

Erik Satie. By Mary E. Davis. (Critical Lives Series.) London: Reaktion Books, 2007. [176 p. ISBN-10 1861893213; ISBN-13 978-1-86189-321-5. \$16.95.] Music examples, illustrations, bibliography, discography.

Erik Satie has often been recognized more for succinct, jocular compositions that parody Debussian impressionism than for his seminal role in the development of French modernism. With the 1988 publication of Satie's correspondence by Ornella Volta (*Satie Seen Through his Letters*, translated by Michael Bullock [London: Boyars, 1989]), as well as later major studies by Alan M. Gillmor (*Erik Satie* [New York: Norton, 1992]), Robert Orledge (*Satie the Composer* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990]), and Steven Moore Whiting (*Satie the Bohemian* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998]), his status has grown considerably in recent years. Davis continues this trend with her entry in Reaktion Books' Critical Lives series, a group of concise volumes devoted to modernist icons including Foucault, Kafka, Picasso, and Frank Lloyd Wright. *Erik Satie* is the first to feature a composer.

Like Gillmor, Davis favors a chronological approach. The introductory chapter explores Satie's position as an antidote to the complexity of post-World War II composers such as Boulez. She also identifies ways that Satie frequently changed his public image to "project a variety of carefully cultivated public personas" (p. 12). The links between Satie's appearance and his artistic work is a common theme throughout the book, which is hardly surprising given that much of Davis's recent work has focused on the underappreciated relationship between French music and fashion.

The opening chapters focus on Satie's early years in Honfleur, his brief and tumultuous studies at the Paris Conservatoire, and his first compositions, including the *Trois sarabandes*. According to Davis, these works provided a "new conception of large-scale form" (p. 26) that could be construed as uniquely French. The *Sarabandes* also foreshadowed important directions in French music through their use of motivic cells as opposed to traditional thematic development. Such cells are clearly evident in

the music of Poulenc, Stravinsky, and others, and these connections merit closer scrutiny beyond Davis's brief comments.

The bulk of the second chapter is devoted to Satie's association with the Chat Noir, including ways that his clothing reflected a new role as Bohemian artist. It was during this period that he composed his most famous work, the *Trois gymnopédies*. Although these pieces have been amply covered in the Satie literature, Davis suggests origins beyond a simple evocation of ancient Greek athletic festivals. She notes that allusions to the title appear in several French reference sources of the period and that the music conflates Chat Noir cabaret music with styles typical of the French salon. These familiar miniatures thus emerge as potent examples of what Davis earlier calls the "mingling of high art and vernacular culture that was central to Satie's sound—and to the history of modernist art" (p. 8). The chapter concludes with a summary of Satie's complex relationship with Debussy, including his orchestral arrangement of the *Gymnopédies*. In addition to its position as a "milestone in Satie's career" (p. 35), the *Gymnopédies* represent Debussy's only orchestration of another composer's music.

Satie's relocation to Montmartre in the early 1890s corresponded with his growing awareness of diverse artistic and spiritual movements ranging from the Spanish *modernismo* movement to the short-lived Rosicrucian sect of Sâr Joséphin Péladan. Davis notes that Satie's association with Péladan emanated from meetings at Montmartre cabarets, and that after breaking with the sect he fully intended to create his own branch. She provides brief stylistic commentary on selected works from this period, including the enigmatic *Sonneries de la rose + Crois* and the *Prélude de la porte héroïque du ciel*. The composer's turbulent affair with artist Suzanne Valadon—his only known romantic relationship—is posed as the inspiration for the enigmatic piano work *Vexations*. Davis views *Vexations* as a symbol of Satie's failed relationship with Valadon, although the specific connections are not explored in detail.

The period from 1895 until 1910 is one of the most fascinating in Satie's career, as the composer explored diverse artistic approaches while "groping toward a new

compositional style" (p. 74). Satie's growing interest in popular song is evident through his associations with chansonnier Vincent Hyspa and singer Paulette Darty, for whom he composed the popular "Je te veux." Davis focuses especially on the "untidy group" (p. 61) of *Gnossiennes* and contends, contrary to other scholars, that the works were inspired more by French Gnosticism than Greek classicism. The *Gnossiennes* also represent the first time Satie included text alongside music, a crucial step that allowed him to "redraw the relationship between composer and interpreter" (p. 62). Davis reminds us that the musical sketches for a proposed play entitled *La mort de Monsieur Mouche* represents the first known usage of American ragtime in European music, predating Debussy's "Gollowig's Cakewalk" by almost ten years.

Satie's decision to enroll at the Schola Cantorum in 1905 is the focus of a very brief chapter (seven pages) entitled "Scholiste." His entrance into the Schola was primarily intended to "address gaps in his training" (p. 76). It also corresponded with a distinct change in appearance. Satie quickly abandoned his "Velvet Gentleman" attire in favor of a bohemian look complete with three-piece suit, bowler hat, and ubiquitous umbrella. At the same time, his political outlook evolved through attendance at meetings of the Radical-Socialist party and contributions to a progressive newspaper. Because Satie's fin-de-siècle political views mirror those of other French composers (such as Ravel), it is hoped that more work can be done beyond Davis's very brief introduction to the topic.

The period just prior to the 1917 premiere of *Parade* is the focus of the "Bourgeois Radical" chapter, which at twenty-four pages is the longest in the book. 1911 was especially significant. His success at a Société Musicale Indépendante concert sponsored by Ravel led to several major compositions between 1912 and 1916. Chief among these were a series of humorous piano works reflecting Satie's growing interest in graphic design and visual art. Davis notes Satie's "desire to create integrated art that transcended boundaries" (p. 93) in works such as *Embryons desséchés*. She further considers the relationship between the spoken text of *Embryons* and the poetry of Apollinaire. This is another topic

that merits closer examination, especially because of Apollinaire's influence on Satie's disciples, chiefly Poulenc.

The majority of the chapter is devoted to *Sports et divertissements*, a work representing Satie's "witty adaptation of the fashion magazine" (p. 95) and examined in depth in Davis's previous work (see *Classic Chic: Music, Fashion, and Modernism* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006] and "Modernity à la mode: Popular Culture and Avant-Gardism in Erik Satie's *Sports et Divertissements*," *Musical Quarterly* 83, no. 3 [Fall 1999]: 430–73). She writes that contrary to the accepted view, Satie was unfazed by the large commission offered by Lucien Vogel and in fact encouraged it. Davis includes several black and white illustrations to highlight differences between the 1914 and 1922 versions of Charles Martin's drawings. The changes are most apparent in "Le golf," where the 1922 version exhibits a stronger female presence, a reflection of the popularity of the sport among French women in the 1920s. Davis's research on *Sports* represents the most complete and informed to date, with the present book providing a concise summary.

Satie's brief association with the Ballets Russes began with *Parade*, a work largely dismissed by audiences and the French press. Surprisingly, consistent support for the work came from America, especially *Vanity Fair*, which featured Satie in several issues in 1921 and 1922. Satie's final years included his brief association with Dada, a definitive break with Cocteau, and the disastrous reception of *Mercur*e and *Relâche*. Davis correctly notes the artistic significance of the latter ballet, as it allowed him "to push the boundaries of the popular music/high-art mix to further extremes" (p. 142). I would add that *Relâche* also provided a crucial foundation for later avant-garde experiments, including the collaborative dance pieces of John Cage and Merce Cunningham.

Its brevity notwithstanding, *Erik Satie* is a lucid, elegantly written biography and a distinguished addition to the general literature on the composer. Although the inclusion of a relatively brief bibliography and discography in no way hinders the book, the lack of an index does. This exclusion is unfortunate, especially since Davis has synthesized a large amount of material into a

highly concentrated package. Without an index, the reader is forced to shuffle back and forth to locate key names or topics. The omission may in fact have been a decision of the publisher and not the author. And while the book's concision and avoidance of technical jargon may be an asset to general readers, scholars will likely wish for more substantive commentary, especially on musical issues. The copious drawings, paintings, and illustrations stand in contrast to the limited music examples, most of which are too small to be read accurately. Ultimately, the book's greatest asset is Davis's consistent focus on the complex social milieu of Satie's career and ways that this fertile environment shaped and defined his work. Her exploration of the symbiotic relationship between music, art, and fashion provides a solid foundation for the examination of similar issues with composers from France and beyond. *Erik Satie* is a welcome step in that direction.

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Olivier Messiaen: *Oiseaux exotiques*.

By Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone. (Landmarks in Music since 1950.) Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007. [xii, 128 p. ISBN-10: 0754656306; ISBN-13: 9780754656302. \$69.95.] Compact disc, music examples, appendix, bibliography, discography, index.

In their book *Olivier Messiaen: Oiseaux exotiques*, Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone examine a pivotal stage in Messiaen's compositional development when he turned to birdsong as a primary resource of musical material during the 1950s. Although Messiaen had incorporated stylized versions of birdsong in his music of the 1930s and 1940s, he rendered birdcalls with greater accuracy in subsequent decades. Messiaen became increasingly preoccupied with birdsong after World War II. He began a systematic study in the early 1950s, which was aided by consultations with the French ornithologist, Jacques Delamain. As Messiaen scholarship informs us, the composer sought refuge in the world of birdsong after the composition of the *Livre d'orgue* (1951–52), the culmination of his so-called

experimental period, because he was experiencing a creative dead end in his response to post-war European serialism. In other words, Messiaen overcame a compositional crisis by assimilating birdsong into his music, a turning point in his development as a composer. That is why *Oiseaux exotiques* (1955–56) is so significant in Messiaen's oeuvre, for it was the first work to integrate birdsong successfully into his musical language.

Olivier Messiaen: Oiseaux exotiques is an important study for three main reasons. First, it outlines the evolution of Messiaen's compositional ideas in *Oiseaux exotiques* by directly linking the transcriptions found in his birdsong *cahiers* (notebooks) to his musical language. Because of the opportunity given to them by Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen to examine Messiaen's *cahiers* in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Hill and Simeone shed new light on Messiaen's music during this pivotal stage of his career. Second, the book offers a unique perspective on *Oiseaux exotiques* through recorded material provided on an accompanying compact disc. The disc consists of audio examples of American birdsongs taken from an anthology of six 78 rpm records titled *American Bird Songs* (1942), recorded for Cornell University's Laboratory of Ornithology. Messiaen transcribed these birdsongs and used them while composing *Oiseaux exotiques*. The compact disc also includes examples of Peter Hill playing Messiaen's transcriptions on the piano, as well as a recording of the world premiere of *Oiseaux exotiques* at the Petit Théâtre Marigny, Paris on 10 March 1956, taken from the original Véga recording (Véga C30A65, Accord/Universal 476 9209). Third, in order to provide a historical and musical background to *Oiseaux exotiques*, the book considers the origins of the Domaine musical concerts spearheaded by Pierre Boulez, as well as Messiaen's *Réveil des oiseaux* (1953). In particular, it supplies hitherto unknown information about Messiaen's involvement with the Domaine musical, along with an examination of *Réveil des oiseaux* that reveals how it actually belongs to the period of experimentation exemplified by *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités* (1949) because of its rule-based aesthetic rather than to Messiaen's later bird style (pp. 27–28).