
H-France Review Vol. 16 (September 2016), No. 210

Caroline Potter. *Erik Satie: A Parisian Composer and His World*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2016. xxxiv + 269 pp. Illustrations, map, music, bibliography, and index. \$50.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-7832-7083-5.

Review by Richard Langham Smith, Royal College of Music.

Is it better to understand the kitchen secrets of how Satie ruled out his manuscript paper and carefully planned his pieces, or to speculate on why he had seven “grey velvet suits,” detailing that they were corduroy, not velvet, and a dun color? The answer is that we need both context and musical analysis to understand this man, dismissed by some because he couldn’t be fitted into the teleological trajectory of development with which music historians and some composers and interpreters—*pace* Boulez—were at one time so obsessed. Potter addresses the anecdotes seriously, attempting to understand their motivation rather than add them to the pile of jokes.

Until twenty years ago, all we had on Satie were journalistic books, mostly slight and in French, underpinned by the view that he was a bit of a joker, and that a nicely readable book could be fashioned out of the often hilarious anecdotes about many aspects of his life and works. The chief writers who have probed deeper and corrected this view have mainly been Anglophone: Alan Gillmor, Robert Orledge, and Steven Moore Whiting. Add to this list Deborah Menaker Rothschild’s excellent single-work study on what might be considered Satie’s most successful collaboration: *Parade*.

Singled out from these are the two pinnacles who have viewed Satie from opposite perspectives, Orledge and Whiting, respectively dealing with *Satie the Composer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) in Orledge’s case and *Satie the Bohemian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) in Whiting’s. Potter’s book is not situated between these but rather straddles them, always driven by the music, but probing the collaborations, the motivations of the purely instrumental music, and the writings to a depth unachieved in previous studies. In respect to Whiting (who, together with Orledge and the stalwart documenter of Satie, Ornella Volta, are the triumvirate of essential Satieists), the importance of Potter’s book lies in its deep probing of the many innovative genres and spectacular collaborations (meaning dealing with spectacles). There is a particular emphasis on mechanical reproductive systems: the old Paris of the itinerant organ-grinders and the newly evolving phonograph that, for Potter, becomes an essential ingredient of the self-consciously modernist world promoted by his circle. Aptly, the subtitle of the book states that he is a “Parisian composer,” while many of his contemporaries, although living in Paris, were decidedly not, always escaping to the seaside, Auvergne, or to the artifices of the World’s Fair. Only in his early days did Satie seem to escape to Crete (the *Gnossiennes*) or to young boys athletically exercising themselves to memorably modal slow waltzes. Although in later spectacles (for example *Socrate*), the “New Spirit” of *la musique dépouillée*, nicely translated by Potter as “stripped-down” music (p. 91), re-interprets the romanticized mythology of classical antiquity in a starker, and telling form.

Potter lays one of her over-arching preoccupations on the table in the first chapter: “Satie in Montmartre” to which the suffix is “Mechanical Music in the Belle Époque.” We are led through a detailed study of

street music in Paris, the various ways in which the barrel organ provided an accompaniment for its street spectacles, and a study of the personalities connected with the composer at the various times of his life: this becomes a key methodology in the book. In this first case, the extraordinary pseudonym of Narcisse Lebeau, a friend of Satie at this time, is interrogated, and the efforts to which the composer went to publicize his early *Gymnopédies* are charted with much relevant detail, giving insight into his first years of relative obscurity.

Detail and depth are overall the great strengths of this study where, despite Potter's borrowings from Whiting, the emphasis is not on Satie the Bohemian, but Satie the serious composer, surrounding himself with humor and anecdote, but actually at the center of innovative, if sometimes failed, collaborations. Mechanical music continues to underline chapter two, which fundamentally deals with the Futurist impact on Paris, not something Satie in any way signed up to, but perhaps where he left a mark. Figures connected with Futurism are probed, and here a largely unknown piece, *Les Pantins dansent* comes under the microscope—as do several others that are given significant attention. An examination of Satie's dealings with Varèse is added to this, as are studies of his interaction with Apollinaire and Cocteau, supported by the manifestos of Futurism and their Parisian commentators.

The particularly rich third chapter deals briefly with Satie's performance instructions—curious to say the least!—and more comprehensively with his “texted piano works” (p. xiv), meaning such pieces as *Sports et divertissements* where the author's tentacles explore not only text and music, but also the all-important illustrations. Some fascinating and sometimes contradictory accounts by early commentators (for example, Calvocoressi, Roland Manuel, Auric, Léon Guichard, and Jankélévitch) continue a useful underpinning of the narrative with perceptive reception from the interwar years. Potter concludes this chapter with a comprehensive table of topics in the textured works: “Body parts and bodily functions”; “Social life and human behaviour”; “The natural world,” etc. (p. 110), all broken down into sub-sections and giving a hint of the rhyme and reason behind what is too often dismissed under the umbrella-term “humorous.” In the case of *Celle qui parle trop*, a further methodology is unveiled as copious sketches are compared to the eventual published version.

A further chapter muses on the nature of repetition in Satie's aesthetic and naturally deals with *Vexations* and the *Furniture Music*. No other writings I have read dig as deep, and Satie's later but little-known collaboration *Ruffian toujours, truand jamais* is dwelt upon in considerable detail, inevitably probing his relationship with the Jewish-turned-Catholic poet Max Jacob with whom Poulenc also collaborated. An interesting theoretical conclusion ties together the threads of this section of the book, which never deteriorates into an oxtail of program notes, but seeks out continuing enthusiasms, preoccupations, and collaborations.

The next chapter on “Science, Society and Politics” might be said to focus on “Modern Life.” Satie's relationship with his brother is touched upon as are the commonality of approaches between him and his compatriot from Honfleur, the Montmartre humorist, Alphonse Allais. Other literary figures discussed are Charles de Sivry and Charles Cros.

Chapter six examines Satie's “provocation” and Dadaism (p. 216), focusing on the figures with whom he interacted, or who commented on him as being one of their brethren: Tzara, Picabia, Cocteau, René Clair, Duchamp, and Max Breton among others. As the reader reaches his final works, one of the most striking qualities of the study is the sense of progression through a welter of external influences and collaborative projects. The book ends with a focus on the circumstances of his death and an estimation of the composer's musical legacy.

Situating the study among those of her important predecessors, it can unequivocally be asserted that Potter's approach is entirely fresh. Although it draws upon Orledge and Whiting in particular, on the whole, this is done only where it quite rightly attributes an interpretation to their previous researches. It

does not repeat Orledge's unparalleled probing of Satie's compositional methods that he revealed were far more organized than previous writers had assumed. Nor does it follow Whiting's approach, which is perhaps too ready to dismiss Satie's work as humoristic and to leave it at that. Potter's admirable approach is to expose revealing features of context and collaboration, and to get to the heart of his many literary associates.

Just occasionally, where there is material to be weighed up, the reader may wish that the author had given her own perspective, rather than defaulting into secondary opinions of others—particularly Orledge and Whiting—of which, to my mind, there are rather too many. In an otherwise clearly focused and highly informative account of the *bruitisme* of *Parade*, for example, the question of whether Satie approved of the introduction of typewriters, sirens, and *bouteillophones* has to be left an unanswerable question. The focus isn't helped by the introduction of a non-expert secondary source by an English biographer of Picasso, with which Potter subsequently disagrees.

On the other hand, many will be illuminated by her precision on what a *bouteillophone* really is, and her location of a highly developed example of one in the museum of the celebrated Beaujolais producer Georges Duboeuf on the outskirts of Lyon. This might catalyze some readers to make the journey to their "Hameau de vin." Indexing is impeccable and the book is appealingly produced and enhanced by a personalia and chronology. As a springboard for further research the book is rendered especially useful by its inclusion, in footnotes, of all original French quotations translated in the text.

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ISSN 1553-9172