

Chapter 8

Collaborative works in Satie's last years

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On 3 June 1923, while having lunch with Sergei Diaghilev, Satie had a sudden and painful colic episode that forced him to leave abruptly. His subsequent message, sent to the famous impresario some hours later to explain and apologize, ended with a cheerful ‘See you soon for Gounod, right?’¹ As a matter of fact, during that same lunch Diaghilev had proposed Satie an important and well-paid job: setting to music – in the form of recitatives – the spoken sections of Charles Gounod’s *opéra comique* titled *Le Médecin malgré lui* (1858), in order to transform it into an entirely sung opera. Satie probably enjoyed this idea of a stylistic pastiche, as he spent all the second half of 1923 working on this project – the programmed premiere being in Monte Carlo on 5 January 1924.² But the first months were not easy: at the end of July Satie confided his problems to Diaghilev: ‘I’m working on the ‘Doctor’, but it’s

¹ ‘A bientôt pour Gounod, n’est-ce pas ?’ (Erik Satie, *Correspondance presque complète*, ed. Ornella Volta, Paris: Fayard / IMEC, 2000, p. 540 – hereafter Volta, *Correspondance*). The author wishes to thank the editor for her invaluable help with the translations of Satie's letters into English.

² The recitatives for *Le Médecin malgré lui* were part of a larger project restaging some Gounod *opéras comiques* within the Festival français in Monte Carlo organized by Diaghilev (January 1924): Diaghilev also commissioned new recitatives for *La Colombe* (to Poulenc) and for *Philémon et Baucis* (to Auric; see Steven Moore Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian: From Cabaret to Concert Hall*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999, p. 520 note 24).

not happening. Yes. I am angry – with myself, of course’ (26 July).³ On the same day, in a letter to Milhaud, he confirmed that ‘It’s not working’, and on 3 August he repeated to Poulenc that ‘My ‘Gounod’ isn’t ‘going’ very well.’⁴

His dissatisfaction arguably derived from a crucial doubt of a stylistic kind: should he write *à la manière de Satie* or *à la manière de Gounod*?⁵ On the one hand, making a faithful reproduction of Gounod’s style would not have easily suited Satie’s strong artistic personality. On the other hand, a resolute intervention on Satie’s part would have certainly shifted the centre of the work towards the avant-garde – thus potentially putting it out of balance. However, no intent of mockery was hidden in Diaghilev’s commission: on the contrary, the new recitatives would highlight the dramatic qualities of Gounod’s music, as well as the light irony of Molière’s lively dialogues (as he was the author of the original comedy), adapted by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré for Gounod’s *opéra comique*.

In order to achieve such aims, Diaghilev could not have made a better choice: Satie must have been delighted by the humour of the libretto; and the two parallel mediations (from Molière to Barbier and Carré, and from Gounod to Satie himself) probably reminded him of his masterpiece *Socrate*, where other textual mediations

³ Volta, *Correspondance*, p. 552; ‘Je travaille au « *Docteur* », mais cela ne marche pas. Oui. Je suis furieux – contre moi, bien entendu’.

⁴ Volta, *Correspondance*, pp. 552–3; ‘Ça ne va pas’; ‘Mon « *Gounod* » ne « *marche* » pas très bien’.

⁵ Actually a ‘Satie way’ never existed, given his fierce determination to continuously question his musical language – and even maturity did not weaken his drive for experimentation.

(Satie set to music Victor Cousin's translation of Plato's text)⁶ led him to compose very personal music. Moreover, on at least one earlier occasion he had proved receptive to Gounod's expressive suggestions: in 1916, in the *mélodie* for voice and piano *Le Chapelier*, Satie had quoted the *Chanson de Magali*, drawn from Gounod's opera *Mireille* (1864).⁷ This quotation, which for Satie is conceptually significant, had the sentimental expansion of the original melody interact with the mad hatter's astonishment in ascertaining that his watch 'retarde de trois jours' (is late – three days late).

In *Le Médecin malgré lui*, Satie's primary concern was, of course, to reconcile the new recitatives with the preexisting music. But how could this be done? Perhaps the composer should find a stylistic middle ground between Satie and Gounod? Barbier and Carré's adaptation – which was very respectful of Molière's original text⁸ – invited a discreet approach on Satie's part as well. By mid-August 1923, Satie seemed to have found a solution to this problem, as he said he was busy with composition: 'I am working [...] in a torrential and even storm-like manner' (13 August); 'I am taken with this like a devil' (19 August).⁹ Another letter of 19 August helps us to understand his point of view on the whole issue: 'I'm 'doing' Gounod as if

⁶ See Pietro Dossena, 'A la recherche du vrai Socrate', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 133/1 (2008), p. 17.

⁷ See Robert Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 21–4.

⁸ Molière's dialogues were preserved (almost unchanged) for the spoken sections; the verses to be set to music were also closely based on Molière's words.

⁹ Volta, *Correspondance*, p. 555; 'Je travaille [...] d'une façon torrentielle & même diluvienne'; 'je suis pris comme un diable'.

it were falling from the sky.’¹⁰ In other words, Satie proved himself humble enough to tip the scales in favour of Gounod – an attitude comparable to a contemporary architect asked to add new parts to a 65-year-old building. Satie ‘makes’ Gounod but, as we shall soon see, he does not completely dismiss his own identity.

According to Robert Orledge, in *Le Médecin malgré lui* Satie showed ‘how proficient he was at writing functional chromatic harmony in a nineteenth-century style’;¹¹ nevertheless, I cannot agree with Steven Moore Whiting that Satie’s intervention was simply an ‘extended exercise in stylistic imitation.’¹² If this were the case, Satie’s recitatives would sound similar to those composed by Gounod himself for his operas (notably *Faust*, *Mireille* and *Roméo et Juliette*). Speaking of recitatives, Steven Huebner explains that ‘Gounod often went considerably beyond declamation accompanied by punctuating chords in such linking sections’,¹³ and this is applicable to Satie’s recitatives as well, which pursue textural and instrumental variety. But the harmonic paths, smoothly consequential in Gounod’s recitatives,¹⁴ are more nervous

¹⁰ Volta, *Correspondance*, p. 556; ‘Je « fais » du Gounod comme s’il en pleuvait’. On 15 September he wrote to Stravinsky: ‘Je fais du Gounod – ce qui n’est pas plus bête que de faire du Ravel’ (ibid., p. 560).

¹¹ Robert Orledge, ‘Gounod, Satie and Diaghilev (1923–24): *Le Médecin* [et le Compositeur] *malgré lui*’, *Muziek & Wetenschap*, 3 (1993), p. 115.

¹² Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian*, p. 520.

¹³ Steven Huebner, ‘Gounod, Charles-François’, *Grove Music Online*, accessed December 2010.

¹⁴ Of course, as Gounod did not set to music the spoken dialogues of any of his *opéras comiques*, these remarks are merely speculative, but they are still pertinent to Gounod’s musical language.

and sharp-cornered in Satie. It is true that, as Orledge writes, ‘Satie uses the full nineteenth-century vocabulary of chromatic chords [...] with perfect ease’,¹⁵ but he often deliberately dodges round the resolutions recommended (or even allowed) in functional harmony, thus creating musical situations that are unmistakably personal.

CASE STUDY: *Le Médecin malgré lui* (from Act III, scene 7)

On 20 September Satie wrote to Diaghilev ‘I have a lot to discuss with you’, and fixed a meeting for the 22nd:¹⁶ as he had already completed the first two acts of the opera, he was probably going to talk to Diaghilev about the third – and last – act. On 28 September, a few days after that meeting, Satie indicated in a more precise way the passage of the opera causing most of his troubles:

I need to talk to you about *Scene vii* (page 42 of the libretto & page 174 of the score). What will we do with the *Andantino*? And how will we deal with the flute and bassoon ‘*things*’? I would like to see you about this matter. Yes. Couldn’t the ‘speech over music’ go over the *Andantino*? Think about it, I beg you. I will be at the Savoy on Monday morning [1 October] at 11 o’clock (eleven). This *Scene vii* is bothering me a little. You will be able to enlighten me on this topic. Yes.¹⁷

¹⁵ Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, pp. 25–6.

¹⁶ Volta, *Correspondance*, p. 562; ‘J’ai beaucoup à causer avec vous’.

¹⁷ Volta, *Correspondance*, p. 563; ‘J’ai à vous parler de la *Scène VII* (page 42 du livret & page 174 de la partition). Que faire de l’*Andantino* ? et comment traitons-nous les «

The third act is almost finished. I'm working on No. 9. Very happy with my work. Attractive, fat, fine, delicate, superior, exquisite, varied, melancholy, super... etc... thus it is, this fruit of my daily vigils, and even nocturnal ones (though rarely).³⁷

In *Le Médecin malgré lui* Satie, with typical humility, renounced part of his authorial personality, but this stylistic constraint did not prevent him from attaining his aesthetic ideals: the adjectives listed in this letter effectively form a mock-serious summary of 1920s Satie.

If Diaghilev proved to be a very helpful collaborator, Gounod had no other choice than agreeing and nodding silently, though his shadow may well have bothered Satie now and then. Satie acknowledged that his best artistic companion ever was no less than the philosopher Plato, with whom he 'worked' on *Socrate*³⁸ – a very discreet collaborator indeed. On the other hand, the most contrasted and articulated artistic partnership was arguably the one for *Parade*, with Cocteau, Massine and Picasso.

The *Parade* team, first reunited in 1923 by the Comte Etienne de Beaumont for the short divertissement *La Statue retrouvée*, was recalled again by Beaumont in 1924 for the new ballet *Mercure* (part of the Soirée de Paris series he was organizing),

³⁷ Volta, *Correspondance*, p. 575; 'Le troisième acte est presque terminé. J'en suis au n° 9. Très content de mon travail. Joli, gras, fin, délicat, supérieur, exquis, varié, mélancolique, extra... etc.... tel est-il, ce travail fruit de mes veillées diurnes, & même nocturnes (mais rarement).'

³⁸ 'Platon est un collaborateur parfait, très doux & jamais importun' (Volta, *Correspondance*, p. 277). The implicit reference is to Cocteau's intrusive behaviour.

this time with the significant exclusion of Cocteau. The count had complete trust in the ideas of Picasso and Satie, as he wrote to Satie in laudatory terms: ‘When one has the marvellous agreement of Satie and Picasso, one should not seek anything else’.³⁹ In fact the composer and the artist had been on the same wavelength since the *Parade* experience – their perfect mutual understanding causing Cocteau’s jealousy – and the very subject matter of *Mercure* may well have been a mockery of Cocteau, who loved to disguise himself as Mercury in masked balls.⁴⁰

The Count himself wrote a three-page typescript scenario for the ballet,⁴¹ but he was probably more interested in challenging Diaghilev’s supremacy as an artistic impresario than in being acknowledged as an author himself: in fact, quite surprisingly, the Soirée de Paris poster indicated *Mercure* as based on a theme by the choreographer Massine.⁴² Satie, Picasso and Massine actually worked quite independently, but since the first stages of the work it became quite clear that

³⁹ ‘Lorsqu’on a l’accord merveilleux de Satie et de Picasso, on ne doit rien chercher d’autre’ (Volta, *Correspondance*, p. 592).

⁴⁰ Robert Orledge, ‘Erik Satie’s Ballet *Mercure* (1924): From Mount Etna to Montmartre’, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 123/2 (1998), p. 234.

⁴¹ Now held at the IMEC (Abbaye d’Ardenne, Saint-Germain-la-Blanche-Herbe, France) together with all the documents of the Fondation Satie. See also Orledge, *Erik Satie’s Ballet Mercure*, pp. 229–49.

⁴² The poster presented the ballet as ‘Mercure / Poses plastiques / Thème et Coréographie de Léonide Massine / Musique d’Erick [*sic*] Satie / Décor et Costumes de Pablo Picasso’ (reproduced in Ornella Volta, *Erik Satie: Del Chat Noir a Dadá*, Catalogue of the Exhibition at the Ivam Centre Julio González, Valencia, 1996, p. 164).

Picasso's ideas showed the way: his subtitle 'plastic poses' pleased both the Count – who initially wanted to call the ballet *Mercure, Tableaux vivants*⁴³ – and the composer. Massine, who had to wait for the music in order to prepare the choreography, constantly pressed Satie during the composition process – something the composer did not like at all. Satie's lack of sympathy for Massine was hidden perhaps under the flattery 'Cher Grand Artiste' with which he invariably addressed Massine in correspondence, and the definition 'votre si riche chorégraphie' (in a letter of 4 May) does not sound like a compliment, coming from Satie. Nevertheless, the final stages of composition involved adding music to numbers 4 and 11 of the ballet, precisely to fit Massine's choreographic ideas.⁴⁴

On the other hand, Satie definitely enjoyed working with Picasso – their stubborn independence being one of the possible reasons for their sympathy since their first meeting in 1916. Satie, who even declared himself a disciple of Picasso in a letter he sent him on 10 October 1918,⁴⁵ had always showed a deep interest in cubism, and the 'key passage' composition logic he used from 1913 onwards bears striking similarities with synthetic cubism collages.⁴⁶ But in 1924 cubism must have seemed a relic of the past, after Dada had appeared on the Parisian artistic scene.

⁴³ 'Le titre de cette œuvre pourrait donc être : «*Mercure, Tableaux vivants*», si cela vous convient' (letter to Satie of 21 February 1924; Volta, *Correspondance*, p. 593).

⁴⁴ See Orledge, *Erik Satie's Ballet Mercure*, p. 245.

⁴⁵ See Volta, *Correspondance*, p. 342.

⁴⁶ See chapter 4 of my doctoral thesis *Scrittura e riscrittura in Erik Satie* (Università degli Studi di Padova, 2010) and the conference paper 'At the Intersection of Three Forms of Art: The Genesis of Erik Satie's *Le Golf*' that I presented at the AMS 2010 meeting in Indianapolis.

Actually neither Picasso nor Satie were particularly interested in being associated with Dada, but they soon became involved in post-war artistic struggles for publicity. The names of Picasso and Satie appeared in Picabia's 1919 drawing *Mouvement dada*, near the top of the timeline of French artists leading to the Dada movement,⁴⁷ and also on a leaflet that Tzara distributed in Paris in January 1920, among the personalities who had (allegedly) 'adhered to the DaDa movement'. Two years later Breton started to consider Tzara as an opponent, and Satie was delighted to preside over the 1922 public trial (following the 'Congrès de Paris' organized by Breton to take the leadership of the Dada movement) that eventually 'condemned' Breton. This episode surely alienated Breton's sympathy for Satie, while the latter got closer to Tzara. No surprise that on 15 June 1924, at the *Mercure* premiere, the surrealist 'commando' led by Breton and Aragon cried 'A bas Satie' and 'Vive Picasso seul'. Incidentally, Breton's definition of surrealism (in his 1924 *Manifeste du surréalisme*) as a psychic automatism expressing the real functioning of thought 'in absence of all control exercised by reason, outside of all aesthetic and moral preoccupation'⁴⁸ was indeed very far from Satie's extremely careful control of his creations. As for Picasso, apparently he had always been ahead of his time, for his

⁴⁷ *Mouvement dada* is a mechanical drawing that represents Dada as an alarm clock which is supposed to awaken contemporary art. Picasso's name is close to the 'positive pole' (i.e. antitraditional) of the clock battery (i.e. French modernism), while Satie is closer to the negative pole (see John Elderfield, *The Modern Drawing: 100 Works on Paper from The Museum of Modern Art*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1983, p. 116).

⁴⁸ André Breton, *Œuvres complètes*, Vol. I, Paris: Gallimard, 1988, p. 328.

1914 sculpture *Le verre d'absinthe* was chosen by Breton for the *Exposition surréaliste d'objets* he organized in 1936.

In such a complex environment, what never changed was the admiration Satie and Picasso had for each other. While trying to define a first structural plan for his score, Satie added in pencil a few memos to a single-page typescript by Beaumont, that are clearly connected with Picasso's views:⁴⁹ 'Poses Plastiques' was written twice in the document, and 'Cubisme' appeared next to the typed title of the final number 'Rapt de Proserpine'. The influence of cubism on Satie's thinking is also evident in yet another memo, 'Nocturne (cubisme)', apparently referred to the second number *La Nuit*: this art movement acted therefore as an aesthetic frame of the whole score. But when one actually looks at the score, cubism is not the first tag that comes to mind: in *Mercur*e we still find Satie's lifelong trademark, namely the jigsaw puzzle assembling logic, but collage-like procedures are not as radical as in the 1914 kaleidoscopic series *Sports & divertissements*: they are instead quite tamed, applied to regular four-bar phrases that are only occasionally twisted. Such phrasal regularity was of course borrowed from popular music, and in particular from music hall,⁵⁰ as Satie himself declared: 'The spectacle is related quite simply to the music hall, without stylization or any rapport with things artistic'.⁵¹

⁴⁹ BNF 9596(2), pp. 1–2 (folded sheet pasted on the back of the front cover).

⁵⁰ *Mercur*e was premiered at the Cigale, a former music hall theatre in Montmartre.

⁵¹ 'Le spectacle s'apparente au music-hall tout bêtement, sans stylisation, et par aucun côté n'a de rapport avec les choses de l'art' (interview with Pierre de Massot, *Paris-Journal*, 30 May 1924; translation by Robert Orledge, in *Erik Satie's Ballet Mercur*e, pp. 231–2). Music hall was a favourite Cocteau *idée fixe*, but 'the qualifier 'without

There is however a more convincing way to associate cubism with *Mercure* – and to distrust his last sentence.⁵² Paraphrasing the aesthetic statement that Satie wrote in 1917 on one of his sketchbooks,⁵³ for him harmony was a sort of camera filter through which an object (the melody) could be observed: changing the filter produced iridescent effects. Far from being a recollection of Monet’s Rouen cathedral series, this concept is much closer to cubism than to impressionism: lines and colours should never blur together but should instead preserve their autonomy, so that the illusion of a superimposition of different planes can be created. What Satie is essaying here is basically a multiplication of (listening) perspectives. In *Mercure* this is achieved in various ways including the following three: first, through the numerous reharmonizations of melodic themes (something Satie was fond of); second, through the choice of stylistic variability within a consistent musical structure; and third, through a sort of dramaturgical counterpoint with the other forms of art.

One example of reharmonization concerns the melody presented at bars 1–3 of the *Polka des Lettres*, which is then seen through different harmonic filters at the end of the number and later in *Le Chaos* (at the beginning and end). Satie’s musical style in *Mercure* is eclectic: we hear popular tunes (e.g. *Danse de tendresse*), avant-garde harmonies with nervous chromatic basses (e.g. *Ouverture*), oases of modal elegance (e.g. *Bain des Grâces*) or inspired passages of a neoclassical clarity that could well stylization’ sets *Mercure* apart from Cocteau’s evocations of popular entertainment’ (Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian*, p. 523).

⁵² What Satie called ‘art’ was, however, a complex concept: for further clarification see the complete aesthetic statement reported in Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, pp. 68–9.

⁵³ See *ibid.*

have sprung from the pen of an eighteenth-century composer (e.g. *Nouvelle Danse*). The dramatic counterpoint was apparent in ‘plastic poses’ such as the delicate *Bain des Grâces* accompanying the bath of... three transvestites.

Now the ‘Cubisme’ tag to the *Rapt de Proserpine* in the autograph plan seems to make more sense,⁵⁴ as Satie’s energetic music here resembles (in Steven Moore Whiting’s words) ‘a romp in an operetta by Offenbach’,⁵⁵ while Picasso’s scene is much more restrained and abstract. The artist chose in fact to represent the chariot of Proserpine as a white wooden cut-out (*praticable*) functioning as a background to black wickerwork linear shapes attached to it.⁵⁶ The form of the represented object was therefore the result of the superimposition of the two elements, each on a distinct plane: the linear element, floating freely out of the edges of the background shape, cast shadows that created the illusion of thickness. This special technique (comparable to Satie’s definitions of melody and harmony) is one of the most appealing features of Picasso’s scenes, and makes one think of pencil drawings made in space. Likewise, in the curtain for the *Soirée de Paris* season, Picasso painted the two stock characters with free-flowing continuous lines against coloured flat surfaces: such drawings made of a single unbroken stroke must have been a constant in his visual imagination, as they can be found both in his 1918 virtuosic illustrations (appropriately called ‘monogrammes’) for Cocteau’s *Le coq et l’arlequin*, and as late as in 1949 in the fascinating light drawings he made with the help of the *Life*

⁵⁴ It should be remembered that this plan was done at the very first stages of composition.

⁵⁵ Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian*, p. 528.

⁵⁶ For a photograph of the scene see Ornella Volta, *L’Ymagier d’Erik Satie*, Paris: Van de Velde, 1979, p. 81.

photographer Gjon Mili.⁵⁷ In any case, Picasso's mastery was above the 'artistic' fights between movements – and arguably Satie's was as well, despite his fondness for personal confrontation. In 1924 in fact the border separating Satie's friends from his enemies was particularly porous: Auric, Poulenc and Cocteau had just gone over to the enemy (at least in his own view, since Cocteau still contributed to the homage to Satie in the March 1924 number of *Revue musicale*), so joining the surrealists Breton and Aragon.

When Satie chose Picabia between the two candidates proposed by Blaise Cendrars as a set designer for *Après-Dîner* (to be featured in the season of the Ballets Suédois),⁵⁸ he was consciously throwing himself into the Parisian fray at the age of 58. Picabia – who back in 1921 had published two salacious *pensées* by Satie in his journal *391*⁵⁹ – was easily convinced to leave his temporary artistic retreat, also because he was allowed to mould Cendrars' scenario to his own (iconoclastic) design. This was done in February 1924 and led to the audacious 'ballet instantanéiste' *Relâche*, where the contribution of Cendrars was scarcely noticeable.

⁵⁷ Some of Mili's photos were published in the 30 January 1950 issue of *Life*, on pp. 10–12.

⁵⁸ See Volta, *Correspondance*, p. 1024.

⁵⁹ The two aphorisms were published in *Le Pilhaou-Thibaou*, 'supplément illustré' of *391* (10 July 1921): 'J'aimerais jouer avec un piano qui aurait une grosse queue' ('I'd like to play with a piano that has a big knob', a 'piano à queue' being a grand piano); 'Ce n'est pas beau de parler du nœud de la question...' ('It isn't the done thing to talk about the knot of the question' – though 'le nœud' can also mean the glans of the penis).

On 2 May, an anonymous reporter wrote in *Paris-Journal* that a few days earlier he had seen Picabia, Satie and Rolf de Maré (the director of the Ballets Suédois) having lunch together. He (probably Pierre de Massot) described their behaviour in a lively tone: they ‘were discussing animatedly and laughing loudly. Erik Satie was whispering in the ear of the painter Francis Picabia, and the director of the Ballets Suédois, Rolf de Maré, looked delighted. What is preparing this trio? Mystery...’.⁶⁰ Apparently Satie and Picabia got along really well, and this led to Breton’s strong refusal (3 May) to Picabia’s offer to contribute to *391*: therefore Picabia started denigrating his former Dada companions, so that his enemies came to coincide (at least partially) with Satie’s. Both being uncompromising artists with a penchant for provocation, the *enfants terribles* Satie and Picabia got prepared to strike the Parisian artistic establishment at the premiere (which, after being postponed twice, took place on 7 December).⁶¹

The title of the work, *Relâche* (meaning ‘no performance tonight’) was a brilliant discovery that would guarantee it would be ‘displayed in any theatre at least once a week, and, during the summer, in all theatres at once’.⁶² In the advertisement of the ballet in the October 1924 (and last) issue of *391*, the audience was invited to bring dark glasses and something to block their ears. As for brawlers, de Maré would

⁶⁰ ‘[...] discutaient avec animation et riaient à tue-tête. Erik Satie chuchotait dans l’oreille du peintre Francis Picabia et le directeur des Ballets suédois, Rolf de Maré, semblait ravi. Que prépare donc ce trio? Mystère...’ (Volta, *Correspondance*, p. 959).

⁶¹ The evidence supporting this date has been recently found by Robert Orledge.

⁶² ‘[...] nous serons sûrs de le voir afficher, au moins une fois par semaine, dans n’importe quel théâtre, et, pendant l’été, dans tous les théâtres à la fois’ (Volta, *Correspondance*, p. 1024).

have whistles distributed to the public at every performance.⁶³ The one and only product of the ‘instantanéisme’ movement, *Relâche* was also advertised by Picabia in the November-December issue of *La Danse* with a striking manifesto-like description that included puns, slogans and more articulated thoughts like the following: ‘[...] Relâche is life, life as I like it; life without tomorrow, the life of today, everything for today, nothing for yesterday, nothing for tomorrow. [...] Relâche is movement without a goal, neither forward nor backward, neither to the left nor to the right. [...] Relâche is the happiness of the moments without reflection; why reflect? why follow conventions of beauty or joy? [...] Relâche advises you to be bon viveurs [...]’.⁶⁴ Other hyperbolic passages of this text could well have been pronounced by Rodolphe Salis, the master-of-ceremonies at the Chat Noir that Satie met in 1887: ‘Erik Satie, Börlin, Rolf de Maré, René Clair, Prieur and me have created Relâche a bit as God created life’.⁶⁵ Picabia’s ironically subversive ideas must have reminded Satie of the

⁶³ See Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian*, p. 535.

⁶⁴ ‘[...] Relâche est la vie, la vie comme je l’aime ; la vie sans lendemain, la vie d’aujourd’hui, tout pour aujourd’hui, rien pour hier, rien pour demain. [...] Relâche, c’est le mouvement sans but, ni en avant ni en arrière, ni à gauche ni à droite. [...] Relâche est le bonheur des instants sans réflexion ; pourquoi réfléchir, pourquoi avoir une convention de beauté ou de joie ? [...] Relâche vous conseille d’être des viveurs [...]’ (reproduced in Volta, *L’Ymagier d’Erik Satie*, p. 83).

⁶⁵ ‘Erik Satie, Börlin, Rolf de Maré, René Clair, Prieur et moi avons créé Relâche un peu comme Dieu créa la vie’ (ibid.). Salis used to say: ‘God created the world, Napoleon created the Legion of Honour. As for myself, I made Montmartre!’ (Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian*, p. 52). Prieur was probably the French Revolution

fumiste experiences of his Montmartre years – the very title *Relâche* being an example of mystification in the best *fumiste* tradition.⁶⁶ Surely delighted to second Picabia's anti-bourgeois attitude, Satie in turn caught the pleasure-focused spirit of the project and claimed to have written 'amusing, pornographic music',⁶⁷ an 'obscene ballet'.⁶⁸ Reviving the parodic techniques used in his so-called humoristic pieces, in *Relâche* Satie indeed quoted various popular lewd songs that were supposed to be recognized by the audience. Some of these were actually songs 'with alternate lyrics, both children's rhymes and barracks songs',⁶⁹ like the harmless *Cadet Rousselle* and the spicy *Le Père Dupanloup* sharing the same *timbre*. It seems that Satie succeeded in

politician Pierre-Louis Prieur from the Marne region, who was given the pun nickname 'Crieur de la Marne' because of his eloquence (and stentorian voice).

⁶⁶ For a study of the relationships between *fumisme*, Erik Satie and the avant-garde (especially Dada), see Emilio Sala, 'Dalla *Bohème* all'*avant-garde*: Ancora nel segno dei fumisti', in *Erik Satie e la Parigi del suo tempo*, ed. Gianmario Borio and Mauro Casadei Turrone Monti, Lucca: LIM, 2001, pp. 29–44. On p. 44 the author compares the accelerating hearse in *Entr'acte* with the *galop* refrain in the 1880s song *L'enterrement* (by Aristide Bruant and Jules Jouy) and also with the lithography *Les morts vont vite* by Charles Leroy (presented at the Exposition des Arts incohérents in 1886).

⁶⁷ '[...] une musique amusante, pornographique' (Volta, *L'Ymagier d'Erik Satie*, p. 85).

⁶⁸ In a letter to Milhaud on 1 September 1924 he wrote 'Le ballet obscène est terminé' (Volta, *Correspondance*, p. 629).

⁶⁹ Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian*, p. 539.

his aim, as many in the audience felt compelled to sing along when they recognized the song *Le Navet* (also known as *Le marchand de navets*).⁷⁰

Any critical approach to Satie's contribution to *Relâche* has to deal with a curious contrast inherent to the work: despite all the explicit emphasis that Picabia put on ephemeral and hedonistic aspects, Satie's logical thinking got activated (by default?) and led to a tightly crafted mirrored structure with interlocking elements, represented by Orledge on p. 180 of *Satie the Composer* and by Whiting on p. 553 of *Satie the Bohemian*. 'Instantaneist' music was therefore supposed to outlive its performance time, at least in the analyses of musicologists. Picabia's trenchant statement 'nothing for tomorrow' was also contradicted by Satie in a letter to Marcel Raval (21 October) where he declared that 'It is in *Relâche* that the signal for departure will be given. With *Relâche* we are entering into a new period. I say this immodestly, but I say it... Picabia is cracking the egg, and we shall set out 'forward',

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 538 note 71. The lyrics of this song (titled *Les Navets*) are found in *Anthologie Hospitalière et Latinesque, Tome II*, Paris: 1913, p. 336. It was recorded (with the title *Le marchand de navets* and slightly different lyrics) in *Anthologie des chansons de salle de garde*, Collection 'Plaisir des Dieux', Tonus No. 13, Diffudisc, Paris. Satie used it in the *Entrée des Hommes* and in the *Rentrée des Hommes* – the turnip being an obvious reference to the penis. This melody must have been the 'air connu' adapted by Xanrof for his song *Flagrant délit* (see Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian*, pp. 538, 543–5). However, Satie's direct reference to *Le Navet* in an interview with W. Mayr (*Le Journal littéraire*, 4 October 1924) clarifies the ultimate source of his quotation.

leaving the Cocteus and other ‘blinkered’ people behind us’.⁷¹ In reality, any attempt to define the essence of Dada-inspired instantaneism seems to be inherently fruitless: in his 1926 portrait of Erik Satie designed for the *Relâche* vocal score, Picabia inserted the sentence ‘When will we get away from the habit of explaining everything?’⁷² Fortunately, a slogan on the front cover of the October issue of *391* helps to get out of this exegetical impasse: ‘Instantaneism is for those who have something to say’⁷³ – and Satie and Picabia surely did.

One of the most remarkable features of *Relâche* was its daring multimedia nature, which involved music, dancing and film. As is known, René Clair contributed two films: one was very short, most probably projected over the two initial pieces *Ouverturette* and *Projectionette*;⁷⁴ the other was the famous *Entr’acte*, about eighteen minutes long, projected as an intermission. The insertion of filmed images, although not a completely new experience for the audience,⁷⁵ looked very far into the future of experimental theatre – and of cinema, for that matter. Not only was *Relâche* a

⁷¹ ‘C’est de «*Relâche*» que sera donné le signal du départ. Nous commençons de «*Relâche*» une nouvelle période. Je le dis immodestement, mais je le dis... Picabia crève l’œuf, & nous partons en «avant», laissant derrière nous les Cocteau & autres «bridés»’ (Volta, *Correspondance*, p. 638; starting from the second sentence, the translation is by Robert Orledge, in *Satie the Composer*, pp. 2–3).

⁷² Volta, *Correspondance*, p. 1025; ‘Quand se déshabituera-t-on de l’habitude de tout expliquer ?’. This sentence was written in 1920 by Picabia’s first wife Gabrielle Buffet in the preface to her husband’s book *Jésus-Christ Rastaquouère*.

⁷³ ‘L’instantanéisme: est pour ceux qui ont quelque chose à dire’.

⁷⁴ There are in fact issues related to the respective timings of the film and the music.

⁷⁵ In early cinema, films were commonly projected during music hall shows.

landmark of non-narrative cinema, but it was also a pioneering experiment in virtual reality. For example, Börlin was seen onstage as a man of flesh and blood ('l'Homme') in the first act, then as a character (actually, two different characters) in *Entr'acte*, then, at the end of the film, as the 'virtual' Börlin jumping through the screen onto the stage, and then again in flesh and blood on the stage. Even the authors of the show, Picabia and Satie, appeared at different 'levels' of reality: first as themselves in the introductory film (the famous jumping-on-roof sequence), then in the most incorporeal possible form as the minds behind the scenes and the music, and finally as the real authors driving a Citroën car onstage.

The concept of multiplication did not only refer to people and art forms, but also to aesthetic categories. To put it better, the aesthetic core of *Relâche* was arguably the subtle interpenetration of 'high' and 'low' artistic categories, where each could be transformed into (or mistaken for) the other in a disorienting (and authentically Dada) aesthetic experience. A good example of inextricable high/low mixture is the trivial lascivious tunes which were coated with elaborate harmonies, displayed in rather conservative contrapuntal textures, and finely orchestrated to achieve a varied palette of timbres. In this respect, Satie's last work (as *Relâche* turned to be) allowed him to push his lifelong experiences with interfering aesthetic categories to a previously unreached limit of higher complexity and greater strength. In the kaleidoscopic and elusive network of *Relâche* the absolute, nostalgic elegance of the *Rentrée de la Femme*, the evoked lyrics 'Mesdames, voilà l'navet' ('Ladies, here's the turnip'; Nos. 8 and 13), a fugal exposition (No. 17) and Chopin's funeral march (in *Entr'acte*) were all granted a similar status within a convincing dramatic structure.

A parallel interest in contrasting concepts (that turn out to be mutually reversible) is found in Picabia's wild scenario, where men and women were presented in their double dimension: as elegantly dressed bourgeois, but also as apparently naked bodies (actually covered with body tights) deprived of any social characterization. As for *Entr'acte*, every single projection made nowadays confirms that its appeal is still vivid and multi-targeted, because none of its elitist references to avant-garde movements stop the general public enjoying its crazy freedom and genuine comic scenes. All in all, such a multi-layered way of communicating would not have been so effective without Satie's music. In his last production Satie seemed to have successfully carried out Picasso's celebrated motto: he did not have to look for his music any more; he simply found it.⁷⁶

In fact, both of Satie's last ballets *Mercur*e and *Relâche* were composed in a hurry, mostly under the pressure of choreographers. Satie, typically reflective and considered, was never a fast composer and detested time constraints. Nevertheless, his recent experience with *Le Médecin malgré lui* certainly helped him to deal with these two important (and well-paid) commissions, by providing him with a solid constructive frame to start with. As we have seen, Gounod's opera, with its traditional division into separate 'numbers', invited a very meticulous organization of the work on Satie's part: he divided his 'scènes nouvelles' into nine numbers and prepared preliminary rhythmic and tonal plans before drafting the score. The 'number opera' form (which was indeed suggested by the detailed scenarios provided by Beaumont

⁷⁶ His compositional methods in 1924 became in fact very straightforward: he seemed to have found an excellent balance between the relative simplicity of the compositional processes and the never-ending experimentation in language (see Dossena, *Scrittura e riscrittura in Erik Satie*, chapter 6).

and Picabia), the careful structural and tonal planning and the use of tonality itself are also common features of *Mercure* and *Relâche*: this confirms the central role of *Le Médecin malgré lui* in the definition of Satie's latest working (and thinking) habits.

It should be noted that neither *Parade* (1916–17, 1919) nor *Socrate* (1917–18) were planned as a series of short numbers, each set in a specific tonality: the dramatic swiftness of *Mercure* and *Relâche* owes more to the light-hearted number opera *Geneviève de Brabant* (1899–1900) or to Satie's proto-surrealistic play *Le piège de Méduse* (1913). But the concern for tonal centres and the neo-classical lightness that shines in many pieces of the two ballets are likely to have been directly suggested by the Gounod pastiche.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ The influence of the aborted opera *Paul & Virginie* (1920–3) cannot be properly estimated from the few surviving manuscripts. However, Robert Orledge guesses that this opera could have been similar in style to *Le Médecin malgré lui* (see Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, p. 323).