

**POINTS & LINES:  
THE MUSICAL LANGUAGE OF ERIK SATIE**

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**Abstract**

When publications on Erik Satie's life and work began to appear in the years following his death, one of the more striking assessments of his career came from the composer and monastic Maxime (later Dom Clément) Jacob. Writing in *L'Exemple d'Erik Satie*, Jacob observed of his friend that "the most extraordinary thing is that he traveled directly, right from his earliest compositions, towards the technique that suited him, and from the *Ogives* to *Relâche* the spirit of that technique never varied."

This dissertation takes seriously Jacob's provocative claim that the music of Erik Satie, despite its remarkable breadth of experimentation over four decades of personal and cultural transformation, is unified by the same idiosyncratic technique. The first of half of my essay examines the tiny *Allegro* (1884), Satie's earliest known composition, identifying nine inchoate aspects of that technique: (1) textual intervention, (2) quotation, (3) mosaic construction, (4) harmonic ambiguity, (5) conceptual development, (6) economy of material and expression, (7) mixture of high- and low-brow elements, (8) repetition and (9) antiphonal relationships.

The second half of the essay tracks the ways in which these nine topics persist in Satie's work, from the two 1885 piano waltzes, *Valse-ballet* and *Fantaisie-valse*, until *Cinéma*, the score the composer wrote for René Clair's cinematic interlude for the ballet *Relâche* in 1924.

Framing this dissertation is significant consideration of Satie's biographical details intended to explore the underpinnings of the composer's singular poetics. I suggest that

Satie's aesthetic is essentially escapist. His early works were imbued with obsessive anachronism. He distanced himself with relish from the conventions of his craft: form, counterpoint, harmonic and motivic development. His score for the early ballet *Uspud* rejected the convention that the music should in some way engage the onstage action, just as the late ballet *Relâche* questioned the use of music at all. As though fleeing an uncomfortable intimacy with his audience, Satie imbued his works with a hermeticism which was by turns absurd and bewildering. Even the relatively candid subtexts of the works *Danses Gothiques* and *Trois poèmes d'amour*—both concerning affairs of the heart—feature inexplicable oddities which prevent too much personal disclosure from their composer.

My work *Littoral* (2006-7), scored for flute, percussion and 5.1 surround-sound tape, represents the composition portion of this dissertation. A half-hour meditation on time and distance, the heart of the piece is Cees Nooteboom's poem *Cartography*, which figures in the tape part, read by the author. *Littoral* represents the culmination of my electroacoustic work undertaken at Princeton University.