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John Cage, Roger Shattuck, and Alan Gillmor Erik Satie: a Conversation

This conversation took place outdoors near Cage's summer home at Stony Point, New York, on 14 July 1973; it was sponsored by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, to whom we are grateful for the kind permission to publish.

Don't take out your feelings on your instrument. Often, instruments are subject to terrible treatment. People beat them. I know children who deliberately, with fiendish pleasure, step on their piano's feet. Others won't put their violin back in its case. Naturally the poor thing catches cold. It's not nice. No, it's not. A few even pour snuff into their trombone, which is terribly disagreeable—for the instrument. When they blow they project the irritating powder right in their neighbour's face. He coughs and sneezes for a good half hour . . . Pouah! . . . Exercises are to be done in the morning, after breakfast. You should be very clean, and blow your nose ahead of time. Don't go to work with jam on your fingers, or get up every few minutes to go get some candy, or caramels, or chocolate—that's the worst of all.

Erik Satie¹

JOHN CAGE: So much in Satie's writing leads people to believe that he was simply a humorist who was saying funny things without their having an otherwise useful meaning. But that remark, for instance, advising the children to blow their noses before playing music in the morning, reminds me of advice I received from another composer, Lou Harrison, to always blow my nose before playing the piano. You see, music consists of sounds, and as a person is playing, because music is a rhythmical affair, the rhythm of the breathing of the body becomes very evident and is very disturbing to a listener or even to the musician himself.

ROGER SHATTUCK: But when you talk about Satie being just taken for a comic, you put your finger on something that is not only the source of a lot of the misinterpretations of his work, but a lot of other misunderstanding, because I don't think most people know how a musician can be both a musician and a comedian, or a clown, which he was. In fact you're one of the few people yourself, John, who I think might . . .

JC: . . . understand?

RS: Yes, might understand and might have something to say about it. I've just been spending the last two years trying to prove that more than anything the usually considered highly serious author Marcel Proust is above all a comedian. And I think I can make that case. I'm not going to make it here.² But Satie has that very rare sense of balance and of tonality and rhythm that allows almost everything he does to be an undercutting of what he has tried to do in the first place. But are there any other musicians who are comical in the same way?

JC: Well, there are other people. And we never know how much of a musician they may have been. James Joyce, was he not closely involved with music?

RS: Yes.³

JC: And he was certainly devoted to comedy, much more than to tragedy.

RS: Well, that's a literary type though.

JC: I believe he said once that what he loved about comedy was that it left the world, so to speak, free of the constraints arising from likes and dislikes.

RS: But is there any music at which it is permitted to laugh?

JC: Very rarely. We're not supposed to laugh at Satie's music either. You recall he wrote somewhere that we're not to laugh.

RS: All right. What do you do with that? He also wrote that he forbids anyone to read the instructions in his music while the music is being played.⁴ Well, I'm absolutely convinced that the only true recording of Satie's music will be the one in which the commentary is in fact read during the performance.

ALAN GILLMOR: It is true that the most puzzling aspect of Satie for many listeners is this aura of buffoonery which seems to surround his name. It seems to me that most of Satie's critics have tended to view his humorous side with some embarrassment and have taken great pains to point out that the composer after all did write a considerable amount of music which can only be called serious, and it is this music, of course, which should concern us most. I would suggest that these critics have failed to observe the Satie case in its proper perspective, and that they have been utilising the canons of Anglo-German musical criticism and have seemed reluctant to concede that the composer—at least a good part of the composer—was at heart a *fumiste*, or practical joker. And this, contrary to making him a non-entity, is of primary significance to the development of the avant-garde ideal, and consequently to the evolution of 20th-century musical aesthetics. These critics have suggested that Satie's whimsical approach to art and life was nothing more than a suit of armour and a defence mechanism designed to shield him, to shield that fact that he really possessed no talent. It seems to me from what we've already said here that this approach to Satie's humour is no longer acceptable. I'd be interested to hear what views you have on this; we've already expressed some.

RS: I don't think he needed any self-defence. Satie was a self-taught musician, an *autodidacte*, who had the guts to go back to school when he was almost 40 and act as if he were going to take his education very seriously, although he already had a style. But the humour was so much a part of his genius, and so much a part of his essential eccentricity, an eccentricity which really was right on the beam, that I don't think we need to talk about defences against anything. He used this as a portion of his expression, not as a cover-up for his expression. And it's the rarity of the combination that I think throws people off. You just don't find musicians who write tongue in cheek. I can think of a few items—natural reproductions of sounds in Classical music—but this is always just a little touch which doesn't really affect the large composition, or the whole. But much of what Satie is doing is aesthetically—well, it's just like the things we're hearing in the background here. He is introducing

elements which take exception to the very fact that music has to be taken seriously, and here we sit with a tape recorder going and everything against us in the way of lawnmowers and children swimming in the brook next to us. Should the whole thing be cut off at this point because it's being interfered with? The answer would be, according to this aesthetic, no. It must contain this as a part of itself.

JC: I think being open to the environment is a point of view, as you say Roger, close to Satie's use of his music in the society.

RS: I have to admit that much as I am ready to accept in aesthetic terms what Satie calls 'furniture music',⁵ that is, music which is to exist within our environment as furnitures does in our rooms . . .

JC: . . . and to which we need not pay special attention . . .

RS: —yes, to which we need not pay attention—I nevertheless do a slow burn whenever I walk into an airport and have to listen to the canned muzak. Now this is a contradiction in terms. When it comes from Satie it seems to be all right. But when it comes from the commercial establishment piped into airline terminals or any other kind of place where you are a victim of circumstances, it seems outrageous. I've never been able to reconcile this because I feel I should like this kind of music.

JC: It could be reconciled by muzak's being convinced that they should record the *musique d'ameublement* of Satie and use that.

RS: And things of that quality.

JC: And then there's the Japanese composer Toshi Ichianagi who now advertises the availability from him of sound environments, so that people could for their homes or their factories have sounds which he would provide.

AG: So it really depends on the kind of muzak. I notice, John, that it's taken you a while to come to grips with the muzak phenomenon, that this is something to which you have taken exception.⁶

JC: I still have muzak in mind as a project.

AG: And you will no doubt use it in a piece in order to conquer it.

JC: I hope so.

RS: Well, the answer is that commercial pop music cannot mix with the furniture music aesthetic. Those two don't go together.

JC: Don't you think that muzak, in a very weak way, attempts to distract us from what we are doing?

RS: Well yes. I think it surrounds us with a kind of soft felt cushion against reality.

JC: Whereas I think Satie's furniture music would like us to pay attention to whatever else it was that we were doing.

RS: I haven't seen that worked out, though, as any kind of a process that would be clear. In the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance, court musicians played all the time. The aristocracy lived, I imagine, in an environment which was filled with music. Did that prevent them from hearing natural sounds and the grunts of their servants and the people being tortured in the courtyard, or did it heighten reality? I don't know. Satie wrote a good deal about this, but almost entirely again in a kind of spoofing way. I think he took it seriously, but the furniture music aesthetic has not been worked out fully in a way that really reconciles it to the way we live, or even the way they

lived in the Renaissance.

AG: Is it then that we need a better quality muzak or a more Satiean brand of muzak? I mean, why should any and all music not be fair game for this phenomenon if we accept it in a completely free and open way as perhaps Satie would have us do?

RS: Well we do. I imagine 50 per cent of the automobiles on the highway have the radio going and are existing in a medium of music, although very third- or fourth-rate music. Now I do not believe that that kind of music does anything to enhance what's going on within those automobiles. They'd do better just to listen to the whistling of the wind. So, therefore, I'd say probably yes, the question is the quality of music or the simplicity, the kind of self-effacement of the sounds that this could produce. But still it shouldn't be at all times. But if we're talking about a musician here—and I'm the only non-musician of the three of us—I'd like to ask the two of you to speak of an aspect of Satie that has troubled me. I do feel that, compared in a very obvious way to Stravinsky, Satie has a very narrow rhythmic repertory. Is this a limitation or is this a part of his style?

AG: Isn't this really part of the whole question of 'stripping the music bare to the bone'?

JC: And then seeing what you have when you get to that simplicity. It's very much like *Walden*. In going to Walden what Thoreau wanted to do was strip things to the bone, so to speak, and then see whether life was worth living. I think we can actually make a case for the correspondence between Thoreau and Satie.

RS: You're assuming, then, that simplicity is the equivalent of repetitiousness, like the heart-beat or the movement of walking or something like this?

JC: No, I'd like to answer your question a little further. If we talk about the principle of simplicity of rhythm and of repetitiveness of rhythm in Satie's writing, I think that the extreme of it might be the *Vexations*, in which you have a 13-measure cantus firmus, followed by its repetition with two voices above it; then the cantus firmus is repeated and then the two voices are heard with the top one now in the middle rather than the other way.⁷ This goes on for 18 hours and 40 minutes. Now what happens when something so simple is repeated for such a long time? What actually happens is the subtle falling away from the norm, a constant flux with regard to such things as speed and accent, all the things in fact which we could connect with rhythm. The most subtle things become evident that would not be evident in a more complex rhythmic situation. We have, I believe, many examples in contemporary visual art of things brought to an extraordinary simplicity. I recall, for instance, the white paintings of Robert Rauschenberg, which don't have any images. It's in that highly simplified situation that we are able to see such things as dust or shadows. Whereas, if we had the shadows carefully painted, as in Rembrandt, any other shadow entering the situation would be a disturbance and would not be noticeable, or if noticeable, a disturbance.

RS: That's an extremely eloquent answer, and I follow it and I even would support it, particularly in the case of the *Vexations*, which is, however, an extreme case. It's the kind of thing that I feel can't be done again.

JC: I think that a proper performance of Satie's music will bring about subtle oscillations simply because it would be intolerable to have that music, with its more or less regular beats, kept extremely regular. In other

words, the very fact of their simplicity and regularity calls for the kinds of subtle differences that go with, say, breathing. And I think, finally, the rhythm of Satie becomes not interesting at the point of the beat, but it becomes definitely interesting at the point of the phrase. And there you will find that the phrases are not repeated, but are in fact varied in the most interesting way.

RS: The way I was attracted to Satie's music is ridiculous and a little bit backwards. I was working at the time on the poet Apollinaire, who rejected all punctuation. When he published his first book of poetry he was so annoyed with the printer's errors that had been introduced into his text he said 'To hell with it, I'll get rid of all punctuation', and he had them eliminate every punctuation mark in the entire book. This corresponds somewhat to Satie's elimination of the bar-lines, and it is a very striking thing to anyone who knows a little bit about music and looks into a Satie score. There are just no bar-lines. How do you find your way?

JC: I think that Thoreau also omitted punctuation. And I know Ives did. They've only been added editorially since.

RS: Yes, Cummings did; Pound often in his poetry omitted punctuation. Gertrude Stein said a comma is something which you only use if you have to have a hook on which to hang your hat and that you should be able to do without it.

AG: This idea of finding your way in the music: isn't this going a little bit against the grain of the Satie aesthetic? Finding your way—that very expression suggests temporality, progress, movement. Isn't this exactly what the composer was consciously or unconsciously trying to avoid?

JC: You mean that Satie was perhaps not interested in moving along, that he was content with where he was?

AG: His pieces seem to revolve around an axis: the *Gymnopédies*, for example—those undulating lines that continually turn back on themselves.

JC: I have the feeling, too, especially in those pieces written between 1912 and 1915, that some phrases could be taken out of one piece and put into another without any serious damage, even aesthetically.

RS: This is true between *Socrate*, his most serious, apparently ambitious piece, and the 'Entr'acte cinématographique' from *Relâche*, which is a little bit of movie music he wrote for René Clair's film *Entr'acte*, the first use of film, I believe, in a ballet. There are sections there which are very close and are practically interchangeable. In fact the whole idea of repetition as a portion of furniture music and of movie music is something very central to all this.

AG: Why should Satie continue to puzzle and disturb some people when the likes of Alfred Jarry, Marcel Duchamp, and many others like them have been embraced by the critical fraternity with relative ease? Why is it that the comic spirit has never really been allowed to penetrate freely the musical arts, while even an outrageous brand of humour has long been acceptable in literature, painting, theatre, for example?

RS: This could be an economic thing, couldn't it? A musician—unless, as Satie has, he can survive as a literary type, a man whose works are read without having to be performed—is in a bit of a bind. He has to be able to put together some musicians and an audience in order to survive. Neither the writer nor the painter has to do that.

JC: And Satie's music in performance has never seemed—say, to a German-controlled concert-giving organisation—to be sufficiently heavy.

RS: And we don't have the performers who know how to do it. Rare is the performer who has the wit.

JC: And most soloists have wished to appear skilful in public, and for that they needed to play difficult pieces, and for the most part Satie's pieces seem too simple.

AG: It seems to me a good part of the explanation is simply the fact that the German hegemony had been so complete in the last two centuries that we have inherited a very Germanic view of music.

JC: But we're getting free of it.

RS: Satie has, of course, survived as a literary type. It's odd, but I think that, were it not for the fact that he had written as much as he had, he might very well have succumbed and practically disappeared. But since he does have an appeal through the amazing fact that not only was he active in the nineties but was also a kind of godfather and master of dada in the twenties, we think of him as a person who is at home as much with the written word as with musical sounds. He seems so much the perfect expression of the magical city of Paris in an era when it was at its best, between 1885 and the early 1920s. This is exactly the time during which he was active, during which he had two complete careers: one as a kind of anti-impressionist trying to be the conscience of Debussy and the discoverer of Ravel, and then he went underground and came out about 15 years later, and people thought they would discover the old man who had lived all these times ago, and on the contrary he was a completely new figure, had remade himself, and was more at home in the twenties than many of the youngsters who were all around him.

AG: John, there are many parallels, I think, between you and Satie, and perhaps we could explore a few of them. One of Virgil Thomson's statements strikes me as being particularly apt. He said: 'Of all the influential composers of our time, an influence even his detractors cannot deny him, Satie is the only one whose works can be enjoyed and appreciated without any knowledge of the history of music.'⁸ Now perhaps Thomson would not appreciate my taking liberties with his statement, but it strikes me that this is particularly applicable to you.

JC: Well, I must say I'd be happy if it were. I'm not familiar with that statement of Virgil Thomson's, but I like it. And I think that spirit of breaking with the past

RS: . . . but if you break with the past you have to know what the past is; he's saying that it isn't even a break with the past, isn't he? If you don't have to know the history of music, you're unaware of breaks.

JC: Satie himself had a feeling that in his early music he was not sufficiently educated, that he hadn't sufficiently made a connection with the past, isn't that true?

RS: Yes. I think that's why he went back to school—and found it really wasn't necessary. There's a period in there where I think he is testing himself or testing the history of music, perhaps, to see if he can bring himself into another relationship to it. But he dropped it quite fast even though, in good faith, I guess, he worked on his fugues and voice-leading, and all the other things.

AG: John, there's another area here that intrigues me

and I'd like to get your view of it. In 1963, from 6 p.m. September 9 to 12.40 p.m. September 10 . . .

JC: . . . this sounds like Watergate . . .

AG: . . . you made avant-garde history by presenting, with a team of ten pianists working in shifts, the world première of Satie's *Vexations*, which, as you've noted already, is a rather innocuous series of 36 diminished and augmented chords which the composer directs to be repeated 840 times. The performance lasted 18 hours and 40 minutes and was covered, I believe, by a team of eight critics from the *New York Times*.⁹ Now Darius Milhaud, who was, as you know, intimately acquainted with Satie in the 1920s, has taken exception to this performance. He suggested that Satie would not have approved of such a caper, that his essential *pudeur*, or modesty, would not have allowed it. How would you react to Milhaud's criticism?

JC: I think that the piece was a perfectly serious piece which the French, including Milhaud, had not taken seriously. I first found it in a drawer at Henri Sauguet's; he brought it out as a joke on Satie's part which he claimed that Satie himself had not taken seriously. But if you just look at the manuscript of the *Vexations* you see how beautifully it was written. It was written no less beautifully than anything else he wrote. Curiously enough, the textual remarks in connection with the *Vexations* are not humorous; they are in the spirit of Zen Buddhism. It says at the beginning of the piece not to play it until you have put yourself in a state of interior immobility, and it very clearly says that it is to be done 840 times. Satie had a concern for inactivity and for repetition far beyond, say, even Andy Warhol, not only in terms of time but in terms of extent of activity.

RS: This is one of the things to which I would genuinely apply the term 'consciousness expansion'. It is an absolute act of concentration upon a single entity.

JC: There was not the true connection between Milhaud (and Les Six) and Satie that we have automatically taken for granted. I think they were all quite different from Satie, and I don't think they really understood much Satie.

AG: John, it seems to me that Satie's *Vexations* and your 'silent' piece, or so-called silent piece, 4'33", achieve much the same effect . . .

JC: . . . except that one is very short and one is very long.

AG: True. The effect is achieved, perhaps, by almost opposite means, but it is nevertheless much the same. After the first performance of *Vexations* in New York you noted, and I quote, that 'something had been set in motion that went far beyond what any of us had anticipated'.¹⁰ What exactly did you mean by that statement?

JC: If you know a piece of music, as we did, and you're going to do it 840 times, and you know that you've planned to do that, and you're committed to do it, there's a tendency to think that you have had the experience before it has taken place. And I think that this idea is basic, is it not, to what is called conceptual art?

RS: Yes, except it doesn't even have to take place.

JC: Right. I have often been connected with conceptual art because of my interest in such things as playing Satie's *Vexations*. But I feel very different. I think that the experience over the 18 hours and 40

minutes of those repetitions was very different from the thought of them, or the realisation that they were going to happen. For them to actually happen, to actually live through it, was a different thing. What happened was that we were very tired, naturally, after that length of time and I drove back to the country—I lived here at Stony Point but in another place—and I slept I think for, not 18 hours and 40 minutes, but I slept for, say 10 hours and 15 minutes. I slept an unusually long period of time, and when I woke up, I felt different than I had ever felt before. And furthermore, the environment that I looked out upon looked unfamiliar even though I had been living there. In other words, I had changed and the world had changed, and that's what I meant by that statement. It wasn't an experience that I alone had, but other people who had been in it wrote to me or called me up and said that they had had the same experience.

AG: And this is very similar to the reactions you have gotten to 4'33", even though the time span is so much smaller.

JC: Yes.

RS: Well now John we may be way out over our heads. A few moments ago we were talking about 'furniture music', an aesthetic which permits us to think of music as something which can fade into the background, be there like the flowers sitting in the pot over there at which we cast an occasional eye on to, or the hammock, or the trees and the leaves around us. Now we're talking about a kind of music diametrically opposed to that, in the form of a spiritual exercise which requires total concentration . . .

JC: . . . and a change of mind . . .

RS: . . . a dedication of one's entire being to the performance which is in progress or about to take place. You're quite right in saying that this is the opposite of conceptual art; it is the performance as a spiritual crisis, like St Ignatius Loyola who talked about prayer or telling beads. The act of telling beads could either be a trivial act, a kind of 'furniture' act, or it could be a profound conversion of one's self. But the questions are: Are we talking about two quite different sides of Satie's music—the 'furniture' and the 'meditative'—or do they meet somewhere?

JC: They meet.

RS: I prefer to think of their meeting, but we can't always assume that just because we want them to meet they do. I think it has to do with something like telling one's beads or rubbing stones, which is both a totally ridiculous and trivial thing, but also the very mechanical, automatic process which gives you access to something great.

JC: And which involves devotion, yes.

AG: The *Vexations* in its complete, or 18 hour, version, suggests another important aspect of Satie's contemporaneity, that is, the role of boredom. I'd like to refer to a statement in your book, Roger, where you say that Satie challenges us not to be impressed but to be bored.¹¹ I wonder if you would comment on this?

RS: Well, we've been talking about it. Everything we've said in the last few minutes has to do precisely with this. When do you cross the threshold between boredom and a total overhaul of one's consciousness? You don't know when. Satie himself commented perpetually on boredom. He said experience is a form of paralysis; boredom is something we are obsessed with. He speaks of the bourgeois being obsessed with

boredom. But it is something which could be a friend and an ally if we're not afraid of it. And again I think all of these things—boredom, experience, silence—are very tentative means of approaching this critical point, almost in the physical sense that the physicist would use, the critical point where something changes state. Boredom is one way of doing it. When you play the *Vexations* over and over again your first reaction obviously is to be bored. But if you do it long enough it becomes a highly refined thing. It is in fact highly subtle variation, and our eternal fear of boredom is probably very closely related to our fear of age. And here is where Satie fulfils both of these: he was able to conquer the myth of age and be at an old age as youthful as anyone.

AG: Do you think that it would be reasonable to view Satie's concept of boredom—a piece like *Vexations*, for example—as an aspect of the avant garde in the sense that it was an antagonistic act? That is to say, the most outrageous thing you can do is bore your audience. This is the supreme insult.

RS: Yes. I'd accept that fairly quickly. It's not the only way. But it is a much more subtle way than straight scandal, than undressing in public, or dirty words, or any number of other quite obvious ways of *épater le bourgeois*. It is much more subtle and outrageous simply to bore them and still do it in the name of something called music.

JC: It apparently has to do with the sale of tickets. People think that if they've bought a ticket they must not be bored. I think, though, that we now have an audience that doesn't sit in rows, that sits on the floor or wherever, that is prepared to stay for a long time and to have quite a different experience from an exciting one. You know of Tantric Buddhism where the discipline is to quiet the mind in a situation where the mind would normally not be quiet, such as in the act of making love or sitting cross-legged on top of a corpse? What we might propose as a sequel to the Satie discipline is being bored while listening to Beethoven.

RS: There is another element here—and this is a pet theory of mine—that the source of this in Satie, as it may have been in quite different terms in Wordsworth or Rimbaud, is the act of walking. Satie walked endlessly across Paris. After he moved to the outskirts he lived six miles from his place of work and usually walked both ways each day. Someone calculated that Wordsworth in his lifetime walked 24,000 good English miles. He walked everywhere. He never took a horse. And Rimbaud walked everywhere; Vachel Lindsey, Mayakovsky, and there are many other instances. These are all poets or musicians who composed while putting one foot in front of the other in a fairly boring, if you want, physical act, which nevertheless has its relationship to the heart-beat and the universe.

JC: We come back to Thoreau again.

RS: Thoreau, too. I think that the source of Satie's sense of musical beat—the possibility of variation within repetition, the effect of boredom upon the organism—may be this endless amount of walking back and forth across the same landscape day after day, and finally taking it all in, which is basically what Thoreau did: the total observation of a very limited and narrow environment.

AG: Roger, there's one last question I would like to put to you. I think you will agree that 'the banquet years', that marvellous explosion of avant-garde activity at the turn of the century, could only have

happened in France. What was it about the intellectual climate of France in the period leading up to the First War that made this possible?

RS: That's, I suppose, a question of cultural history and all kinds of things. My answer to that is not too far from some of the things that we've said. Somehow for those years, and it's still present but diminished, I think the populace of Paris, and particularly its artists, achieved a sense of what I call theatricality. They sensed themselves present at what seemed to be the centre of a most exciting cultural activity. They were willing to take this responsibility upon themselves. And they refused no outsiders: it was the most open-armed situation. Anyone who came from America, from Spain, Germany, and elsewhere was welcomed. There wasn't a sense of it all having to belong to a single culture. And for reasons I can't explain, things were popping in painting, from impressionism on down to cubism, in literature from symbolism to Rimbaud to what eventually became everything we know of as modernism. And in music there was the need to explode the Wagnerian domination of French music. It's a coincidence that these things should come from many directions and meet on the platform that was called Paris. The world was much smaller then, something we tend to forget. And in any particular discipline almost everybody knew everyone else, something which is not even true any longer in New York, where there are all kinds of competing groups.

JC: Nor in Paris now.

RS: And in Paris, too.

JC: Because of the one-way streets, perhaps.

RS: Or just the automobiles. But when you had to walk—again I'll bring this in—sit in the café, and you weren't able to go off for weekends or go away for the summer, as many people weren't able to do, then the arena was there and it was necessary to perform simply in being yourself day in and day out. Beyond that I have no explanation, except to say that the individuals came along who could fulfil it.

AG: One of Jean Cocteau's characteristic statements I find rather appropriate in this respect; he refers to France's inimitable secret weapon as her tradition of anarchy.¹²

JC: That I like.

RS: Yes. Anarchism was very close to it all. The bombs were going off all over throughout this.¹³

JC: And then we come back to Thoreau: 'The best form of government is no government at all.'

¹ Ne vous vengez pas sur votre instrument . . . Les instruments subissent souvent . . . de bien mauvais traitements . . . On les bats . . . J'ai connu des enfants qui prenaient plaisir . . . à marcher sur les pieds de leur piano . . . D'autres . . . ne replacent leur violon . . . dans sa boîte . . . Alors, . . . la pauvre bête . . . prend froid . . . & s'enrhume . . . Ce n'est pas beau . . . Non . . . Quelques-uns . . . versent du tabac à priser dans leur trombone—ce qui est très désagréable . . . pour l'instrument . . . En soufflant, . . . ils projettent cette irritante poussière . . . dans la figure . . . de leur voisin, . . . lequel éternue & crache . . . pendant plus d'une demi-heure . . . Pouch! . . . Les exercices se font le matin, . . . après le petit déjeuner . . . Il faut être très propre . . . S'être bien mouché . . . Ne pas se mettre au travail avec les doigts pleins de confiture . . . Non plus qu'il ne faut pas se déranger—toutes les cinq minutes—pour aller chercher des bonbons, . . . du nougat, . . . du sucre d'orge, . . . des biscuits, . . . du

chocolat, . . . ou autres choses du même genre'. From a lecture by Satie called 'Les enfants musiciens', read in Paris on 17 February 1921 at a 'Soirée pour les jeunes' organised by Mme Jeanne Alvin at the Salle de l'Étoile, 17 rue Chateaubriand; published in *Erik Satie, Écrits*, ed. Ornella Volta (Paris: Éditions Champ Libre, rev. 2/1981), pp.81-7. The translation given here was extemporised by Roger Shattuck on the occasion of the conversation.

² See Roger Shattuck, *Proust* (London: Fontana, 1974).

³ Further on this point see Rollo H. Myers, 'A Music Critic in Paris in the Nineteen-Twenties: Some Personal Recollections', *Musical Quarterly*, vol.63 (1977), pp.537ff.

⁴ Satie affixed the following note to the score of *Heures séculaires et instantanées* (1914): 'A quiconque: Je défends de lire, à haute voix, le texte, durant le temps de l'exécution musicale. Tout manquement à cette observation entraînerait ma juste indignation contre l'outrecuidant. Il ne sera accordé aucun passe-droit.' (To whomsoever: I forbid the reading of the text out loud during the performance of the music. Failure to conform with these instructions will cause the transgressor to incur my just indignation. Special dispensation will be granted to no one.)

⁵ Satie himself originated the term 'musique d'ameublement' (furniture or furnishing music). The painter Fernand Léger, who often accompanied Satie on his long walks across Paris to his suburban lodgings in Arcueil, recalled a luncheon meeting with the composer and some of his friends during which the resident orchestra became so boisterously loud that the diners were forced to vacate the premises, whereupon Satie turned to Léger and said: 'There's a need to create furnishing music, that is to say, a music which would be a part of the surrounding noises and which would take them into account. I imagine it to be melodious, softening the clatter of knives and forks without dominating them, without imposing itself. It would fill up the awkward silences that occasionally descend on guests. It would spare them the usual banalities. Moreover, it would neutralise the street noises that tactlessly force themselves into the picture.' (Il y a tout de même à réaliser une musique d'ameublement, c'est-à-dire une musique qui ferait partie des bruits ambiants, qui en tiendrait compte. Je la suppose mélodieuse, elle adoucirait le bruit des couteaux, des fourchettes sans les dominer, sans s'imposer. Elle meublerait les silences pesants parfois entre les convives. Elle leur épargnerait les banalités courantes. Elle neutraliserait en même temps les bruits de la rue qui entrent dans le jeu sans discrétion. Fernand Léger, 'Satie inconnu', *La revue musicale*, no.214 (1952), p.137)

⁶ Cage is inconsistent on the subject of muzak: 'If I liked muzak, which I also don't like, the world would become more open to me. I intend to work on it.' (Quotation from an article of 1966, reprinted in Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *John Cage* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), p.51) But in a letter to Paul Henry Lang in 1956 he wrote: 'having written radio music has enabled me to accept . . . the television, radio, and Muzak [sounds], which nearly constantly and everywhere offer themselves. Formerly, for me, they were a source of irritation. Now, they are just as lively as ever, but I have changed. I am more and more realizing, that is to say, that I have ears and can hear.' (Kostelanetz, p.118)

⁷ Like most of Satie's music, *Vexations* dispenses with bar-lines. Cage is referring to the fact that the 13-beat theme is heard altogether four times, with the interpolation of the cantus firmus between its two harmonised versions (see Example 4 in Alan Gillmor, 'Satie, Cage, and the New Asceticism', also in this issue).

⁸ Virgil Thomson, 'French Music Here', *Music Reviewed: 1940-1954* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p.33.

⁹ See 'Satie's "Vexations" Played 840 Times by Relay Team', *New York Times* (11 September 1963), pp.45, 48. The performers were: Viola Farber, Robert Wood, Mac Rae Cook, John Cale, John Cage, Christian Wolff, David Del Treddici, David Tudor, Philip Corner, and James Tenney, with brief appearances by Joshua Rifkin and *New York Times* critic Howard Klein who stepped in for a missing pianist between 9 a.m. and 11 a.m. on Tuesday 10 September. The marathon performance was covered by the following critics: Harold C. Schonberg, Richard F. Shepard, Raymond Ericson, Brian O'Doherty, Sam Zolotow, Howard Klein, Marjorie Rubin, and one anonymous reviewer who entered the hall at 4 a.m. on Tuesday 10 September and promptly fell asleep. 'I couldn't help it', he said when his relief man woke him. 'The music was positively Zen.'

¹⁰ Quoted in Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors: the Heretical Courtship in Modern Art* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965), p.104.

¹¹ Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: the Origins of the Avant-Garde in France 1885 to World War I* (New York: Vintage Books, rev. 2/1968), p.185.

¹² 'If other nations ask France what her armaments are she can reply: "I have none. I have a secret weapon." If asked what that is, she will say that one does not reveal a secret weapon. If they insist, she'll lose nothing by showing her secret because it is inimitable. It is her tradition of anarchy.' Jean Cocteau, *Beauty and the Beast: Diary of a Film*, trans. Ronald Duncan (New York: Dover Publications, 1972), p.126.

¹³ Shattuck is speaking of the years 1885-1914, what he calls 'the banquet years', and he is referring to the fact that anarchist activity in Paris during that period was particularly rampant, with assassinations and bombings almost daily occurrences.

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