REVERSO SATIE PROJECT REVISED
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Has there ever been another composer in Western classical music as simultaneously admired and misunderstood as Erik Satie? Deemed an eccentric in his day – a view he cultivated as a long-haired bohemian in top hat and frock coat – Satie is understood now to have been an innovative maverick, an artist who set the stage for musical postmodernism, minimalism, even ambient music. His influence extends beyond his peers and proteges, encompassing such disparate creators as John Cage, John Adams, Brian Eno, and Gary Numan.

“Satie’s music has a rare balance of clarity and mystery,” says French pianist Frank Woeste, a founding member of the distinctive trans-Atlantic triumvirate Reverso, whose new album, *Between Two Silences,* pays tribute to this most singular and enigmatic of French composers. “Beneath its apparent simplicity, there’s an emotional ambiguity and a quiet radicalism that still feels modern,” Woeste says. “His refusal of excess, his dry humor, and his distance from romantic grandiosity resonate strongly with me. His music feels both intimate and conceptually bold, stripped of ornament yet full of personality.”

It should come as no surprise that Reverso – Woeste, American trombonist Ryan Keberle, and French cellist Vincent Courtois – should take an interest in Satie. The band’s signature series of albums honoring the great French concert-music composers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries has previously paid homage to Maurice Ravel and the collective Les Six—all of whom were inspired profoundly by Satie.

Born in 1866 in Honfleur, a rustic fishing town in Normandy, Satie rose above his conservative early training and brief, traumatic military service to establish himself as a pianist in Montmartre café-cabarets during the 1880s. It was during this period that he composed some of his most celebrated works for solo piano. At a time when the harmonic density and emotional intensity of Richard Wagner and his disciples was dominant, the deceptive simplicity and seductive sway of early Satie works like *Trois Gymnopédies* (1888) and *Gnossiennes* (1889–97) were a persuasive alternate route.

His aim could be droll and disruptive at once: with *Vexations* (1893), a succinct motif ostensibly meant to be repeated 840 times (and first presented that way by John Cage in 1963), Satie seemingly anticipated and reconciled total chromaticism, minimalism, and performance art. In 1917 he introduced the notion of *furniture music,* forebear to Brian Eno’s ambient-music pursuits. Sophisticated collaborations with artists like poet

and director Jean Cocteau, artist Pablo Picasso, and impresario Sergei Diaghilev further ensured Satie's stature prior to his premature death of cirrhosis of the liver at age 59.

His music has long fascinated jazz composers and improvisers, who've issued one-off covers and even entire albums of Satie reworkings. But rather than rendering Satie's compositions in the manner of offbeat jazz standards, Reverso instead offers entirely new music inspired by elements of the composer's life, character, and musical style.

"I was attracted to Satie's use of space, slow harmonic rhythm, sense of humor, and quirky yet beautiful music," Keberle says of the music he wrote for *Between Two Silences.* "I think that many of these characteristics are also found in Monk's music," he continues, "so I was thinking a bit about Monk while I composed my three songs."

Woeste similarly sought to evoke aspects of Satie's spirit and idiom. "I was drawn to Satie's restraint, his sense of irony, and his way of letting silence and space carry meaning," he explains. "Rather than borrowing his themes, I responded to his attitude: a music that is direct but elusive, rigorous yet playful, and emotionally open without being demonstrative."

Courtois reckons Satie would have appreciated Reverso's idiosyncratic instrumentation. He honors the composer's penchant for quirky titles with his own "Désespoir agréable" ("Pleasant despair") and "Choral Hypocrite" ("Hypocritical choir").

"More than for any other composer, the character and his strange, mysterious, and miserable life cannot be dissociated from the music," Courtois says. "Satie represents an entire era, but also emblematic and contrasting places: the cabarets of Montmartre versus the Parisian suburbs at the beginning of the 20th century. And then, of course, humor is always present in Satie's work, which is close to the Dadaist movement. Poetry, absurdity, and provocation are three elements that I try to keep in mind, especially in the most improvised moments."

What results is a set of original compositions representing an artistic conversation among three creative musicians with individual viewpoints and a fourth participant more than a century distant. With *Between Two Silences,* Keberle, Woeste, and Courtois once again find inspiration in the art of an estimable forebear—and then tap into the spirit of that art and its maker to fashion something elegant, persuasive, and wholly new.

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