

At the intersection of three forms of art: the genesis of Erik Satie's *Le Golf*

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[show slide 1] This paper is based on the thorough study of writing and rewriting procedures in the numerous surviving sketchbooks of Erik Satie, most of which are kept at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. The study of this material proves to be particularly interesting, showing progressive modifications not only of style and compositional technique throughout all Satie's career, but also of the dynamics of the compositional process in itself.

In 1905, aged 39, Satie decided to enroll at the Schola Cantorum in Paris, against the advice of his friend Claude Debussy; he would attend the school from 1905 to 1912, studying counterpoint with Albert Roussel and composition with Vincent d'Indy. Many notebooks of these years provide a very interesting insight into Satie's progress from strict two-part counterpoint to imitative florid counterpoint in six parts. Satie had an everlasting fondness for the harmonic elaboration of melodic ideas, and this was particularly stimulated by the Schola exercises: chorale melodies, *chants donnés* and fugue subjects are indeed melodic materials immersed in harmonic and contrapuntal contexts. Chorales and fugues soon appeared to be the forms that most suited Satie's musical imagination: his most important pieces of the Schola years, the two sets for piano duet *Aperçus désagréables* and *En habit de cheval*, consist almost entirely of chorales and fugues. In such pieces Satie even tried to define a new conception of the fugue, something he claimed in 1911 had taken him eight years to realize – and which would recur in later pieces as famous as *Parade*.

After completing *En Habit de cheval*, perhaps fearing an artistic *impasse*, Satie made an unexpected stylistic shift leading to the piano pieces commonly defined as “humorous” – and whose language was defined by Satie as “fantaisiste”. In these pieces, inaugurated by the *Véritables Préludes flasques*

(*pour un chien*) in August 1912, a remarkable stylistic fusion took place: the cabaret, politely escorted out of the Schola Cantorum, made its way back inside in the form of popular melodies – that virtually took the place of the school's severe *chants donnés* – and also in the form of parodistic techniques – something that Satie had already experimented during his collaboration with the *chansonnier* Vincent Hyspa.

Together with these innovations in style, Satie's compositional procedures started to become freer. Numerous alternative 'paths' were often composed for a single passage (or short piece), and the overall creative logic became less and less teleological. Satie allowed himself to explore different possible directions, before steering the compositional trajectory towards the final version.

This paper is focused on a very short piece composed in 1914, *Le Golf* from the collection *Sports & divertissements*. *Sports & divertissements* is a sort of frivolous *Gesamtkunstwerk*, published in 1923 by Lucien Vogel, editor of fashion magazines as renowned as *La Gazette du Bon Ton*. Vogel had planned the work in 1914 (before the war) as a luxury publication, an album representing 20 pastimes of the Parisian *élite*, ranging from social activities to games and sports – such as golf. Satie was commissioned the creation of the musical element, in the form of 20 short pieces (to which he added a chorale as an introduction); the visual counterpart was instead provided by the French illustrator Charles Martin, who in 1914 made a series of drawings to be matched with the music pieces. One cannot easily tell which form of art came first, in the preparation of the album. However, Satie and Martin certainly influenced each other, as will become evident from the analysis of *Le Golf*.

A few clues seem to indicate Satie's enthusiasm in this project: not only did he write the introductory chorale, titled *Choral inappétissant* ("Unappetizing Chorale") and dedicated "to all those who do not like me", but

he also wrote an amusing preface to the album and, to our delight, he enriched his beautifully handwritten score with short prose poems of his own invention, humorously accompanying each piece. *Sports & divertissements* is therefore composed of three artistic elements: drawings, music and verbal texts.

Although the resulting album was virtually ready by the summer of 1914, the outburst of the First World War obliged to postpone its publication; when Martin came back from the front, realizing that fashion had meanwhile changed, he decided to revise and update his drawings accordingly. Satie did not modify his score, and *Sports & divertissements* finally went to press in 1923 (so, nine years after the planned date of publication). Anyway, in this talk I will not deal with the later set of drawings, made in 1922, as their connections with Satie's pieces are much looser.

Le Golf was the last piece of *Sports & divertissements* to be completed by Satie (on the 20th of May, 1914), and it is also the one with the most complex and interesting genesis: in Satie's sketchbooks one may identify as many as ten different attempts for the music (which I will call "genetic variants", or simply "variants") and six variants of the verbal text. I will now analyze the mutual influences between Satie's variants – of both kinds – and Martin's 1914 picture (contemporary to the composition of the music).

Here is Martin's drawing, which we shall soon see again [**slide 2**]; here is Satie's score [**slide 3**]. The verbal text can be translated as follows:

“The colonel is dressed in shocking green «Scotch Tweed»

He will be victorious

His «caddie» follows him carrying his «bags»

The clouds are amazed

The «holes» are all trembling: the colonel is here!

Now he takes his swing: his «club» breaks into pieces!”ⁱ

Let us listen to the piece **[play the whole piece on the piano]**.

Before moving on, a short explanation of my methodology is necessary: I represented the genesis of the music and of the verbal text in synoptical schemes such as this one **[slide 4]**. Each rectangle in the diagram, indicated by a letter of the alphabet, represents a variant; the abbreviation **f.v.** stands for “final version”. The variants are aligned from left to right in the most probable chronological order. The connections between the rectangles provide a description of the genetic logic, and they are of two different kinds: the squared groupings are non-directional, and connect similar variants – sharing at least one common element. The arrows are instead directional links connecting couples of variants, where the second is derived from the first; in order to have a derivation the variants still have to share a specific element, but this is drawn upon in the second variant, subjected to some sort of modification.

Let us get to the heart of the matter, starting with a closer look at Martin’s drawing **[slide 5]**. You will all notice one odd element: the player’s club breaks into pieces after the shot; this same image is present in the first variant **A** of the verbal text **[slide 6]**. I will translate it into English: “What is he doing on the golf course? He may want to break his club. Perhaps he is enraged? He should hide himself in the holes”. As you can see in the synoptical scheme of the genesis of the text **[slide 7]**, there exists a variant **F** derived from **A** (see the arrow connecting these two variants): the common element is the breaking club, but while in **A** there is just the wish of breaking the club (“He may want to break his club”), in **F** it actually bursts into pieces, as we can read in the last line **[slide 8]**: “Now he takes his swing: his «club» breaks into pieces!”. The same idea of the breaking club is also found in some of the musical variants. Martin drew the disastrous swing of the player in the shape of a rising stripe **[slide 9]**,

a sort of very narrow isosceles triangle; Satie decided to represent it musically as a rising dissonant arpeggio. During the composition he tried out different versions of this arpeggio: the first attempt was rather clashing [**audio example 1**]; Satie also tried a more consonant combination [**audio ex. 2**], but his final choice [**slide 10**] was an interesting superimposition of an E major triad with added sixth (played by the right hand) [**audio ex. 3**] and a dominant seventh on B (played by the left hand) [**audio ex. 4**]. This is the result, starting at bar 23 of this variant. (We do not need to pay attention to the smaller staves: they represent previous stages of this variant – the closer to the central system, the later in the compositional process.) [**audio ex. 5**] In the published score [**slide 11**], the triangular shape drawn by Martin finds an even more precise visual equivalent, as Satie added a big crescendo marking and enclosed the arpeggio between two facing slurs.

These different attempts leading to the definitive version of the arpeggio are found in three genetic variants of the music: **c**, **f** and **j**. In the scheme of the genesis of the music [**slide 12**] you can notice that **c**, **f** and **j** are connected by arrows, and thus form a derivation chain. (A brief clarification concerning this diagram: the four boxes numbered 1–4 are not proper variants but instead short independent musical fragments, whose position in the chronological sequence is hard to establish).

Now let us compare the synoptical schemes of the genesis of both the text and the music, by placing one next to the other [**slide 13**]. They share a two-folded nature: on the one hand in both diagrams there is a limited number of arrows (derivative connections) – which indicates that the variants tend to be self-sufficient. On the other hand the squared connections are plentiful, so making apparent the pervasiveness of some recurrent elements in the variants of both kinds: such connections make these genetic structures quite solid. An example of recurrent element in the musical variants is the dotted rhythm, really ubiquitous since it is found in **a**, **b**, **c**, **d**, **e**, **f**, **i**, **j**; but in each of these variants

the dotted rhythm acquires a slightly different character. Variant **a** [slide 14] ends with repeated notes of a martial quality [audio ex. 6], probably influenced by the following passage in the second variant **B** of the text [slide 15]: “This game seems to pertain to old officers. It is a sport for mature men, for retired people. Old English colonels excel at it. Out of two golf players, two are English, both of them honorary colonels of the Army of His Majesty the King. It is therefore an English and military game, or military and English”. In **d** [slide 16], yet another variant with dotted rhythm, Satie makes extensive use of zigzag patterns in the melody [audio ex. 7]; these zigzag patterns will be recalled in the final variant **j** at bars 1–4 [slide 17; audio ex. 8] and also in bars 14–15 [slide 18; audio ex. 9]. An emblematic example of Satie’s meticulousness is the genesis of the left hand at the beginning of **j** (actually the same as in the final version) [slide 19; audio ex. 10]. The harmony is taken from variant **i** [slide 20], where the left hand plays an E chord with an arch-like melody in the lower part [audio ex. 11]; but the oom-pah pattern is instead taken from fragment **1** [slide 21; audio ex. 12]. Therefore, as showed in the synoptical scheme [slide 22], in **j** are used elements coming from both **i** and **1**.

But what is the reason for Satie’s relish for the dotted rhythm in as many as eight musical variants? In Satie’s musical world, it was typically associated with English or Scottish folksongs, at least since he composed *Jack in the Box* in 1899, and Scotland is indeed an important inspiration for Satie’s text of *Le Golf*. For example the word “links” in variant **A** [slide 23] is a Scottish term meaning “dunes”, used in the French language to indicate a golf course by the sea. Moreover, the English colonels in variant **B** are reported to be wearing “Scotch Tweeds”, and a green Scotch Tweed is also mentioned in variants **C**, **E** and **F**. No wonder, then, that Satie’s mother Jane Leslie Anton was born in London of Scottish parents.

The Scotch Tweed is missing from the drawing [slide 24], but other elements occur both in the drawing and in Satie’s verbal variants: the player in

the picture is followed by a caddie carrying the bag with the clubs, and Satie, obviously intrigued by the game and its British origins, playfully employed all these words in English: for example the word “caddie” is used in five variants [slide 25]; “bags” appears in four variants, and “club” (or the plural “clubs”) in five variants as well. The genesis of the text is therefore very similar to the genesis of the music, at the same time compact and non-teleological. There are of course some derivative connections in the genesis of the text, but, as in the music, their positions make the whole structure look more like a labyrinth than like a single main road with a few detours. Among the derivative genetic links (oriented towards a possible solution), two are related to the health conditions of the colonel: in **B** golf is defined as a sport played by old colonels, and in the derived variant **E** the colonel is in fact depicted as old and suffering from rheumatism; in variant **C** the colonel reportedly plays to lose weight, and in the derived variant **D** he is “as fat as a barrel” and plays for hygienic reasons. One of the musical variants also refers to the colonel’s bad health: variant **g** [slide 26] carries the performance direction “Asthmatically”, comically associated with limping off-beat eighth notes [audio ex. 13]. The final version [slide 27] is instead focused on the colonel’s boisterousness. The performance direction “Exalted” fits well the character’s excessive self-confidence: he will surely be victorious, and even the colour of his Scotch Tweed is “violent”... but his decisive swing turns into a rout. Since the First World War began about two months after the composition of *Le Golf*, Satie’s humour suddenly sounds sinister.

Let us come back to the diagrams [slide 28] for some final remarks: one cannot underestimate the originality of these compositional processes, characterized by a sheer number of alternative paths contradicting the linear-derivative logic, much more common and conventional, where the variants are derived one from the other. Moreover, the structural similarity between the two

diagrams proves that Satie was able to apply the very same genetic logic to such different artistic domains as music and literature. In this respect, *Le Golf* represents an important experiment on the dynamics of the compositional process in itself.

In attempting a parallel between style and compositional process, it could be argued that such an erratic creative logic proved effective in that it perfectly matched Satie's style in 1914, characterized by fragments of music juxtaposed in unforeseeable syntagmatic sequences. The final version of *Le Golf* (which I played before) is indeed the result of an intricate process of recombination of tiny elements selected from the previous genetic variants. The diversity of the variants allowed Satie to achieve his main aesthetic goals of richness and variety, condensed into a musical miniature: the published piece is both more varied and more faceted than any of the preceding attempts.

In 1912 Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque brought Cubism into a new phase, often referred to as "Synthetic Cubism" [slide 29]: for the first time, collages were made (and perceived) as fine art works. Satie, who claimed that it was painters who taught him the most about music, had a very clear understanding of Cubism, as reported by Fernande Olivier, Picasso's mistress from 1904 to 1912: "The only person that I heard argue clearly and simply about Cubism was Erik Satie. I believe that he alone, if he had written on Cubism, could have made it easily comprehensible".ⁱⁱ Robert Orledge, one of the most renowned Satie specialists, adds that "The parallel between Satie's disinclination to write about Cubism and his refusal to discuss the way he composed suggests that the two were of equal importance in his mind".ⁱⁱⁱ Actually, Satie's compositional processes in *Le Golf* share striking affinities with Cubist collage: this results from the accumulation of many materials, that are then carefully selected, reduced to their two-dimensional essence and eventually organized on the canvas. Similarly, Satie's musical and verbal

collages aim at the maximum density disguised under the utmost lightness – and attain a distilled essentiality [**slide 30**].

ⁱ As translated by Mary E. Davis, *Erik Satie*, London: Reaktion Books, 2007, p. 99.

ⁱⁱ Quoted in Robert Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 226.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibidem*.