

## Serious Immobilities: On the Centenary of Erik Satie's *Vexations*

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*"To play this motif 840 times in succession, it would be advisable to prepare oneself beforehand, in the deepest silence, by serious immobilities."*

This enigmatic instruction, on a single page of music bearing the title *Vexations*, has turned the strange piano piece by celebrated French composer Erik Satie (1866-1925) into a legend in the annals of experimental music.

The work emerged from obscurity in 1949 when Henri Sauguet, a friend of Satie in his last years, drew it to the attention of John Cage. At first Cage found it interesting as a concept but dismissed the possibility of a performance: "True, one could not endure a performance of *Vexations*... but why give it a thought?"<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, in September 1963 Cage organised the first 'complete' performance of *Vexations* at The Pocket Theatre, New York. Since that occasion, *Vexations* has been performed numerous times by individuals and groups.

The repetitive nature of the piece raises fundamental aesthetic questions, in particular about the function of boredom in art. Boredom was "mysterious and profound" for Satie.<sup>2</sup> But it was also an effective way of mystifying and irritating the bourgeoisie, as Satie suggests in *Sports et divertissements* (1914), which opens with a Chorale into which "I have put all I know about Boredom. I dedicate it to those who don't like me." There are many interpretations of *Vexations*, ranging from the suggestion that it "may be one of Satie's grandest leg-pulls"<sup>3</sup>, to Gavin Bryars' description of it as a poor man's *Ring of the Nibelung* ("a sort of 'Ring des Nibelungen des pauvres'").<sup>4</sup>

*Vexations* was written sometime between January and June 1893, during an eventful period in Erik Satie's life. He was deeply involved in esoteric religion, first with the Rosicrucian sect led by the eccentric self-proclaimed spiritual leader, Sâr ('Priest-King') Péladan, and then with his own one person cult, 'The Metropolitan Church of Art of Jesus, Leader', which he presided over from his 'abbey' - a one-roomed apartment in the Rue Cortot - issuing edicts excommunicating those who offended him, such as music critics. At the time he composed *Vexations*, Satie was engaged in a passionate but difficult affair with the painter Suzanne Valadon - the only documented love affair of his life. It is hard to say whether the affair itself or the ending of it caused Satie greater pain. In a letter to his brother (28 June 1893) he wrote: "I shall have great difficulty in regaining possession of myself, loving this little

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<sup>1</sup> John Cage, *Silence* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), p.78.

<sup>2</sup> According to the painter Santiago Rusiñol, in Ornella Volta, *Erik Satie à Montmartre*, (Paris, Musée de Montmartre, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> Alan M. Gillmor, *Erik Satie* (New York, W.W. Norton & Co., 1988), p.103.

<sup>4</sup> Gavin Bryars, 'Vexations' and its Performers (*Contact: A Journal of contemporary Music*, no.26, Spring 1983), p.12.

person as I have loved her... She was able to take all of me. Time will do what at this moment I cannot do."<sup>5</sup>

The music which Satie wrote during his 'Rosicrucian period' is quasi-liturgical; single-line melodies reminiscent of plainsong alternate with passages of block chords (perhaps suggested by Medieval *organum*). The harmonic progressions of the 'Rosicrucian' pieces have nothing to do with functional harmony: they consist of 'illogical' progressions which, as Satie's surviving note-books show, were the outcome of elaborately worked-out systems. "I am obliged to perform tours-de-force just to write a single bar," he declared.<sup>6</sup> Satie's carefully crafted 'illogicality' removes all association, expressive or otherwise, from harmonies which, taken individually, are mostly commonplace: familiar chords seem strangely unfamiliar. Stripped of conventional meaning by the context, a series of simple triads becomes a vehicle for spiritual revelation.

Important to the concept of *Vexations* is the relationship between the repetitive form of the piece and the forgettable nature of its material. *Vexations* lingers in the memory as a vague impression, the details effaced as soon as heard: it is difficult to imagine anyone walking home whistling the 'tune' after a performance. Perhaps it is only because the music is almost literally self-effacing that extended repetition becomes tolerable. Above all, it must not be 'interesting'; it must not draw attention to itself as music, otherwise the listener - or performer - might attempt to discover meaning, expression, thematic development or any of the other qualities which the intellect is accustomed to seek in music.

*Vexations* consists of a bass 'theme' of eighteen notes occupying thirteen crotchet beats (including a final quaver rest), and two harmonisations. Eleven of the twelve notes of the chromatic scale are included in the 'theme' (G sharp is omitted), with certain notes (C, C sharp, D sharp, E, G flat and B natural/C flat) repeated. This 'theme' is played first; it is then harmonised by the addition of two voices in the right hand, forming a succession of three part chords comprising mainly 6/3 (first inversion) diminished triads, with the exception of an augmented triad and an augmented sixth chord. G sharp is included in the harmonisation, completing the chromatic set - an example, it has been suggested, of an "early attempt at serialism".<sup>7</sup> The bass 'theme' is then repeated, followed by another harmonisation, identical to the first except that the relative positions of the upper two voices are inverted.

The notation is complicated, however, by Satie's deliberate use of enharmonic equivalents. Even the relatively simple bass line (which may be analysed in various ways as a succession of major and minor tonalities) is obscured by the use of weird intervals such as the doubly augmented second, augmented third, doubly augmented fourth, and augmented fifth. The harmonised version is even more confusing, with bizarre melodic successions in the upper voices: B sharp - B flat - B

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<sup>5</sup> Ornella Volta, *Satie seen through his letters* (London, Marion Boyars, 1989), p.46.

<sup>6</sup> Contamine de Latour: *Erik Satie intime*, (Comoedia, August 1925).

<sup>7</sup> Robert Orledge, *Satie the Composer* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.144.

natural, or B sharp - B double flat - A sharp. The convention that sharpened tones rise and flattened tones fall is frequently ignored: Satie's accidentals more often than not do the opposite. The right hand chord E flat-B double flat reappears two beats later as D sharp-A natural; and so on. Each chord is perfectly comprehensible in relationship to its bass note and easily read when considered by itself (Satie does not mix sharps and flats within a chord, and even the chords containing double flats would be relatively familiar to a pianist who has played later 19th century piano music.) The strange appearance arises from the notation of the theme itself, which seems to have been devised to make any tonal implications of the theme as obscure as possible to the eye. The repetition of B natural as C flat appears to part of this strategy.

Robert Orledge<sup>8</sup> has demonstrated the systematic elements of the notation and suggests that 'there is logic and indeed a highly organized compositional system behind the 'vexations' caused by Satie's weird chromaticism' (although there are inconsistencies that are difficult to account for.) But the fact remains that *Vexations* is as puzzling to the eye as it is to the ear. This accounts for the phenomenon, noted by Gavin Bryars, that performers - even after repeating the piece many times - have difficulty remembering it and must maintain intense concentration to avoid errors. The deliberate notational obfuscation compels the performer to confront the piece anew with each repetition. experience is of little avail; Satie discounted the value of experience - "a form of paralysis", as he called it many years later.<sup>9</sup> The artist must begin anew with each new work, "from zero" as Cage would say, which is exactly what the pianist must do when commencing each repetition of *Vexations*. The notation shrouds the music in mystery, giving it the appearance of a musical 'secret doctrine', a magic spell, an alchemical formula, or a message in code, quite literally esoteric as it is only accessible to the select few who are able to find their way through the maze of accidentals - the maze being a familiar ancient and Medieval metaphor for a spiritual journey with its attendant trials and 'vexations'.<sup>10</sup> The intention appears to be the removal of the music as far as possible from the commonplace by the utter strangeness of its appearance.

At the same time, the notation is a musical 'sight gag'; one can imagine Satie's mischievous delight when contemplating the vexation which his baffling notation would cause to a would-be performer. Satie revives the old notion of 'eye music', which might be defined as a notational pun - a private communication between composer and performer from which the audience is excluded. In a similar spirit, Satie prohibited the reading aloud of the humorous texts in his later piano pieces. But in the case of *Vexations*, however, it is possible that the message was for himself alone. One is reminded of the strange letter written by Satie in obsessively meticulous archaic calligraphy, addressed, stamped and duly posted to himself,

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Orledge, Understanding Satie's 'Vexations', Music and Letters, Vol 79, No 3, August 1998, pp 386-395.

<sup>9</sup> Erik Satie, *Ecrits*, ed.Ornella Volta (3rd. Edition, Paris, Editions Champs Libre, 1990), 173.

<sup>10</sup> *Vexationes* is the subtitle of *Coelum philosophorum* by Paracelsus, an esoteric text with which Satie may have been familiar (first noted by Andrew Hugill; see Orledge, Understanding Satie's 'Vexations', p. 391-2)

which was found among Satie's papers after his death. It reads: "Tomorrow will be the day, milord. Yours humbly."

Satie's music, his notation and his performance instructions - not just in *Vexations*, but throughout his work - are designed to engage the performer's mental processes in an entirely different way from that assumed by the 19th century cult of the performer as interpreter - a cult which survives to the present day. 'Expression' is the primary interest of this cult: expression of the composer's ideas or feelings mediated through the personality of the performer. Satie is not interested in music for the purpose of 'expression' but rather for its psychological effect on both performer and audience. *Vexations* is structured and notated to facilitate the cultivation and maintenance a mental state which Satie calls 'serious immobility'.

This is the view of John Cage, who observed that "the textual remarks in connection with the *Vexations* are not humorous; they are in the spirit of Zen Buddhism."<sup>11</sup> *Vexations* could be thought of as a musical *koan* to be meditated upon; or a *mantra* to be repeated. the performance instructions, apart from their function of placing the performer in the right frame of mind, also acknowledge, for the first time in musical history, the existence of the silence which temporally precedes every musical performance and ontologically precedes the act of composition. But Satie never went as far as his friend and fellow native of Honfleur, the humorist Alphonse Allais, who not only produced a completely silent *Funeral march for a deaf man*, but also painted the first all-white canvas, entitled 'Anaemic girls going to their first communion in a snow storm'.

With his celebrated silent piece 4'33" nearly sixty years later, John Cage wrote a 'first movement' for *Vexations*, a composed realisation of Satie's "deepest silence" and "serious immobility". (If *Vexations* is in some sense a prayer, it may be worth noting that Cage's original title for the piece which became 4'33" was Silent Prayer.) Silence - which in the time-dependent art of music is equivalent to 'empty' duration - is the blank surface on which Satie painted the design of *Vexations*. Satie calculated the dimensions of his musical tabula rasa precisely; performed at a tempo of 52 crotchet beats per minute, *Vexations* lasts exactly 1 minute, with 840 (14 x 60) repetitions yielding a total duration of precisely 14 hours. Alternatively, it could be performed at half that tempo - at 52 quavers per minute - in which case it would last 28 hours. Daunting though that prospect might seem, it is undeniable that some of the psychological effects of *Vexations* - the obliteration of memory, the destruction of musical syntax - are intensified by a very slow tempo. Given Satie's preoccupations at the time, there may be some cabbalistic significance in the choice of numbers, but the precise nature of that significance can only be guessed at.

The static, undramatic nature of *Vexations*, reinforced by repetition, gives it the character of a 'sound object' (*objet sonore*), while the 'flatness' of the music suggests a two-dimensional surface. The immobility which the performer is advised to adopt is the immobility of the music itself, which becomes an 'immobile' sound object to be

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<sup>11</sup> John Cage, Roger Shattuck, and Alan Gillmor, Erik Satie: a conversation (Contact: A Journal of contemporary Music, no.25, Autumn 1982), p.21.

'viewed' by the listener. One is reminded of mystical experience of the Zen masters who describe "hearing with the eye", and "seeing with the ear." The pallid harmonic colour of *Vexations*, the absence of strong contrast and the large-scale repetitive structure based on the small-scale alternation of similar elements, suggest an analogy with the "pale and hieratic" frescoes of the Middle Ages or antiquity which Satie so admired. But the absence of thematic material - which is a function of memory, since thematic material must be memorable - leaves *Vexations* as a 'ground' with no 'figures'. The performer and the audience become the figures; the 'dramatic action' is the transformation of consciousness effected by the music.

*Vexations* is, in a number of ways, a direct antecedent of Satie's later pieces of *Furniture Music* (*musique d'ameublement*), which consist of short phrases - some a mere four bars - repeated an unspecified number of times, acting as articles of sonic decor. In order to fulfil its function, *Furniture Music* must not attract undue attention to itself and must offer no encouragement to those who might attempt to listen to it. It provides musical 'objects' for use, not 'works' for interpretation. Among the titles are *Carrelage phonique* ('Acoustic Floor Tiling') and *Tapisserie en fer forgé* ('Wrought-iron Tapestry'), both suggesting two-dimensional surfaces.

Satie's thoughts were already moving in the direction of *Furniture Music* at the time of *Vexations*. In the bizarre music drama *uspu*d [1892] (the libretto of which, published at Satie's expense, is apparently the first piece of typography printed entirely in the lower case), the music functions as scenery, impassively continuing on its course undisturbed by cataclysmic events on stage. In relation to another stage work of the same era, *Le fils des étoiles* [1891], Satie is reported to have declared: "We should see to it that the orchestra does not grimace when the characters enter on the stage. Look here: do the trees and scenery grimace? We should make a musical scenery, create a musical climate where personages move and speak - not in couplets, not in leit-motifs: but by the use of a certain atmosphere of Puvis de Chavannes."<sup>12</sup> The avowed purpose of the music for *Le fils des étoiles*, according to the programme, is to "prepare the spectator psychologically (*nerveusement*) for the scene which he is going to contemplate." The recurrence of motifs - the principle upon which the entire edifice of Wagnerian music drama is erected - is stripped of all dramatic function. *Vexations* impoverishes the sonic scenery still further, reducing it to a single 'motif'. Satie's ostensibly most religious works are therefore the precursors of his most sacrilegious discovery: *Furniture Music*, the ultimate blasphemy against the religion of Art. In the evolution from *Vexations* to *Furniture Music*, Satie moved directly from the Middle Ages to the era of mass production, ignoring all of musical history from the Renaissance on. *Furniture Music* is *Vexations* industrialised.

There is also a psycho-biographical reading of *Vexations*, in which Satie, tormented by conflicting desires of the spirit and the flesh, and deeply disturbed by the disastrous course of his relationship with Suzanne Valadon, exorcises his vexation in

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<sup>12</sup> Jean Cocteau, *Fragments d'une conférence sur Eric Satie* (1920), as translated by Leigh Henry in *Fanfare*, 1/2 (15 October 1921), 23. Puvis de Chavannes was a painter strongly influenced by Medieval frescoes.

music. Imagine Satie sitting at the piano in his tiny apartment (cupboard would be closer the truth) in the Rue Cortot playing *Vexations* hour after hour, seeking spiritual solace - a kind of musical psychotherapy, perhaps. This interpretation is supported by the closely related *Danses gothiques*, which Satie describes as a kind of religious office "for the the greater calm and tranquillity of my soul", written, as the first dance states, "in a time of great suffering."

But laughter may be the most effective psychotherapy of all. Humour can be construed in the title which, by means of letter substitution, transforms the classical theme and variations form into a 'theme and vexations'.<sup>13</sup> And, notwithstanding Cage, the performance instructions themselves conceivably have an ironic tone. It is typical of Satie that the very words which make *Vexations* one of his most radical works also cast doubt on the seriousness of the piece. One cannot parody *Vexations*: it is so bizarre that it is already a parody of itself. Parody is characteristic of Satie's work, and self-parody in particular. It goes beyond a self-mocking expression of Satie's characteristic modesty and is elevated to an artistic method. Satie's humour has been variously interpreted as a smoke-screen for his own technical inadequacies, a Dadaist anti-Art gesture, the practical jokery of an incorrigible *fumiste*, or a means of maintaining a stance of ironic detachment from the spiritual crises of his time.<sup>14</sup> There may be some truth in all of these, but they only partial explanations of an art in which sense and nonsense, seriousness and humour, mystery and mystification co-exist. Perhaps Satie sought to transcend such dualities, going 'beyond sense and nonsense' as Nietzsche and the Zen masters sought to go 'beyond good and evil.'

Whatever *Vexations* may have meant to Satie, its meaning is now inseparable from the significance it has acquired through the efforts of John Cage, whose devotion to Satie's music began in the late 1940s and continued to the end of his life. From 6pm on 9 September 1963, to 12.40 pm the next day, Cage staged the first complete performance of *Vexations*, using a team of ten pianists (with two reserves) working in shifts, playing all 840 repetitions without a break. It lasted 18 hours 40 minutes, and was covered by eight critics from the New York Times, working in two-hour relays.

The first Australian performance, organised by David Ahern, took place in Watters Gallery, Darlinghurst, Sydney, on 21-2 February 1970. The performance lasted 22 hours; The pianist was Peter Evans, who attempted the performance solo. After 16 hours, having reached repetition 595, he stopped abruptly, and left the room. He wrote: "I would not play the piece again. I felt each repetition slowly wearing my mind away. I had to stop. ...People who play it do so at their own great peril." Apparently his mind became full of "evil thoughts, [and] animals and "things" started peering out of the score at him." However all was not lost; another pianist, Linda Wilson, came forward and completed the performance, reporting no ill effects.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> see Bryars, op.cit., p.13.

<sup>14</sup> Anne Rey, Erik Satie (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1974), p.80 ff.

<sup>15</sup> Bryars, op.cit., pp.15-16.

The act of performing or listening to a complete performance of *Vexations* cannot be compared to any other musical experience. As Cage observed, "the experience over the 18 hours and 40 minutes of those repetitions was very different from the thought of them or the realisation that they were going to happen. For them to actually happen, to actually live through it, was a different thing. What happened was that we were very tired, naturally, after that length of time and I drove back to the country... I slept an unusually long period of time, and when I woke up, I felt different than I had ever felt before. And furthermore the environment that I looked out upon looked unfamiliar even though I had been living there. In other words, I had changed and the world had changed... It wasn't an experience I alone had, but other people who had been in it wrote to me or called me up and said that they had had the same experience."<sup>16</sup>

From the audience point of view, Dick Higgins observed, "the music first becomes so familiar that it seems extremely offensive and objectionable. But after that the mind slowly becomes incapable of taking further offence, and a very strange euphoric acceptance and enjoyment begin to set in... Is it boring? Only at first. After a while the euphoria... begins to intensify. By the time the piece is over, the silence is absolutely numbing, so much of an environment has the piece become."<sup>17</sup> In Cage's famous aphorism, "In Zen they say: If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, try it for eight, sixteen, thirty-two, and so on. Eventually one discovers that it's not boring at all but very interesting."<sup>18</sup> In a poetic sense, *Vexations* never finishes - the 840 repetitions are themselves but an instant in the eternal present in which the music exists like some platonic form, obliterating memory, eluding analysis. In the words of an ancient Indian saying, "The music continues; it is we who walk away."

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<sup>16</sup> Cage, Shattuck, and Gillmor, op.cit., p.24.

<sup>17</sup> Dick Higgins, *Boredom and Danger* (Source, vol.3, no.1, January 1969).

<sup>18</sup> Cage, *Silence*, p.93.