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MASTERPIECE

A Simply Superb Suite

Erik Satie's 'Gymnopédies,' all composed in 1888, have had an impact on the music of the 20th century and today that belies their modest scale

By Jordan Michael Smith

Feb. 26, 2021 2:48 pm ET



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Even amid the tornado of cultural experimentation that defined La Belle Epoque—those four fertile decades in France that preceded World War I—Erik Satie (1866-1925) was a singularly windy eccentric. He declared himself not a musician but a “phonometographer.” He was almost a parody of a bohemian, strolling Paris streets in his frock coat and hat, his beard unkempt and his hair long. Living alone in shabby conditions, working intermittently as a pianist in cafes in the early 1890s, collecting umbrellas, Satie had made good on his college teacher’s designation of him as “the laziest student at the Conservatoire.”



PHOTO: DAVID GOTHARD

Yet this notoriously idiosyncratic figure had already composed three short pieces that remain among the most popular, influential and lovely piano works produced in the 19th century. Their name is characteristically bizarre: the “Gymnopédies,” derived from the

Gymnopaedia—the festival where naked young men in ancient Sparta participated in war dancing. The title is deceptively complicated; the “Gymnopédies” are austere works.

Though all three pieces were composed in 1888, when he was still in his early 20s, Satie published the “Gymnopédies” separately over the next seven years. They were first performed separately at the Chat Noir in Montmartre, a cabaret where Satie became a pianist. The only available evidence of their reception comes from the newsletter of the Chat Noir: “We cannot recommend this essentially artistic work highly enough to the musical public,” it read. “It may rightly be considered as one of the most beautiful of the century that has witnessed the birth of this unfortunate gentleman.” Satie almost certainly wrote that notice himself.



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At the time he composed the “Gymnopédies,” French music was still huddling defensively in the enormous shadow of Wagner’s operas. The German Romantic had died five years earlier, but even from the grave he would influence the French music scene for the next 20 years or more. With its stripped-down plainness, Satie’s suite was as contrary to the German composer’s grandiose symphonies as it was possible to be.



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Satie had allies in his anti-Wagner campaign, including his good friends and collaborators Maurice Ravel and Claude Debussy, the latter of whom performed an orchestral version of the “Gymnopédies.” But while Ravel and Debussy are usually known as the first musical Impressionists, Satie’s work is too idiosyncratic for him to be associated with any movement. He once wrote in a newspaper: “There is no school of Satie. Satieism could never exist. I would oppose it.” (He had left his actual school, the Conservatoire, without a diploma after attending for seven years.)

The “Gymnopédies” are distinguished by their slow, melancholic moods that vary only slightly. Their themes are repetitive but also evolve subtly, with changes unfolding gradually and minutely. If the “Gymnopédies” sound simple, it isn’t because they’re

simple-minded. Their elementary nature is deliberately chosen, a way to evoke deep feeling through spare notes. That the chord changes are so soft and basic while still being melodic is what makes the “Gymnopédies” timeless and accessible. This is music that sounds pure and almost natural, the musical equivalent of snow-covered mountains. It is not surprising that Satie said that Gustave Flaubert’s writings inspired his suite, for both it and the literary realist’s best novels capture complex emotion through superficially uncomplicated forms.

After being essentially forgotten for more than 50 years, the “Gymnopédies” had an unlikely resurrection in the second half of the 20th century. The pieces had an enormous impact on the avant-garde American musician John Cage, who was inspired by the Parisian’s experimentation and quiet use of space. After Cage helped revive interest in Satie, other modern composers such as Philip Glass and Terry Riley found inspiration in him.

After the Minimalists brought the works to attention, the “Gymnopédies” influenced much late 20th-century and early 21st-century electronic music, from Brian Eno’s 1970s works to the dance-floor soundscapes of the Orb and the minimalist techno of the Field.

The phrase Mr. Eno used to describe his atmospheric instrumentals—“ambient music”—updates the term that Satie used to describe some of his own: “furniture music.” Satie wanted it to be unobtrusive, played in the background. The “Gymnopédies” have appeared repeatedly in films and on compilation albums for relaxed or “chill-out” music. In 2019 “Vexations,” a novel by Caitlin Horrocks that imagined Satie as a mentally ill genius, was well-received, a sign that he’s penetrated popular culture.

Satie’s popularity is a remarkable revival. In “The Banquet Years,” his 1955 study of the origins of the avant-garde in France, literary scholar Roger Shattuck observed that “Satie is today a musician more heard of than heard.” Now the reverse is true.

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Appeared in the February 27, 2021, print edition.

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