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SATIE

Piano Works Vol. 4

Trois Morceaux en Forme de Poire • Jack-in-the-Box
La Belle Excentrique • Le Poisson Rêveur

Klára Körmendi • Gábor Eckhardt, Piano



Erik Satie (1866 - 1925)

Piano Works (Complete) Vol. 4

The French composer Erik Satie earned himself a contemporary reputation as an eccentric. Stravinsky later described him as the oddest person he had ever known and at the same time the most rare and constantly witty. His musical innovations proved immensely influential on his nearer contemporaries Debussy and Ravel and on a younger generation of composers and artists in the years after the war of 1914.

Satie was born in 1866 at Honfleur, on the coast of Normandy. His father was at the time a ship's broker, while his mother was of Scottish origin. Something of his later eccentricity seems to have been acquired from his paternal uncle, Adrien Satie, known in Honfleur as a character. The family moved to Paris, but on the death of Satie's mother in 1872 he was sent back to Honfleur to the house of his grandparents. Six years later he returned to Paris, where in 1879 he entered the Conservatoire. There he proved an undistinguished and unsatisfactory pupil, lingering on, according to one friend, in order to avoid the obligatory five years of military service. His status as a student allowed him a period of one year in the 33rd Infantry, cut short by a severe attack of bronchitis that he had deliberately courted.

Satie's few months of soldiering were followed by the first publications of his music, two piano pieces, and then a set of five songs, settings of poems by his friend Contamine de Latour, published by his father, who now had a stationer's shop and small publishing business. Inspired by his reading, in the early 1890s Satie came for a time under the influence of the extraordinary Joséphin Péladan, self-styled Sâr Merodack of the Rose + Croix, an eccentric exponent of Rosicrucianism with whom he had broken by 1892. Eclectic medieval preoccupations led him to establish his own mock religion, the Metropolitan Church of the Art of Jesus the Conductor. Of this he described himself fancifully as Parcier et Maître de Chapelle, the first title sheer invention, issuing his publication *Le cartulaire*, in which critical enemies were attacked in appropriate style. At the same time, paradoxically, he was involved with Rudolf Salis and his bohemian cabaret, the Chat Noir. The same years brought contact with Debussy, with whom he remained on good terms in the years that followed, in spite of the latter's tendency to patronise him.

In 1905, after a period in which he had been compelled to earn his living as a café pianist and a composer of appropriate music, Satie enrolled as a student at the Schola cantorum, where his teachers included Vincent d'Indy and Roussel. Here he attempted to make up for his technical deficiencies as a composer by a concentration on traditional counterpoint. He completed his studies in 1908, but only began to win some success through the agency of Ravel, who in 1911 performed the three *Sarabandes* that Satie had written in 1887, establishing the originality of Satie's early work. The following years brought his compositions before a wider public, but it was through the advocacy of Jean Cocteau that Satie's fame was more firmly established, particularly with collaboration in the Diaghilev ballet *Parade*, with choreography by Massine and décor by Picasso. The scandal of the first performance, in May 1917, made Satie a hero to a younger group of composers, to be known as Les Six. In 1923, under the inspiration of Darius Milhaud, his collaborator in *musique d'ameublement*, furniture music, that was not supposed to be listened to, he became the centre of another group of younger composers, the Ecole d'Arceuil, its name derived from the poor and relatively remote district of Paris where Satie lived a life of the utmost simplicity, his room furnished with a chair, a table and a hammock, the last heated in winter by bottles filled with hot water placed below and looking, according to Stravinsky, like some strange kind of marimba. He died on 1st July 1925, after an illness of some six months.

Satie's *Le Piccadilly*, described as a march, belongs to the group of works intended for the music-hall. Like *La Diva de l'Empire*, with its allusion to London's Leicester Square, described as an American intermezzo, an arrangement of a café-concert song, it falls among the works Satie himself described as *rudes saloperies*. The sketch *The Dreamy Fish*, written in 1901, marked a new stage in the composer's work and was the result of much revision, as Satie's editor Robert Caby, who prepared the solo piano version, informs us.

Satie's *comédie lyrique*, *Le piège de Méduse* (The Trap of Medusa), was written in 1913 but not staged until 1921, when it was mounted by Pierre Bertin at the Théâtre Michel, an anticipation of Dadaism and the more recent theatre of the absurd. The characters in the piece include Jonas, a dancing monkey, stuffed by a master hand, Baron Méduse and his *filles de lait* Frisette and manservant Polycarpe, with Frisette's

lover Astolfo. The seven piano pieces derived from the score start with a *Quadrille* for the stuffed monkey Jonas, who provides an interlude between the scenes. The monkey dances tenderly and then seems to go mad: Do not leave your shadow: behave, please: a monkey is watching you. The second dance is a *Valse*: Silence, please: hard as the Devil, and the monkey cannot go on dancing. The third dance is a *Pas vite*, followed by a *Mazurka*, with the postscript: Laugh without anyone noticing: the monkey is thinking of something else. The fifth piece is marked *Un peu vite*, with the added rubric: Do not look out of temper. The following *Polka*, to be danced internally, leads to the monkey tapping his thighs and scratching himself with a potato. The sequence ends with a brief *Quadrille*.

Jack-in-the-Box, described by Satie as a *cloonerie* in a letter to his younger brother Conrad in 1899, was intended as a pantomime, in collaboration with Jules Dépaquit, to be staged at the Comédie Parisienne. The project came to nothing, and the music survived in manuscript, to be orchestrated in 1926 by Darius Milhaud for a ballet produced by Dyagilev.

Vieux sequins et vieilles cuirasses (Old Sequins and Old Breastplates), written in 1914, contains allusions to Gounod, to le Roi Dagobert and to the well known *Malbrouk se va-t-en guerre*, while the *Heures séculaires et instantanées* (Secular and Instantaneous Hours), composed shortly afterwards, has a text with it. Satie had added often irrelevant comments, asides to the performer, on a number of pieces. With the *Heures séculaires* the words, not to be read aloud, form part of each of the three pieces. The work opens with a mysterious and presumably bogus dedication: To Sir William Grant-Plumot I dedicate this work agreeably. Until now two characters have surprised me, Louis XI and Sir William, the first by his strange good humour and the second by his continuing immobility. It is an honour for me to offer here the names of Louis XI and of Sir William Grant-Plumot. The first piece, *Obstacles vénimeux* (Poisonous Obstacles), has the following text: This great portion of the earth has only one inhabitant, a negro. He is so fed up he is ready to die of laughter. The shadow of the thousand-year-old trees shows that it is 9.17 a.m. The toads call each other by their family names. To think better the negro holds his brain with his right hand, his fingers extended. From a distance he looks like a distinguished physiologist. Four anonymous snakes fascinate him, hanging to the edges of his

uniform which is shapeless from a combination of sadness and solitude. By the side of the river an old mangrove-tree slowly washes its roots, which are disgustingly dirty. This is not the right time for shepherd lovers. *Crépuscule matinal (de midi)* (Morning Twilight at Noon) runs as follows: The sun rose betimes and in a good temper. The heat will be more than normal because the weather is prehistoric and inclined to thunder. The sun is high in the sky - he seems a decent fellow . . . But do not trust him. Perhaps he is going to scorch the crops or deliver a great stroke, sun-stroke. Behind the shed an ox is eating itself sick. *Affolements granitiques* (Granite Panics) has the enigmatic text: The clock in the deserted village is about to strike hard, striking thirteen. An ancient rain-storm comes from the clouds of dust. The great mocking trees pull at each other's branches, while the rough granite stones push one another about and do not know where to settle to be a nuisance. Thirteen is about to strike as 1.0 p.m. Alas! This is not the legal time. The penultimate *fortissimo* chord is characteristically marked *gaiement*, given in obscure enharmonic notation, finally translated into its real simple form.

The *Peccadilles importunes* of 1913 are children's pieces, like the *Menus propos enfantins* and *Enfantillages pittoresques*. The simple music describes infant peccadillos, as the child is jealous of his friend with a big head, takes his bread and butter from him and takes advantage of his corns to snatch his hoop.

Satie's works familiar as piano duets include the well known *Trois morceaux en forme de poire* (Three Pieces in the Form of a Pear). The title is a satirical allusion to Impressionist theories and to alleged advice from Debussy that he should pay more attention to form. The facetiously academic structure is clearly announced in the title: *Trois Morceaux en forme de Poire à quatre mains avec une Manière de Commencement, une Prolongation du même, et un En Plus, suivi d'une Redite* (Three Pieces in the Form of a Pear for Four Hands with a Beginning, an Extension of the Same and a Development Followed by a Recapitulation). It was a performance of this work by the composer and Ricardo Viñes that led Cocteau to conceive his ballet *Parade*.

En habit de cheval, originally for orchestra, was written in 1911. Its title refers, as Satie pointed out, to the dress of the horse, not that of the rider, and may, therefore, be taken as a reference to the impediment of academic rules, here exemplified in two fugues and two chorales. In his *Mémoires d'un amnésiaque* (Memories of an Amnesiac), a title that contains a typical Satie paradox, he claims that the *Morceaux en forme de poire* and *En habit de cheval* are, with other pieces, an example of his work as a phonometrician: not the result of any musical idea, but dominated by scientific thought. He goes on to explain the science of measuring and weighing music, with a phonoscope, and the importance of the science of *philophonie*.

The *Trois petites pièces montées* (Three Little Mounted Pieces), arranged for piano duet from the original instrumental version, were written about the year 1920 and illustrate the childhood of Pantagruel, the monstrous creation of Rabelais, in a popular style similar to that used by Satie's younger contemporaries in this period. The childhood of Pantagruel is followed by the Cockaigne March and a polka for Gargantua's games.

Satie's *Aperçus désagréables* (Disagreeable Perceptions) belong to earlier years, written between 1908 and 1912. At the request of his publishers Satie provided a biographical sketch and a facetious account of some of his works. Of the *Aperçus* he wrote: The beautiful and limpid *Aperçus désagréables* are written in a most superior style and help us to understand why this subtle composer is right to say "Before composing a work, I go round it several times, accompanied by myself". This catalogue apologia is of little help in listening to the particularly agreeable *Pastorale, Choral and Fugue*.

La belle excentrique (The Fair Eccentric), written in 1920, but including earlier work, is in the style of the music-hall, familiar to Satie at the beginning of the century. Described as a *fantasie sérieuse* for dance, it was composed for the pseudonymous dancer Caryathis, Elisabeth Toulemon, later known as Elise Jouhandeau. Cocteau devised a masked ball as a way of introducing Caryathis to polite society and Satie entered fully into plans for the event, writing music and advising Caryathis on her dress and on other relevant matters. It was five years later, as Caryathis was burning the relics of her stage career in her garden and the flames had just reached her *belle excentrique* costume, that a telegram from Georges Auric brought the news of Satie's illness, allowing her to visit him once more, as he lay dying. The Franco-Lunary March is followed by an Eye-Kissing Waltz and a final high society Can-Can.

Klára Körmendi

The Hungarian pianist Klára Körmendi was born in Budapest and studied under Kornél Zempléni at the Bartók Conservatory, later becoming a student of Péter Solymos at the Liszt Academy, where she received her diploma with distinction in 1967. She enjoyed early success in a number of international competitions, before embarking on a career that has taken her to the major musical centres of Europe, with broadcasts in Vienna, Paris and London, as well as Basle, Cologne, Lausanne and Ljubljana. Klára Körmendi has a wide repertoire, and has always shown particular interest in contemporary repertoire, both Hungarian and foreign. Her recordings for Hungaroton include music by Pierre Boulez, Olivier Messiaen, Luciano Berio and Heinz Holliger. For Naxos she has recorded works by Debussy and Ravel and the complete piano music of Erik Satie.

SATIE ON NAXOS

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STEREO

DDD

SATIE

Piano Works Vol. 4

Klára Körmendi • Gábor Eckhardt*, Piano

Playing
Time:
67'40"

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|-----------|---|---------|--|
| 1 | Le Piccadilly | (1:44) | III. Profiter de ce qu'il a des cors aux
pieds pour lui prendre son cerceau |
| 2 | Le poisson rêveur
(The Dreamy Fish): Esquisse | (6:22) | |
| 3 | Le piège de Méduse
(sept pièces pour piano) | (4:05) | |
| 4 | La Diva de l'Empire
(Intermezzo Americain d'après la célèbre chanson) | (2:28) | |
| 5 | Jack-in-the-Box | (7:48) | |
| 6 | Vieux sequins et vieilles cuirasses (4:27) | | |
| | I. Chez le marchand d'or | | |
| | II. Danse Cuirassée | | |
| | III. La défaite des Cimbres | | |
| 7 | Heures séculaires et instantanées (3:40) | | |
| | I. Obstacles venimeux | | |
| | II. Crépuscule matinal | | |
| | III. Affolements granitiques | | |
| 8 | Peccadilles importunes (2:03) | | |
| | I. Etre jaloux de son camarade qui a une
grosse tête | | |
| | II. Lui manger sa tartine | | |
| 9 | Trois morceaux en forme
de poire * | (12:12) | |
| 10 | En habit de cheval * (6:19) | | |
| | Choral - Fugue litanique - Autre choral
- Fugue de papier | | |
| 11 | Trois petites pièces montées * (3:34) | | |
| | I. De l'enfance de Pantagruel (Réverie) | | |
| | II. Marche de Cocagne (Démarche) | | |
| | III. Jeux de Gargantua (Coin de Polka) | | |
| 12 | Aperçus désagréables * (4:39) | | |
| | I. Pastorale II. Choral III. Fugue | | |
| 13 | La belle excentrique * (7:38) | | |
| | (Fantasia sérieuse) | | |
| | Grande Ritournelle | | |
| | I. Marche franco-lunaire | | |
| | II. Valse du mystérieux baiser dans l'oeil | | |
| | III. Can-can Grand Mondain | | |

Recorded at the Unitarian Church, Budapest,
from 8th to 11th February, 1994.

Producer: Ibolya Tóth

Engineer: János Bohus

Music Notes: Keith Anderson

Cover Painting: The River by Monet

