in French music, Satie, until his death in 1925, was a seminal influence on a variety of vanguard movements, some ultimately important, others decidedly removed from the mainstream of twentieth-century artistic evolution and consequently short-lived.

After the first performance of *Mercure* at the Théâtre de la Cigale on June 15, 1924, the poet and critic René Chalupt reported that the ballet was poorly received, even by Satie's best friends.[3] Serge Leonidovich Grigoriev, who had served as Diaghilev's *régisseur* for twenty years and who in that time had witnessed many strange and wonderful things, felt that *Mercure* was, quite simply, "utterly nonsensical."[4] Apparently the critic for the London *Observer* was inclined to the same view, for his droll description of the ballet's revival in England some three years later has captured something of the frivolous atmosphere of Picasso's décor, Massine's choreography, and Satie's banal musical clichés:

> It began with a picture called "Night." This suggested an anthropomorphic powder-puff transfixed by hairpins to a square, but sparsely-curranted, bun. There followed a dolorous love-dance between Venus and Apollyon, as rigorous in pose as it was abortive; slow processions of Ugly-wugglies contrived from cardboard and expanding metal; "The Bath of the Graces," suggestive of life on a submerged houseboat as lived by three Edwardian barmaids with hypertrophied period busts; a sharp encounter with Cerberus, and other celestial and infernal pranks whose pagan character defies brief description.
>
> Through this series of plastic poses flew Mercury, a vivid figure in white tunic and scarlet coat, enthusiastically danced by Massine. The whole was accompanied by music to suit, dominated by a grumbling tuba.[5]

[2] *Le Coq*, No. 2 (June, 1920). Cocteau's broadsheet, founded on March 6, 1920, was destined to appear only four times: May, June, July/August/September, and November, 1920. Numbers 3 and 4 were called *Le Coq parisien*. All four issues, originally printed on large folded sheets of pink paper, are reprinted in smaller facsimile in a double issue of *L'Approdo musicale*, No. 19–20 (1965), dedicated to "Il Gruppo dei Sei." Satie's text has been reprinted in Ornella Volta, ed., *Erik Satie: Ecrits* (Paris, 1977), p. 45.

[3] "Paris Letter," *The Chesterian*, VI (October, 1924), 24.

[4] *The Diaghilev Ballet, 1909–1929*, trans. and ed. Vera Bowen (London, 1953), p. 238.

[5] H. H. [Horace Horsnell], *"Mercury," The Observer* (London), July 17, 1927, p. 15.

Five months after the opening of *Mercure* in Montmartre, *Relâche*, Satie's parting snub at the old world he entered (and left) very young, provoked an even greater storm of protest, reminiscent of the heady days of *Parade*. Satie's erstwhile friend and disciple Roland-Manuel, his classmate at the Schola Cantorum and orchestrator of several of his early works including the *Prélude de la porte héroïque du ciel* and the second *Gymnopédie*, rather maliciously entitled his review of *Relâche* "Adieu à Satie," thus setting the tone for a flood of adverse criticism. In the opinion of Roland-Manuel, the spirit of Dada had fed Satie's incoercible appetite for sly buffoonery and had tragically undermined the graceful whimsy of the earlier piano works. The result was *Relâche*, a vulgar work of unimaginable boredom and distressing silliness.[6]

Perceptive readers of *Le Journal littéraire* six weeks before the première of the ballet would have been better prepared for the fiasco at the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées on December 4.[7] In a rare interview, Satie outlined briefly the surrealistic scenario of *Relâche* and explained that he intended the music to be lively and colorful, that he had in fact composed, "for the 'chic set,' amusing and pornographic (*sic*) music."[8] Additional bait, if any were needed, was provided by Francis Picabia in a mock interview with the director of the Swedish Ballet, who asked the painter to explain the scenario of the ballet in preparation for the opening performance a week away; Picabia's characteristically supercilious reply: "*Relâche*? Music by Erik Satie... explain what to you my dear Rolf de Maré? Do you take me for Einstein?"[9]

Forewarned or not, the Parisian press descended upon the com-

[6] Roland-Manuel [Roland-Alexis Manuel Lévy], "Adieu à Satie," *Revue pleyel*, No. 15 (December, 1924), 21–22.

[7] *Relâche* lived up to its name, for there is general confusion concerning the precise date of the première. Of the standard monographs on Satie, only Anne Rey, *Erik Satie* (Paris, 1974) provides the correct date: December 4, 1924. Scheduled to receive "Le Tout-Paris" on Thursday, November 27, the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées remained resolutely closed to the elegant crowd of anxious first-nighters, ostensibly owing to the indisposition of Jean Börlin, leading male dancer with the Swedish Ballet. Two days later an announcement to that effect was seen in *Comoedia*, followed by a short explanatory note by Francis Poulenc entitled "Pourquoi *Relâche* a fait relâche," which appeared in the same newspaper on December 2, two days before the rescheduled opening.

[8] The ironical (*sic*) is in the original. W. Mayr, "Entretien avec Erik Satie," *Le Journal littéraire*, No. 24 (October 4, 1924), 11.

[9] Rolf de Maré, "A propos de *Relâche*," *Comoedia*, November 27, 1924, p. 2.

poser and his Dada colleagues with a vengeance. All the major critics were in attendance—André Messager for *Le Figaro,* Henry Malherbe for *Le Temps,* Emile Vuillermoz for *Excelsior,* Jean Gandrey-Rety for *Comoedia,* Robert Dezarnaux for *La Liberté,* Fernand Le Borne for *Le Petit Parisien,* Paul Dambly for *Le Petit Journal,* Roland-Manuel for *L'Eclair,* even Louis Schneider representing the *New York Herald.* Although there was considerable praise in some quarters for René Clair's pioneering film *Entr'acte,*[10] Satie's music suffered almost universal condemnation, the general opinion being that the score was so poor and simple—"raving proletarian music" according to one report[11]—that it was beneath criticism.

Only months before his death it appeared that the godfather of Les Six and L'Ecole d'Arcueil was about to disappear beneath a mountain of negative publicity. Undoubtedly the public was wearying of the juvenile stunts of the Dadaists. By 1924, the year which saw the publication of André Breton's first *Surrealist Manifesto,* the force of Dadaism was nearly spent. It had begun to take itself seriously, had allowed itself to become dogmatically allied with organized revolutionary politics, and had thus transpired to rematerialize as Surrealism, an artistic movement strongly rooted in reaction to Dada's destructive anarchism and nihilistic spontaneity. Satie, on the strength of the scandalous *Parade* and the even more outrageous *Le Piège de Méduse,* a Jarry-like prefiguration of Dada and the Theater of the Absurd, was taken up by the Dadaists in the early 1920s as a kind of unofficial composer to the group, and we can now see *Relâche* as one of the movement's last and most glorious spasms.

The "official" attitude toward the composer of *Mercure* and *Relâche* was perhaps best summarized by Georges Jean-Aubry in a scathing article which appeared several months before Satie's death.[12] Again his last work was the chief cause of the reversal of opinion. Less than a decade earlier Jean-Aubry had paid homage to Satie in his *Musique française d'aujourd'hui* (1916); and, in the same year, writing for an English journal in advance of a proposed Satie visit to Great

[10] See, for example, Robert Desnos, "Cinéma: *Entr'acte* par Francis Picabia, mise en scène de René Clair," *Le Journal littéraire,* No. 34 (December 13, 1924), 15. Desnos does not hesitate to nominate *Entr'acte* as "le plus beau film de l'année."

[11] Paul Dambly, "Premières Répresentations: Les Ballets suédois—*Relâche,*" *Le Petit Journal,* December 9, 1924, p. 4.

[12] "The End of a Legend," *The Chesterian,* VI (May, 1925), 191-93.

Britain,[13] the French critic wrote of the "genuine musicality" of the composer, and concluded that "behind his apparent lack of respect for music, lurks a sincere love of it, such as one sometimes fails to find in the depths of the soul of certain master builders of works of large dimensions, for whom music is nothing more than scientific boredom."[14] But exposure to the late ballets radically altered Jean-Aubry's view, and, after witnessing the scandal of *Relâche*, the disgruntled critic was compelled to write:

> . . . *Relâche* has at last opened the eyes, or rather the ears, of those who would neither see nor listen and who persisted in maintaining that Satie was a master. Disillusioned, and having decided to remain no longer among those of whom the proverb says, "none so deaf as those who will not hear," they were forced to confess, while listening to *Relâche*, that they were, in fact, listening to nothing.[15]

Writing in the vituperative vein of one who has just discovered that he has been duped, Jean-Aubry went on to denounce *Parade*, and even *Socrate*—perhaps Satie's chief claim to immortality—which he dismissed as a pretentious piece wherein poverty and boredom are in open conflict. His bitter conclusion is a judicious marriage of poetic imagery and invective tinged with regret, as he sees in the composer "an old actor who, because he has once played the part of Napoleon and been applauded by provincials, imagines himself to be really the great captain, but who, looking in a mirror, sees only an old man abandoned in the melancholy twilight of a deserted café."[16]

Henry Prunières, in his obituary for *The Musical Digest*, although kinder to Satie than Jean-Aubry, echoed his colleague's opinion by suggesting that Satie's rediscovery in the postwar period, thrusting him abruptly into the limelight, was detrimental to his art. The composer on several occasions experienced the frustration of seeing

[13] "Erik Satie: A Musical Humorist," *The Music Student*, IX (December, 1916), 135–36. The proposed visit to Great Britain, mentioned nowhere else in the Satie literature, never materialized. Jean-Aubry noted that Satie was to have appeared in performances of his own works at one of the War Emergency Concerts in Steinway Hall on December 7, 1916, and that from London he was to have traveled to Newcastle and Edinburgh. *The Observer*, December 10, 1916, p. 15, reveals that the guest of honor in Steinway Hall on December 7 was in fact Florent Schmitt in a performance of his Piano Quintet, Op. 51, with the Belgian Quartet. In the next issue of *The Music Student*, IX (January, 1917), 163, Jean-Aubry solves the mystery by reporting that Satie found it impossible to take part in the performances arranged for him in the United Kingdom; there is no evidence that such a trip was ever made at a later date.

[14] "Erik Satie: A Musical Humorist," 136.

[15] "The End of a Legend," 191.

[16] *Ibid.*, 193.

his innovations taken up by younger more talented composers who quickly outgrew their need of him. Consequently, Prunières contends, he became jealous of the success of composers whom he had supported, and his former modesty, dignity, and charm were gradually displaced by an intense bitterness and irascibility which barely managed to hide under the surface of an increasingly caustic wit. As Prunières bluntly put it: "His success killed him."[17]

Satie had been dead only a fortnight when Eric Blom, in a harsh notice for the *Musical News and Herald,* wrote of France's "original but ineffectual musician" with the apparent intention of closing the Satie case once and for all:

> Independent critics at no time cherished any illusion about the fertility of Satie's work. He mildly amused them once or twice by his humorous pieces and by the pathetically comic false position into which he had been thrust by a few of the people who are ever eager for innovation, whatever its quality may be. But his last few years deserved unalloyed pity. One was sorry for him as for a preposterous eccentric who has been robbed of his belief in the reality of his attitudes, whom life has left high and dry on an arid sandbank once mistaken by him for a fruitful island. It was said of Satie by some manipulator of *clichés* that he was born before his time; all one can say now, with the sorrowful indulgence one owes to the departed, is that he unhappily died too late to leave a world of unwholesome flattery without bitterness.[18]

Thus many of Satie's cronies, perhaps under some pressure from the critics, began to desert him and his ideals, some, like Roland-Manuel, with considerable fanfare, the greater number silently, although those closest to him—Milhaud, Sauguet, Désormière, Caby, Wiéner—remained faithful to the end. Significantly, despite his periodic difficulties with the implacable and extraordinarily sensitive composer, Georges Auric, youngest of Les Six and one of Satie's first disciples, was genuinely moved by his death, and he had the courage to conclude his front-page obituary for *Les Nouvelles littéraires* with a simple, touching, and prophetic statement: "I will never regret having heeded the lesson of Satie. The years pass—and the misunderstandings."[19]

Satie opened and closed his career with a hoax, beginning in 1887 with the appearance of his first published score facetiously labeled Opus 62 and ending in 1924 with the scandal of *Relâche* and his notorious appearance on stage in a five-horsepower Citroën automobile with a poster proclaiming Erik Satie "the greatest musician in the

[17] "The Failure of Success," *The Musical Digest,* VIII (July 28, 1925), 5.

[18] "Erik Satie (1866–1925)," *Musical News and Herald,* LXIX (July 18, 1925), 53.

[19] "Erik Satie," *Les Nouvelles littéraires,* July 11, 1925, p. 1.

world." Thus there is a remarkable consistency in Satie's actions which suggests that it is futile to attempt an explanation of his behavior in terms of a series of traumas which sent him spinning into the role of the outsider. His posture was in the nature of the man and his time, and when the careers of his equally bizarre colleagues and contemporaries—Eugène Vachette, Joséphin Péladan, Alphonse Allais, Alfred Jarry—have been examined, Satie's very uniqueness comes into question. Although he contrived to live two separate careers, one in the nineteenth, the other in the twentieth century, there was no violent break in his stylistic development, no fundamental change of direction. His ideals were manifested early and he served them throughout his entire career with undeviating loyalty.

Satie's early achievement appears quite remarkable in view of the social and cultural milieu of the early years of the Third Republic. The Franco-Prussian War had left a prostrate France in a state of artistic, as well as political, confusion; the protracted hegemony of German music uneasily joined forces with a renewed French nationalism to produce a kind of aesthetic and cultural schizophrenia which was clearly exemplified by two events: the founding of the Société Nationale de Musique in 1871 and the publication from 1885 to 1888 of the *Revue wagnérienne*. Satie's importance to the early development of modern French music is due in large part to the fact that he was demonstrably the first French musician of his generation to reject completely the regnant German style and the powerful Wagnerian stimulus. Most of the notable French composers of the *fin de siècle*—Lalo, Massenet, Delibes, Chabrier, D'Indy—simply gallicized the Wagnerian language then sweeping much of Europe, or continued earlier French Romantic traditions in the form of lyric opera.

Despite the eclecticism of much French music of the 1880s, when *le culte wagnérien* was at the peak of its influence, the musical avant-garde saw its tentative origins at this time. In the sister arts, progressive trends multiplied so quickly in the decades following the debacle of 1871 that a historian of the period was prompted to say that "the twentieth century could not wait fifteen years for a round number; it was born, yelling, in 1885."[20]

The savage reaction to the Paris Commune in 1871 provides some evidence that France remained politically conservative under the new

[20] Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Origin of the Avant-Garde in France 1885 to World War I*, revised edition (New York, 1968), p. 4.

Republic, as it had been under the Monarchy and the Empire. But the artistic revolt against the philistinism and the solid bourgeois values of French society had begun long before 1870, with the cultivation of *l'art pour l'art* in the early part of the century. Thus 1870 can be considered a decisive date in French cultural history only in the sense that the disaster of the war had inflicted a psychological shock on France which ultimately became the catalyst for the splendid artistic achievements of *la belle époque* and the early twentieth century.

The disaster of the Prussian War had served to regenerate the artistic spirit of France; but Ars gallica was to run head on into Wagner, that "great master of intellectual eroticism," as Philippe Jullian so aptly described him.[21] It is one of the supreme ironies of French music history that the toxic Wagnerian virus should have infected France precisely at the moment when young French musicians were declaiming the virtues of Ars gallica. It is paradoxical, too, that with few exceptions, the charter members of the Société Nationale de Musique spent varying periods of their careers grappling with the specter of Wagner. All of the important French composers of the last decades of the nineteenth century made the obligatory pilgrimage to Bayreuth. Saint-Saëns was there for the opening in 1876; Chausson and D'Indy went in 1882 for *Parsifal*; even the quintessentially French Fauré made the journey in 1883, followed by Debussy in 1888 and again in 1889, and Chabrier and Lekeu, also in 1889.

After the demise of the *Revue wagnérienne* in 1888, the Wagnerian gospel was spread in France by a variety of journals such as *La Revue indépendante, La Revue contemporaine, Le Saint-Graal, La Plume, La Revue blanche,* and many others, some ephemeral, others lasting well into the twentieth century. Alfred Ernst, from 1891 to 1895 the music critic of the influential *Revue blanche*—a journal for which Debussy became a critic in 1901—devoted nearly every one of his columns to a discussion of Wagner, as if no other musical activity were taking place in the Paris of the 1890s. In the words of the critic and novelist Romain Rolland, "The whole universe was seen and judged by the thought of Bayreuth."[22]

A further blow to the cause of Ars gallica was dealt by Charles Lamoureux, a violinist-conductor who founded the Société des Nou-

[21] *Dreamers of Decadence: Symbolist Painters of the 1890s*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York, 1971), p. 66.

[22] *Musicians of To-Day*, trans. Mary Blaiklock, reprint of 1915 edition (Freeport, N.Y., 1969), p. 253.

veaux Concerts on October 21, 1881, and who for eleven years presented his Concerts-Lamoureux at the Cirque des Champs-Elysées. Although he did present a wide variety of music, including that of young French composers, his overriding passion was Wagner, and more so than any other individual Lamoureux was responsible for forcing Wagner on Paris. The literati, however, needed no persuading. The fanaticism with which the Parisian intelligentsia worshipped Wagner is apparent from Frederick Brown's numinous description of a Lamoureux concert:

> Charles Lamoureux conducted Wagner's operas every Sunday during the summer in the Cirque d'été, like a priest conducting mass. When he mounted the podium, his audience turned its eyes inward and observed a sacerdotal trance till the last note sounded. Even Mallarmé, and for that matter all the symbolists, attended these dominical rites.[23]

Although Wagner's influence on French music was felt well into the first decades of the twentieth century, by 1890, the year of César Franck's death, there were signs of a revolt, a movement away from the ubiquitous Wagnerian vogue. Two organizations were founded in the 1890s with the express purpose of studying and performing the masterpieces of the past. In 1892 Charles Bordes, a pupil of Franck and organist of the church of St. Gervais, created the Chanteurs de Saint-Gervais for the performance of old polyphonic music and Gregorian chant. In addition to editing and publishing old church music, Bordes pioneered in the investigation and publication of French folk music, some of which he used as a basis for his own compositions. In 1894 Bordes, along with D'Indy and the organist Félix Guilmant, founded the Schola Cantorum with the intention of reviving interest in the music of the past, perpetuating the teaching of Franck, and encouraging contemporary composition. The Schola, under the direction of the reactionary D'Indy, was instrumental in aiding the restoration of Gregorian chant, work which was begun in the 1850s and 1860s by the Benedictine monks of Solesmes. In January 1895, the *Tribune de Saint-Gervais*, the monthly Bulletin of the Schola Cantorum, began publication, and by 1908, the year in which Satie was graduated from the institution, the Schola had 320 pupils and was a strong rival of the Conservatoire as a training ground for composers. In spite of all this native activity, it was to take another Franco-German war to destroy the last vestiges of Wagnerism in France. In 1918 Satie could

[23] *An Impersonation of Angels: A Biography of Jean Cocteau* (New York, 1968), p. 8.

sarcastically question the patriotism of Frenchmen who did not love Wagner, pointing out in his deliciously cryptic manner that Wagner was, after all, a Frenchman who, by some geographical accident, happened to be born in Leipzig.[24]

With the development of the *l'art pour l'art* aesthetic in the Romantic period, music had come to be considered by many—Schopenhauer, for example—as the very pinnacle of the arts, and the creation of music a sacred calling. In its most elaborate form, the doctrine of art-for-art's sake divorced art entirely from a social context. Art was to be free from utilitarian standards and the artist absolved from all laws beyond those imposed by the form of art itself. The devotees of art-for-art's sake withdrew as much as possible from the world around them and attempted to make art the sole center of their universe. It follows from such an attitude that the partisans of *l'art pour l'art* felt it their duty to practice a pervasive cynicism. In the words of Albert Guérard:

> The passion smouldering beneath the hard and polished surface was the hatred of successful mediocrity, Philistinism. The deluded populace could be ignored: the enemy with whom there could be no truce was the middle class, with its undeniable cunning, its control of worldly goods, its capacity for aping the externals of culture. Thus it was that Art for Art's Sake assumed a non-moral, even anti-moral attitude, for morality was the citadel of the Bourgeoisie.[25]

Deriving from post-Kantian German idealism and imported to France in the early nineteenth century under several guises by various French *littérateurs*,[26] the cult of art-for-art's sake from its inception fostered an artistic and spiritual elite, a select group of sensitive individuals who withdrew from what they considered the stifling and deadening influence of bourgeois banality. For the disciples of art-for-art's sake, artistic creation and contemplation of the beautiful were the highest and noblest ends of life.

It is hardly to be wondered that a generation imbued with such lofty aesthetic ideals, a generation still under the powerful influence of Wagnerism and all it represented to the artistic community, should react to a composer of Satie's stripe with bewilderment and an uneasy

[24] "Cahiers d'un mammifère (extraits)," *L'Esprit nouveau*, No. 7 (April, 1921), 833; reprinted in Volta, *Erik Satie: Ecrits*, p. 28; and *idem*, *Erik Satie* (Paris, 1979), p. 103; and in English translation, in Wilkins, *The Writings of Erik Satie*, p. 68.

[25] *Art for Art's Sake* (Boston and New York, 1936), p. 61.

[26] See John Wilcox, "The Beginnings of *L'Art Pour L'Art*," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XI (1953), 360–77.

mixture of stupefaction and hostility. To such critics, the inheritors of The Great Tradition, the irreverent, clownish posture of a Satie was bound to be anathema, and if a few of them happened to be sympathetic toward him, they were forced inevitably into the role of apologist. In the context of the prevailing ideology of high culture, critics have had no choice but to consider the jester from Arcueil a "problem," a "strange case," and a "fascinating enigma."[27] Thus the Satie legend grew, and continues to grow, and the composer remains a source of puzzlement and exasperation for those who are utterly encapsulated by the gods of *haute culture.*

It is arguable that Satie was the first composer to realize fully avant-garde ideals, and, at a time when avant-gardism, like anarchism, remained on the fringe, there was no course open to critics but to see him as a freak, a dangerous influence, or a nonentity. Avant-gardism is inextricably linked to the concept of art-for-art's sake. Its aesthetic basis is traceable to certain libertarian political movements of the early Romantic period—most notably anarchism in its various forms—and the sociological factors which gave momentum to the realization of art-for-art's sake are to a great extent those which contributed to the formation of avant-garde ideals in the *fin de siècle.* Indeed, avant-gardism might be considered the inevitable consequence of the art-for-art's sake ideal, in its most virulent form its *reductio ad absurdum.*

In his impressive study of *The Theory of the Avant-Garde,*[28] Renato Poggioli isolates several concepts as being central to a theory of avant-gardism, chief among them activism, antagonism, nihilism, and agonism. Poggioli defines *activism* as agitation "for no other end than its own self, out of sheer joy of dynamism, a taste for action, a sportive enthusiasm, and the emotional fascination of adventure."[29] He demonstrates that this activism is usually motivated by a reaction against someone or something, and this spirit of outward hostility he calls *antagonism.* A third characteristic of the avant-garde, *nihilism,* is defined as "joy . . . in the inebriation of movement, . . . the act of beating down barriers, razing obstacles, destroying whatever stands in

[27] See, for example, W. Wright Roberts, "The Problem of Satie," *Music and Letters,* IV (1923), 313–20; Rollo H. Myers, "The Strange Case of Erik Satie," *The Musical Times,* LXXXVI (1945), 201–3; and Everett Helm, "Satie—Still a Fascinating Enigma," *Musical America,* LXXVIII (February, 1958), 27–28, 166.

[28] Trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, Mass., 1968).

[29] *Ibid.,* p. 25.

its way."[30] And finally, *agonism* results when the movement reaches the point of apocalypse, "where it no longer heeds the ruins and losses of others and ignores even its own catastrophe and perdition."[31] These principal governing concepts of the avant-garde reveal the presence of a strong destructive impulse, which seems implicit in the doctrine, and a belief in renewal and apocalypse through revolution.

The external manifestations of avant-gardistic activism, antagonism, nihilism, and agonism are many and varied. The avant-garde artist's antagonism toward his public results in nonconformism, eccentricity, and exhibitionism. In its extreme form the avant-garde transcends mere scorn of the audience by questioning its very right to exist. As a result of these attitudes, pronounced experimentalism becomes a norm of avant-garde art, and external formlessness, obscurity, inaccessibility, and a preoccupation with sensation are sought for their own sakes. There emerges with the avant-garde a tendency to explore art forms to their inner and outer limits, and ultimately there are to be no limits. When the exploratory drive is directed toward expansion of the inner limits of art, the result is a marked interest in the world of the unconscious, in dreams, the stream of consciousness, and the irrational, characteristics of such modern art movements as Surrealism and Dadaism. Conversely, the expansion of the outer limits of art ultimately leads to such nihilistic avant-garde practices as action painting, self-destructing sculpture, random verse, and the happening. Moreover, the antitraditional attitude of the avant-garde, its extreme rejection of the past, and its constant search for renewal explain in large part the cult's excessive exaltation of youth, its infantilism, and the concomitant development of the concept of art as play.

It has been well documented by Marxist aestheticians that the rapid industrialization and increased urbanization of nineteenth-century society produced a sense of spiritual discomfort in the artist, out of which grew a feeling of instability and isolation—a sociopolitical condition which has been called alienation. The artist, believing himself estranged from the mass culture of a bourgeois, industrialized society, responds by cultivating his own norms, thereby making a virtue of his seclusion from the mass. As a consequence, his audience, feeling itself insulted, threatened, or even disregarded, re-

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 26.
[31] *Ibid.*

sponds by ridiculing the artist and charging him with willful incomprehensibility. Poggioli sees this mutual antagonism as a primary cause of the avant-garde's penchant for grotesquerie, caricature, and parody:

> Sometimes the artist ends up by considering the state of alienation as a disgraceful condemnation, a moral ghetto, and seeking to react against that oppressive feeling finds no way out but the grotesque one of self-caricature and self-mockery. Conscious of the fact that bourgeois society considers him nothing but a charlatan, he voluntarily and ostentatiously assumes the role of comic actor.[32]

In the period following World War I, especially in France, the cult of the bizarre and the nonsensical, of parody and caricature, reached almost epidemic proportions.

In the last analysis, it would seem evident that the avant-garde, essentially a nihilist philosophy, is distinguished by a decided iconoclasm, an inclination toward the irrational and the farcical, a penchant for obscurity and hermeticism, and a general tendency toward abstraction and dehumanization.

Even a summary correlation of Poggioli's theories with the external events of Satie's career reveals the uncanny accuracy with which the French composer's artistic life mirrors the avant-garde ideal. Without belaboring the point, one can state categorically that none of his musical contemporaries so self-consciously practiced avant-gardism, and few so carefully arranged artistic suicide, as did *le bon maître d'Arcueil*. On several occasions after his "rediscovery" at the hands of Debussy and Ravel after 1910, the way was open to Satie to withdraw from the fray, had he been willing to accept the role of leader, prophet, indeed, pundit. But the idea of becoming even a *petit maître* was alien to the Satie aesthetic, even though the rejection of such a role meant his own certain destruction. Therefore the sincerity with which he sought official recognition at several stages of his career—notably his three notoriously unsuccessful attempts to gain admittance to the Institut de France in the 1890s—has to be questioned. Had fate, in all its quirkiness, provided Satie with official approbation when he first stormed the redoubtable academies, he most surely would have rejected it.

Satie was a born iconoclast. It is evident that from his earliest years he was incapable of (and probably uninterested in) mastering the traditional forms of musical expression. As a consequence he created

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 110.

his own psychological island, developing everything out of himself, even to the point of devising his own parodistic religion. There is an overwhelming tendency on the part of most critics to conclude that he was somehow forced into his role as musical humorist through his inability to write music in the accepted elitist sense of the word. It must be remembered, however, that Satie's art was not rooted in The Great Tradition, French or German, but rather in late nineteenth-century popular music. One can best arrive at an appreciation of his muse by tracing a line from Chabrier to Messager by way of a host of lesser luminaries of the caliber of Dynam-Victor Fumet, Ernest Fanelli, Charles de Sivry, and, of course, his father Alfred and his stepmother Eugénie Barnetche-Satie, both of whom were responsible for a considerable number of music-hall songs published in the 1880s and early 1890s. Among them these people kept the young composer continuously exposed during his formative years to the sordid glitter of the *café-concert*, with its uniquely Gallic vitality and wit. Satie, it might be said, discovered for modern music the philosophy of the cabaret and the music hall, the metaphysics of the circus.

The eccentric composer was never a part of, nor chose to become a part of, the musical Establishment. "Forced, nervous laughter takes place," Satie's American disciple John Cage has noted, "when someone is trying to impress somebody for purposes of getting somewhere."[33] Satie was singularly free of such self-interest and one must conclude with Cage that the Master of Arcueil was free to laugh or weep as he chose. "He knew in his loneliness and his courage," Cage wrote, "where his center was: in himself and in his nature of loving music."[34]

It can be argued that avant-gardism, with its overtones of antagonism, its defensiveness and self-consciousness, has become, for better or for worse, absorbed into the very fabric of contemporary artistic life. Indeed, Poggioli concludes, with almost alarming detachment, that "avant-gardism has now become the typical chronic condition of contemporary art."[35] In a curious reversal of established trends, the

[33] "Satie Controversy," *Musical America*, LXX (December 15, 1950), 12; reprinted in Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *John Cage* (New York, 1970), p. 89.

[34] *Ibid.*

[35] *The Theory of the Avant Garde*, p. 230. It is interesting to observe in this respect that Poggioli rejects the Anglo-American practice of italicizing the term "avant-garde." Many Anglo-American critics do this, he argues, out of a feeling that "avant-garde art was an international manifestation only in an indirect and mediated way." *Ibid.*, p. 8.

twentieth century has witnessed the ultimate triumph of the avant-garde and has seen the eclectic paradoxically become the iconoclast. Certainly in the West where the artist works in relative freedom from aesthetic dictates, it takes a great deal of courage to adhere to traditional values and to utilize established idioms and procedures. Avant-gardism, in becoming very nearly the norm in the West, has become an established way of life for increasing numbers of young composers, and so commonplace has this activity become since World War II that the term "avant-garde" has ceased to carry the more or less distinctive connotations it enjoyed in the *fin de siècle* and early twentieth century. If there is an avant-garde in the 1980s, it consists only "of those who feel sufficiently at ease with the past not to compete with it or duplicate it."[36]

Today's composer, supported in large part by the university or the state, is expected to create in an advanced idiom, to avoid duplicating the past, especially his own past, to continue the search—as befits the scholar—for new and startling forms of artistic expression. Indeed, there seems to be a direct correlation between the uniqueness of a composer's musical language and his stature in the eyes of his colleagues. Hermeticism has carried the day, and a highly original musical vocabulary has become the *sine qua non* for artistic success in academia. Curiously, we are witnessing the first generation of students to come to Chopin and Mozart through Stockhausen. Further, if this formula is reduced to purely economic terms, it will be seen that John Cage, in his seventies still the acknowledged leader of the American, if not the international, avant-garde, is one of the most successful composers of our time, even though the artistic merit of his "process" is open to endless debate. But despite the fact that a certain amount of controversy surrounds extreme experimentalists such as Cage and his disciples, the avant-garde, if it can be said to exist in any historical sense, enjoys today an unprecedented degree of respectability, a respectability which Satie as a progenitor of musical avant-gardism must now share. Acceptance is a condition of respectability, and as Satie becomes increasingly acceptable, indeed indispensable, as Cage would have it, the fascinating enigma comes into much clearer focus, then begins to fade. Although it would be presumptuous to declare that the mystery ultimately evaporates somewhere along the line of

[36] Dick Higgins, "Does Avant-Garde Mean Anything?" *Arts in Society*, VII (Spring Summer, 1970), 31.

thought proposed, perhaps one might at the very least be allowed the perilous syllogism that the Satie problem has tended to become absorbed into the tissues of the vanishing avant-garde.

To date, the overwhelming majority of Satie's critics have tended to assume, with characteristic gravity, that the composer's cryptic behavior was a mask for an underlying seriousness prevented from surfacing because of a monumentally deficient technical ability. Utilizing the canons of a predominantly Germanic critical tradition, these critics have seemed reluctant to concede that the composer was at heart a *fumiste* and a *fantaisiste*—in a venerable Gallic line, it might be noted, stretching from François Villon and Rabelais through Ronsard and La Fontaine to Alphonse Allais and Léon-Paul Fargue—and that this, contrary to making of him a nonentity, is of primary significance to the development of the avant-garde ideal and consequently to the evolution of twentieth-century aesthetics. "It is not surprising," Rosette Renshaw has perceptively noted, "that his enemies have striven to emphasize his idiosyncrasies which, according to them, outweigh his talent. If only Satie had erected a barrier between his personal life and his work as a musician, if he had been content to joke about everything except the sublime domain of music, 'serious' people would have forgiven his buffoonery."[37] But Satie's irreverent attitude toward art and life, his very refusal, in fact, to differentiate the one from the other, is the primary quality which defines his importance, and it is precisely those aspects of his work which can be identified as avant-gardistic which explain, to a great extent, his relevance and his ultimate historical significance. If Satie did in fact wear a mask, as many would claim, its function was not to conceal his own alleged inadequacy, but rather, in the words of Peter Dickinson, "to cloak a spiritual crisis which he sensed well before this century."[38]

[37] "Erik Satie (1866–1925)," *La Nouvelle Revue canadienne*, I (1951), 77.
[38] "Erik Satie (1866–1925)," *The Music Review*, XXVIII (1967), 146.

NOTICE

We regret that in the October 1982 issue we inadvertently omitted the copyright notice for two examples from Debussy's *Golliwog's Cake Walk* in Barbara B. Heyman's essay, *Stravinsky and Ragtime:*

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