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Satie's career as a composer: some interpretations

Satie would have been delighted by the confusion caused by the many conflicting interpretations of his career, for it would appear that a credible overview can be devised to fit virtually any theory a writer happens to favour. At the same time, these conflicting opinions are themselves a testimonial to the diversity of Satie's œuvre and to the extent of its cross-fertilization with the other arts, and few of the interpretations given below are devoid of all merit. The overriding problem is that the line of consistent development one might expect to find in a composer who is universally acknowledged as a seminal influence on twentieth-century music is conspicuous by its absence. Thus the *Sarabandes* of 1887 are harmonically more sophisticated than his final ballet *Relâche*, which in turn demonstrates the same influences from cabaret and the popular song as the *Trois Morceaux en forme de poire* of 1903 (itself using material dating back to 1890). But in Satie's defence, Fauré's song *Nell* (1878) is outwardly similar to *La Mer est infinie* from his last song-cycle *L'Horizon chimérique* of 1921. Both Fauré and Satie shared a gift for constant renewal within an apparently limited textural range, and both refined their musical expression to its bare essentials in later life by giving it greater contrapuntal strength. But there the similarity ends, for the results are as different as chalk from cheese: chiefly because Satie insisted that his music should retain its melodic links with its popular roots, and because he entirely rejected the nineteenth-century concepts of Romantic expressiveness and thematic development. For Satie was, first and foremost, a man of ideas, a precursor of virtually everything from neo-classicism to minimalism (and even muzak). He was the first to reject Wagner's influence on French music; he by-passed Impressionism and the beguiling orchestral sonorities of Debussy and Ravel; and his art derived more from painters (especially the Cubists) than from any composer, alive or dead. But his attitude in pursuing his chosen path towards ultimate simplicity, brevity and clarity of expression should be seen both as essentially French and as a positive achievement, however much rejection it entailed *en route*. Furthermore, it was an isolated path which Satie knew would engender much hostility, and his moral courage and self-sacrifice in pursuing it should compel admiration rather than pity.

Satie's own autobiographical sketches are couched in his customary ironical vein. Their tangential construction and refusal to elaborate mean that they offer little help towards establishing a definitive interpretation of his complex career. Yet the aggressive stance, the 'take-it-or-leave-it' attitude, confirm the presence of a character

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with extraordinary self-awareness who viewed his precursive art in all seriousness beneath the exterior humour. In his earliest sketch, made for his publisher Demets in 1913 (Ve, 142–3; W, 79), Satie ‘classifies himself amongst the “fantaisistes”’, that is, amongst the group of young poets (including Francis Carco and Tristan Klingsor) established around 1911 who were admirers of the irony and scepticism of Toulet and Laforgue, and such an extra-musical perspective is by no means uncommon. Satie continues, without any undue modesty, as follows:

Short-sighted by birth, I am long-sighted by nature. . . We should not forget that the master is considered, by a great number of ‘young’ composers, as the precursor and apostle of the musical revolution now taking place. Messrs Maurice Ravel, E[mile] Vuillermoz, Robert Brussel, M[ichel]-D[imitri] Calvocoressi, J[ules] Ecorcheville, Roland-Manuel etc., present him as such, and what they say is based on facts beyond all challenge.

Lastly, to suggest how carefully considered his music was, Satie observes of the ‘beautiful and limpid *Aperçus désagréables*’ that their ‘subtle composer is justified in declaring: “Before I write a piece, I walk round it several times, accompanied by myself.”’ A truly sculptural approach.

In his last autobiographical essay: ‘Recoins de ma vie’ (Ve, 25–7; W, 63–4), it is clear that the anti-French criticisms of *Parade* in 1917 still rankled in 1924, and that Satie was aware of the effects of his volatile temperament on others. How much his self-imposed privations for the sake of his music cost him can be seen beneath the ironical surface of the following extract:

I lost no time in developing an unpleasant (*original*) originality, irrelevant, anti-French, unnatural etc.

At that time, life became so impossible for me that I resolved to retire to my estates and pass the remainder of my days in an ivory tower – or one of some other (*metallic*) metal.

That is why I acquired a taste for misanthropy; why I cultivated hypochondria; why I became the most miserable (*leaden*) of men. It upset people to look at me – even through hall-marked gold eye-glasses. Yes.

And all this happened to me because of Music. That art has done me more harm than good: it has made me quarrel with many people of quality, most honourable, more-than-distinguished, awfully genteel people.

Two months later, Satie expanded on the role of music in his life with even greater seriousness:

Music requires a great deal from those who wish to serve her. . . A true musician must be subjugated to his Art; . . . he must put himself above human miseries; . . . he must draw his courage from within himself, . . . from within himself alone.¹

But in the last months of his life Satie was, in contrast, gleefully anticipating the scandal that *Relâche* would provoke, and drawing up battle positions against his now entrenched enemies Cocteau and Auric, and the newly-founded Surrealists, led by André Breton. ‘With *Relâche* we are entering into a new period’, he told Marcel

Ravel on 21 October 1924. 'I say this immodestly, but I say it. . . Picabia is cracking the egg, and we shall set out "forward", leaving the Cocteau and other "blinker" people behind us' (VI, 197).

All of this suggests that Satie saw his career in terms of either a single unbroken line based on what he had tried to achieve in music, or as a series of new departures with intervening periods spent in an anguished search for the right way forward. All that can safely be said is that he never looked backwards, and it is important to try to interpret his career from within, rather than with the judgment of hindsight. The latter can suggest an orderly succession of conventional periods, and I shall try to demonstrate how contradictory and confusing this approach can become.

If we take the new departure approach, Satie's career can be divided into as many as eleven sections, as follows:

- 1 1884–5. Salon music, loosely in the style of his step-mother Eugénie Barnetche.
- 2 1886–90. Harmonic experimentation inspired by Gregorian chant (*Ogives*), the use of unresolved sevenths and ninths in Chabrier's opera *Le Roi malgré lui* (*Sarabandes*), and Romanian folk music heard at the 1889 Exposition Universelle (*Gnossiennes*).
- 3 1891–5. Systematization of chord progressions and the juxtaposition of harmonic cells in the so-called Rose-Croix music (*Fête donnée par des Chevaliers Normands; Danses Gothiques* etc.).
- 4 1897. Greater rhythmic and textural flexibility, developing repetition on a broader basis (*Pièces froides*). This new departure was cut short by the upheaval of moving to Arcueil in 1898.
- 5 1898–1904. Search for a new direction to avoid the influence of Debussy (experimented with in *The Dreamy Fish*). The cabaret influence becomes more pervasive (*Jack-in-the-Box*). In his uncertainty Satie resorts to self-borrowing (*Trois Morceaux en forme de poire*). Although he described this last work as a 'prestigious turning-point in the History of My life' (on the Paris Opera MS, Rés. 218, 30), it was rather a summary of his achievements to date, and its lead was not followed up.
- 6 1905–12. Years of study at the Schola Cantorum lead to an increasing linear strength in the *Aperçus désagréables*, and the creation of the 'modern fugue' in *En Habit de cheval* (1911).
- 7 1912–15. 'Humoristic' piano pieces (*Véritables Préludes flasques* onwards). The rediscovery of Satie by Ravel in 1911 had led to the publication of his earlier music and, in 1913, a demand for new compositions.
- 8 1915–17. The discovery of Satie by Cocteau propels him further into the limelight and a career in the theatre. Association with Picasso brings Satie into close contact with Cubism in *Parade*. First *musique d'ameublement* (1917). Satie now works mostly to commission as he broadens his range of social contacts.
- 9 1918–20. Increasing seriousness of purpose (*Socrate*), and a return to systematic composition (*Nocturnes*). Return to cabaret style in *La Belle Excentrique*.

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10 1921–3. Satie works mostly on articles and the opera *Paul & Virginie*. Ballet plans with Derain and close involvement with the Dada movement.

11 1924. Return to the stage with *Mercure* and *Relâche* (new period).

In contrast, most writers on Satie divide his career into two, three, four or five main periods. Patrick Gowers heads the list with five, ‘conveniently’ corresponding to

the decades of his life. In his 20s [1886–96] he wrote first the early piano works then the Rose+Croix music, in his 30s mainly cabaret music, in his 40s – after his time at the Schola – the ‘humorous’ piano music and in his 50s [1916f.] a suddenly far more varied output including the three main ballets, *Socrate*, songs and piano music. (Gowers, 1980, vol. XVI, 517)

This interpretation has the merits of being clear-cut and memorable, but the major turning-points of the move to Arcueil and the rediscovery by Ravel both fall in mid-period, and the final period includes compositions as radically different as *Socrate* and *Relâche*.

Those favouring four periods include Wilfrid Mellers and William Gray Sasser. Mellers (1942, 215) places his divisions at 1900, 1908 and 1916, though he does attempt to relate them to the concepts of isolation and irony in Satie’s life (*ibid.*, 222). However, 1908 has no claim for special consideration other than being the year when Satie passed his counterpoint exam at the Schola Cantorum and began the *Aperçus désagréables*, and very little is known about his activities in 1900. Sasser makes the more conventional divisions of 1885–95, 1897–1911, 1912–15 and 1916–24 (1949, 139–45; 1952, 112–17), stressing that these represent different facets of the same, very diverse mind, with development being replaced by the metamorphosis, selection and elimination of stylistic elements as Satie’s career proceeded. The second period is transitional rather than self-contained, and melodic considerations are seen to predominate over rhythm and harmony (with some justification).

The tripartite approach is chosen by Alfred Cortot (1938, repr. 1985, 56), in a parallel to Beethoven’s career that Satie would have loathed. Cortot divides Satie’s piano works (only) into a period of mysticism and medieval influences (1886–95), a mystifying and ‘Chat Noiresque’ period (1897–1915), and a period of ‘musique d’ameublement’ (1916–25). However, all this is not as unlikely as it may seem, for the classification of the final works as ‘furniture music’ has support from Satie himself.² He planned *Socrate* as such, for instance (Templier, 1969, 46), and by an extension of this principle there is a functional/sonorous background element to most of his non-descriptive theatre music, from the ‘static sound décors’ of *Le Fils des étoiles* (1891) onwards.

Louis Durey, an arch-enemy of Satie, also supports a three-period solution. In complete contrast to Sasser, Durey (1930, 163–4) claims that the first period (up to 1895) is ‘characterized by harmonic preoccupations’ with ‘melodic ideas being almost non-existent’. (Perhaps he had forgotten the *Gymnopédies* and *Gnossiennes*?) This period was ‘followed by a long silence’ (again untrue) in which Satie ‘perfected his *métier* at the Schola Cantorum’. After this his writing ‘becomes melodic’ suddenly – and vivacious and eccentric. But after the success of *Parade* in 1917 (the end of Durey’s

second period), he claims that Satie again lost his way, by trying 'to venture into serious music' with *Socrate* and the *Nocturnes*. These 'disclosed a paucity of means which in vain was described as simplification', and Satie only 'returned. . .to his true nature' with his final period ballets *Mercure* and *Relâche*. Here he recaptured the eccentric charm and humour of the 1912–15 piano pieces, which Durey obviously considered the zenith of his career.

Several writers divide Satie's career into two. His first biographer, Pierre-Daniel Templier, and the devoted researcher into all things Satiean, Ornella Volta, both favour the move from Montmartre to Arcueil in 1898: whereas the philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch and the composer Charles Koechlin both vote for Satie's entrance to the Schola Cantorum in 1905, with the emphasis shifting from early mysticism to later mystification (see Jankélévitch, 1957, 188; Koechlin, 1927, 9, 18–19). Koechlin (1924, 195) considers the works of his first period to be mainly harmonic in origin, with the emphasis shifting towards counterpoint afterwards. Both 1898 and 1905 have their merits as bisecting points, though if I had to pick one it would be 1898.

A slightly different approach to the bi-partite view is taken by Roger Shattuck in *The Banquet Years*. Here he says that Satie enjoyed two *careers* as a composer, one in the nineteenth and the other in the twentieth century (after 1910) – his 'second coming'.³ The 'essential unity' for Shattuck 'is always in the melodic line' (1952, 53), a view which is supported by Satie's compositional aesthetic of 1917. His hypothesis is also borne out by the fact that Satie's greatest crisis seems to have come in 1911, at precisely the moment when his music was rediscovered by Ravel. As he explained to his brother Conrad on 17 January, the day after Ravel's concert at the SMI:

In 1905 I put myself to work with d'Indy. I was tired of being reproached with an ignorance of which I thought I must be guilty, since competent people pointed it out in my works.

After three years of hard work I obtained from the Schola Cantorum my diploma in counterpoint, signed by my most excellent master, who is certainly the most knowledgeable and the best man in this world.

Here I am then, in 1908, holding a certificate that gives me the title of contrapuntist. Proud of my knowledge, I set to work to compose. My first work of this kind is a *Choral & fugue* for four hands [the *Aperçus désagréables*]. I have often been insulted in my poor life, but never was I so despised. What on earth had I been doing with d'Indy? The things I wrote before had such charm! Such depth! And now? How boring and uninteresting!

Whereupon the 'Jeunes' mounted a campaign against d'Indy and played the *Sarabandes* and *Le Fils des étoiles*, and so on, works that were once considered the fruits of a profound ignorance – wrongly, according to these 'Jeunes'.

That's life, *mon vieux*!

It's total nonsense.

(VI, 28)

The single line view, with or without detours, also finds several advocates, though the prevailing catalyst varies. For the composer Maxime Jacob (1930, 128–9), the thread of 'Christian sobriety' pervades all Satie's works in a spirit of humility and renunciation: whereas for the Normandy historian, André Bruyère (1970), Satie's childhood experiences in Honfleur conditioned the remainder of his career. Thus the

teaching of the local organist M. Vinot (1874–8) fostered his lifelong love of Gregorian chant, whilst the architecture of the church of Saint-Léonard inspired Satie's meticulous Gothic calligraphy and the thousands of strange drawings that became his later obsession. Then, at the concerts of the Honfleur Philharmonic Society in the Town Hall, Satie would have heard numerous waltzes, some of them by Vinot himself, hence his enduring interest in dance music. Even more remarkably, Bruyère traces links between Honfleur street names and Satie's bizarre titles – like the *Croquis et agaceries d'un gros bonhomme en bois* (1913) and the rue Homme-de-Bois (which was adjacent to the rue Haute where Satie was born). But it is certainly true that our childhood experiences condition many of our tastes and outlooks in later life, and that Satie was fascinated by the world of children, so this hypothesis may not be as fanciful as it sounds.

Another single-line view comes from Marc Bredel's thought-provoking psychological investigation of Satie (1982, 157), which sees the 1886 *Ogives* as a blueprint for Satie's later career (coupled with the 'static sound décor' principle of *Le Fils des étoiles*). Rather than periods, Brédél maintains that there are two 'aspects' to Satie's career (*ibid.*, 162): 'the esoteric – works composed from interior necessity; and the exoteric – more popular works written to earn a living'.

The interpretation of the American scholar Steven Moore Whiting also demands serious consideration (1984, 127, 202–8). This is that Satie's involvement with cabaret music and the world of Parisian Musical Entertainment runs as a continuous thread throughout his career. By focusing on what others bypassed, and by questioning the whole function of music and its relationship with the other arts and with society, Satie managed to convert popular music into a serious art and break down the barriers between the two. One problem here lies with the esoteric early works, but if we consider Gustave Doret's account (1942, 98) of Satie performing his wierd ballet *Uspud* as a hilarious entertainment at the Auberge du Clou in the 1890s, or using his *Gnossiennes* to accompany shadow theatre spectacles at the Chat Noir, everything begins to make more sense. And we have seen how Satie's *Gymnopédies* came into being to justify his introduction to Rodolphe Salis as 'Erik Satie – gymnopédiste' when he sought employment at the Chat Noir in 1887. After the move to Arcueil in 1898, Satie still remained actively involved with the cabaret world (to earn a meagre living) until at least 1909, accompanying popular singers like Vincent Hyspa and Paulette Darty at venues such as La Boîte à Fursy and La Lune Rousse. Indeed, he was known to his friends in Arcueil as a writer of popular songs rather than as a serious composer, and the thread can be seen extending in various forms in his later career. Firstly, his 'humorous' piano pieces of 1912–15 make extensive use of thematic quotations from popular operettas, folksongs, and popular and military tunes. Secondly, he told the composer Robert Caby that he saw *Parade* as being set in a cabaret, or 'boîte', with the later addition of the opening Chorale as being like opening up that same 'box' to reveal the entertainment inside.⁴ Thirdly, we find Satie using popular dance-forms like the waltz and cancan in *La Belle Excentrique* in 1920, and both his final ballets *Mercury* and *Relâche* employ a music-hall idiom, the latter quoting popular songs like 'The Turnip-Vendor' and 'Cadet Rousselle'.

The only possible flaw with this interpretation is that Satie apparently hated being forced to earn his living in the 1900s from cabaret work. He told Conrad⁵ in the same letter of January 1911 quoted earlier that he had now 'renounced' this work. The *Café-concert* 'was no field for me to be working in. It is more stupid and dirty than anything' (VI, 27). But this surely refers to the necessity Satie had had to face over some twenty years of working in a milieu that showed no regard for the serious art that was his main priority. Neither does it rule out his taking the accessibility of the *Café-concert* and elevating it to a higher artistic level. In addition, this particular letter shows Satie in a particularly despondent and confused state as to his future, and it should not be taken as the gospel truth with regard to his whole career in popular entertainment. He undoubtedly enjoyed the Bohemian life in and around the Montmartre cabarets, and it was there that his friendship with Debussy began. So we should not easily assume that cabaret work suddenly became (and continued to be) painful to him after the move to Arcueil, however much his seriousness of intent had increased in the interim. Perhaps the true thinking behind this 1911 letter lay in the inevitable recognition that he had wasted so much valuable time in the directionless years around the turn of the century, and reflects his frustration in knowing that his uncompromising and precursive art was always destined to be misunderstood.

Obviously, all these manifold interpretations of Satie's enigmatic career contain elements of truth, even if none of them represents the complete answer. Thus, to a certain degree, they are complementary and interdependent. There is certainly a cabaret thread running through a complex career that does broadly sub-divide at the move to Arcueil in 1898, even if Satie did not find his true direction again until the *Véritables Préludes flasques* of 1912. Whilst only the eleven-point 'new departure' approach given earlier takes every aspect into account, it is too complex to be my final choice. My own view is that Satie's career must be seen as a single span whose unconventional direction was determined by his continual rethinking of the whole aim and aesthetic of music as a reaction to nineteenth-century practice and excesses. A natural tendency towards simplification, succinctness and economy underlies all his work, rather than any desire to make a virtue of his technical limitations. With an enviable talent for self-publicity, Satie made a positive and quick response to the changing circumstances in which he found himself, always contriving to stay one step ahead of his potential rivals and remain the instigator of new ideas. He was extremely sensitive to prevailing social and artistic conditions, and, being intensely self-critical, he published only what he considered appropriate for a particular time. As he moved politically further and further to the left, so, paradoxically, his contacts and commissions with high society grew, much to his delight. As the self-appointed guardian of the avant-garde, the personification of the post-war *esprit nouveau*, Satie rejected all concepts of music as bourgeois entertainment, and in later life he set out deliberately to shock and scandalize his audiences in an uncompromising and aggressive manner that was far from being the result of an inferiority complex. As he explained in 1922 to Henry Prunières, the editor of *La Revue musicale*, he belonged to the generation of his music, and anyone who did not take him seriously was beneath contempt.

2

Why and where Satie composed

‘Work is not always as unpleasant as books maintain’, Satie told André Derain in September 1921 (Vc), in an effort to stimulate some action on their ballet *La Naissance de Vénus*. Since *Parade*, Satie had instigated numerous ballet projects with Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes in mind, both because he was stimulated by the fusion of the arts in the theatre and because Diaghilev allowed him financial advances on projects in hand. We know this through a letter from Satie to Diaghilev in April 1924 asking him when he can draw on the account for the ballet *Quadrille* (planned with Georges Braque) and how much the ‘advance’ is likely to be. That few of his plans materialized was not Satie’s fault, for he thrived on such projects and the artistic and social opportunities they provided. The fact that the majority of the letters concerning these projects come from the summer months shows that the annual exodus of his wealthier friends for the South of France left Satie lonely and depressed in dingy Arcueil. The demand for his music dried up and so did the loans he relied on to keep body and soul together. In such moments he often questioned why he composed at all and his anger at what music had done to him often bursts forth in his wartime summer letters. His morale reached its nadir on 23 August 1918 when he complained to Valentine Gross that ‘I am suffering too much. It seems to me that I am cursed. I loathe this beggar’s life. I am looking for and want to find a position, an employment, however menial. I *shit* on Art: it has “cut me up” too often. It’s a mug’s game – if I may say so. . . For the last month and more I haven’t been able to write a note.’¹

But if we compare this with Satie’s frame of mind when he began *Socrate*, the picture on 18 January 1917 is altogether different, especially as the Princesse de Polignac had that day sent him an advance on her far-sighted commission. Again he writes to Valentine Gross: ‘I’m working on the “Life of Socrates” [the original title]. I found a fine translation. Victor Cousin’s. Plato is a perfect collaborator, very gentle and never troublesome. It’s a dream!. . . I’m swimming in happiness. At last, I’m free, free as air, as water, as the wild sheep. Long live Plato! Long live Victor Cousin! I’m free! Very free! What happiness!’ (VI, 154).

These two letters should be taken as extremes of Satie’s mercurial temperament. The intervening norm (if Satie could ever be described as normal) was one of constant hard work – drafting, honing down and polishing his music with meticulous care.

For Satie composed from an inner necessity, because he never seriously considered anything other than a life devoted to music. All he wished for was the freedom to compose what he wanted when he wanted, without material constraints, though the coincidence of all these ideal factors in *Socrate* was a rare event. If his financial irresponsibility only made matters worse, his precarious situation channelled his inventive mind into numerous projects as a result, for he was only truly happy when he was creative and there was a demand for his music. In short, when the way forward was clear to him.

It might also be said that Satie composed to attract attention to himself, for he thrived on notoriety and the maxim that ‘there is no such thing as bad publicity’. However much he put on a brave face in public, his letters show that he hated being completely isolated for even a few days, and his uncompromising independence was only maintained at great personal cost. He welcomed artistic liaisons with flamboyant catalysts like Péladan, Jules Bois, Cocteau and Diaghilev and was probably fascinated by their immorality, however much he disapproved of it. When such links were not forthcoming, he generated his own publicity – as with the foundation of the *Eglise Métropolitaine d’Art* (1893–5) and his successful attempt to get his ballet *Uspud* considered for the Paris Opéra (by challenging the director, Eugène Bertrand, to a duel!). As a larger-than-life, theatrical personality he always needed to have some stage project in the offing, and in the days before television and cinema the theatre offered the greatest source of potential income for a composer. But together with his financial irresponsibility there was a bizarre streak of deliberate impracticality in Satie, and his refusal to compose descriptive music to correspond with given dramatic situations meant that none of his projects in the 1890s reached the stage. As his technique improved, it naturally became more flexible, but Satie still refused to allow the theatre to dictate terms to him and his prime concerns were the integrity of his own contribution and that it should contradict traditional expectations.

Another potential source of income was the popular song. But despite his quarter-century association with the cabarets of Montmartre (and its continuing influence on his mature music), Satie wrote relatively few original songs for this medium. Such pieces as there are belong to the years of directional uncertainty between 1897 and 1910, and mostly predate his enrolment at the Schola Cantorum in 1905. Thus, as Steven Whiting has shown (1984, 200–2), out of around 100 songs in the Harvard sketchbooks, only 28 are even likely to be original creations. And despite Satie’s literary talents, only one (*Sorcière*) has a text that could be by Satie. The rest of the songs are arrangements or transpositions of works by other composers (like Paul Delmet), or of the popular tunes to which Vincent Hyspa fitted his topical ditties. For when Satie accompanied Hyspa in his engagements around the turn of the century, he seems not to have trusted his pianistic abilities in the alcoholic ambience of the *Café-concert*. Indeed, it is reported that Satie had to be locked in his room before such performances so as to remain sober. When Hyspa published his collection of fifty-one *Chansons d’humour* in 1903, only one (*Un Dîner à l’Elysée*) had music by Satie (on pp. 107–13). Thus, fulfilling a demand for cabaret music does not seem to be a valid reason why

Satie composed, and in my opinion it is of lesser importance than, say, the desire to be chic and 'Parisian' that recurs increasingly in his letters of the 1920s as he revelled in his new high society contacts.

Certainly, Satie found nothing in Arcueil to inspire him. While struggling with his opera *Paul & Virginie*, he again complained to Derain in September 1921 about the endless tedium of life in Arcueil; the daily routine of coming and going with nothing really interesting to nurture the original voice he was seeking. His depressing conclusions were that ignorance was bliss in bygone days and that progress was not necessarily beneficial.

So, to a large extent, composition must also have provided a means of escape for Satie; from everyday philistinism and all that he saw as being wrong in an immoral, materialistic society, as much as from his own highly-principled, but miserable hermeticism. His ivory tower remained impregnable only at a terrible personal cost, and his exquisite calligraphy, his obsessional drawings and devising of compositional systems, must have arisen as much from a need to fill lonely hours as from a desire to create beauty amidst ugliness and squalor. His frequent rages were, I suspect, the outward evidence of an inner compositional block – for the quantity of sketches he made far outweighs his published works. He found completing pieces far harder than starting them, and when his path forward became clear in composition after 1912, so his work rate intensified in parallel.

From the evidence of his pianist friend, Jean Wiéner, we know just how slowly Satie worked in producing calligraphic miracles that were designed as much for the eye as for the ear. 'His writing is a testimony in itself', Wiéner says (20 July 1945, 4).

Total perfection; but it took him a good twenty minutes to write a six-line postcard. . . It happened that Satie, being at my house, wanted to write something after dinner. I left him alone (with a bottle of fine champagne nearby). . . Over half an hour afterwards, he had only started to write the address, and more often than not, it was only a question of a few lines to cancel a dinner engagement.

If fellow composers like Koechlin and Fauré were proud of their increased speed of working in later life, Satie's concern for visual perfection remained with him to the end. He first met Wiéner in 1919, so the incident he described must have taken place when Satie was in his mid-fifties. The laborious production of his scores must have taken even longer and became an end in itself, inseparable from the minute care of the compositional process. Satie admitted his slowness of composition to Bertrand Guégan, the editor of the *Almanach de Cognac*, in November 1919. When Guégan sent him a poem to set for publication in his journal, Satie had to disappoint him because such a deeply-felt piece required much time for contemplation and could not be composed according to the time-scale he imposed.² It must also be said that both Satie's letters and scores, however obsessional in their neatness, still contain both corrected and unspotted errors. The very last bar Satie wrote, for instance, in the November 1924 film score of *Cinéma*,³ contains a glaring and unintentional dissonance through a missing C# in the viola part in a chord of A major.

Other inner reasons why Satie composed will doubtless emerge as more is dis-