

“Musical Furniture!”: Erik Satie and Art Nouveau

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ABSTRACT

While scholars have noted French composer Erik Satie’s association with Impressionists, Dadaists, Cubists, and Surrealists, they have struggled to make his music fit within the bounds of his friends’ movements. Certain aspects of Satie’s life and work—namely, repetition, preoccupation with interiors, and a penchant for ornamental details—point more clearly to correspondence with a previously unexamined possibility: Art Nouveau. Highlighting Art Nouveau as the best of many possible interpretive lenses for Satie, this paper examines the movement during Satie’s primary years of activity, anecdotal information about Satie’s life, and the large collection of writings and drawings he left behind.

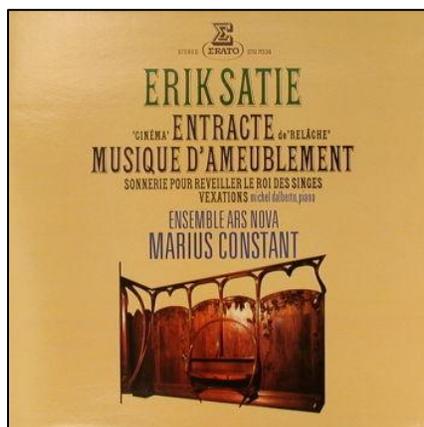


Figure 1: Album cover for collection of Satie's works, featuring the *musique d'ameublement*.¹

In 1917, French composer Erik Satie added the following words to a manuscript for the curiously-titled piece, *Tapisserie en fer forgé pour l'arrivée des invités {grande reception}*: “No more ‘fake music’: musical furniture! ‘Furniture music’ completes the décor; It makes everything possible; It is worth its weight in Gold; It is new; It does not disturb your habits; It is not tiring; It is French; It is unusable; It is not boring.”² Written in his characteristic calligraphy (see Figure 2), Satie’s argument for *la musique d’ameublement*, or furniture music, provides a small glimpse into his idiosyncratic life and career. The album shown in Figure 1 represents the sole attempt at recording the *musique d’ameublement*, and it points to a clue that may help to decipher Satie’s “musical furniture”: the choice of Art Nouveau artisan Alexandre Charpentier’s wooden paneling to represent the composer’s work.

In letters and remembrances by those who knew him well, references to the composer’s eccentricities often occupy as large a place as do discussions of his music. This legacy of

¹ Ars Nova Ensemble, et al. *Erik Satie* [LP cover] (Paris: Erato, 1981). http://www.hamburger-kunsthalle.de/sammlungav/html_sammlung/s/satie_1983_40.html

² Erik Satie, *A Mammal’s Notebook*, ed. by Ornella Volta, translated by Antony Melville (London: Atlas Press, 1996), 198. “Wrought Iron Tapestry for the Arrival of Guests {Grand Reception}”

peculiarity, expressed in many of Satie's compositions and exemplified in his personality, has consigned the composer to a more obscure fate than those of his contemporaries, Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel. But while audiences continue to find themselves puzzled by his short, spare pieces, scholars have begun to appreciate the extent of Satie's innovations, with Robert Orledge claiming that Satie "exerted a wider and more liberating influence on the twentieth century" than either Debussy or Ravel.³

Orledge's role as Satie's biographer points to the importance of historical context in evaluating Satie's work. Divorced from its cultural milieu, Satie's music does indeed strike the listener as strange and inaccessible; however, an exploration of his music alongside developments in other arts in Paris at the time offers possible illumination for his compositional choices. This paper will thus employ an interdisciplinary approach in discussing Satie, examining the visual and decorative arts as well as Parisian culture during his primary years of activity from 1880 to 1920. Art Nouveau, the French iteration of an aesthetic movement that dominated Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century (or *fin de siècle*), coincided with Satie's life and offers us a new lens through which to view him. As hinted above, the seemingly bizarre experiment with *musique d'ameublement* may appear more logical when considered within the wider context of Art Nouveau principles regarding function and beauty in art.

Besides Satie's association with the cabarets whose posters have come to symbolize Art Nouveau, three other elements of his life and work—interiority, repetition, and ornament—point to connections with the movement. Debora Silverman's work on Art Nouveau highlights the importance of interior spaces, both physical and mental, as a factor in

³ Robert Orledge, *Satie the Composer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 262-263.

the emphasis on decorative and craft arts during the 1890s and 1900s in Paris. As the tempo of modern life increased, both physicians and authors were preoccupied with the internal nervous state, and their concerns were reflected in Art Nouveau's focus on the internal space of the home. As the *musique d'ameublement* demonstrates, a fixation on the hidden and private, as well as the home and its furnishings, also characterized Satie's life and work. After his death, friends and relatives, entering his small room for the first time, found notebooks and pages filled with advertisements for dream homes Satie had imagined and designed, with accompanying illustrations.

Musicologist Gurminder Kaur Bhogal helpfully highlights the importance of ornamentation in the music and art created in *fin-de-siècle* Paris. Aware of the word *ornament*'s ambiguity, its different application across the arts, and its sometimes contradictory use, Bhogal focuses on the ways in which artists and musicians sought to elevate elements of a less essential and merely decorative nature to a more central role in their compositions. In *Details of Consequence: Ornament, Music, and Art in Paris*, she writes that “composers were ultimately drawn to the ambiguity of decorative gestures; that is, ornament’s ability to occupy the background—as suggested by its appearance—and the foreground—as a consequence of its actions—often at one and the same time.”⁴ When viewed from this perspective, Satie’s *musique d'ameublement* has much in common with the aesthetic principles of Art Nouveau decorative and craft arts. Other aspects of decoration and ornamentation in Satie’s work are of a non-musical nature, such as the outlandish titles he gave his compositions, the additions of seemingly superfluous text to his manuscripts, and his artistically drafted scores.

⁴ Gurminder Kaur Bhogal, *Details of Consequence: Ornament, Music and Art in Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 10.

Biographies of Satie often highlight the irony of such an “hermetic” composer’s wide-ranging connections among the leading cultural figures of his time; artists such as Picasso and Man Ray, composers Debussy and Stravinsky, Diaghilev the Russian ballet impresario, and ex-pat author Gertrude Stein serve as just a few examples. While Satie lived and worked somewhat monastically, the “circle of Satie,” as Nancy Perloff terms it, naturally provided vast resources for interaction and inspiration, even when Satie composed in his isolated quarters outside of Paris.⁵ The tendency to situate Satie according to the diverse musical and artistic movements of his friends has presented scholars with a dilemma: Satie never seems to “fit” neatly within the boundaries of those movements despite his association with their adherents. He rejected Wagner and his overblown Romanticism and stayed aloof from the hazy qualities of his friend Debussy’s musical Impressionism. He also never fully committed to aesthetic experiments like Surrealism, Cubism, or Dada, even though he spent the last ten years of his life working in the artistic circles that fostered these creative expressions.

As much as these considerations of other movements have offered helpful insight into Satie’s aesthetic decisions, his biographers seem to have ignored possible connections between Satie and Art Nouveau.⁶ Similarly, although Paris served as the center of much of the *fin de siècle*’s cultural activity, Art Nouveau historians such as Silverman have not attempted to draw connections between that movement in the arts and simultaneous developments in French music. Like the other artistic movements mentioned above, Art

⁵ Nancy Perloff, *Art and the Everyday: Popular Entertainment and the Circle of Erik Satie* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

⁶ Pierre-Daniel Templier, Satie’s first biographer, did not address the composer’s relationship to Art Nouveau, but instead established a tradition amongst biographers, such as Steven Whiting, James Harding, Robert Orledge, and Ornella Volta, of viewing Satie strictly according to the Cubist, Dada, and Surrealist artists with whom he associated during the later and more successful third of his life.

Nouveau cannot provide a definitive category in which to place Satie's music; it can, however, provide a different perspective for reconsidering and revaluing it.

The term Art Nouveau conjures up visions of the playful Métropolitain entrances designed by Hector Guimard, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's paintings of dancers in the cabarets of Montmartre, and the exotically curving details found in architecture across Paris. While Art Nouveau seems quintessentially Parisian, it was also part of a broader movement in the arts that swept Europe from the late 1880s through the first decade of the twentieth century.⁷ Although territorial boundaries often determined adherence to a certain aesthetic philosophy and style until the latter half of the nineteenth century, a type of "Continental" culture appeared among the upper classes as improvements in transportation and communication blurred the lines between European nations. A period of relative peace among European nations, the continued popularity of the Grand Tour of other European countries, and the growth of the middle class paved the way for the development of a certain pan-European mindset. Advances in technology, combined with European and American colonization during the period of the New Imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, encouraged the production of world's fairs and expositions. These displays of advances in industry and the arts contributed to a growing sense of internationalism, as well as a feeling of shared culture among the middle and upper classes of Western nations as ideas and trends were exchanged across borders.

Within this context, Art Nouveau appeared by the 1890s as an artistic movement with international appeal.⁸ The multiplicity of Art Nouveau's sources guaranteed its acceptance by

⁷ Gabriel P. Weisberg, et al., *The Origins of L'Art Nouveau: The Bing Empire* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 9-10.

⁸ Gabriel P. Weisberg, *Art Nouveau Bing: Paris Style 1900* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1986), 7.

leading cultural figures across Europe, and allowed the movement to take on subtle differences from country to country while still maintaining its central principles. The many names used to describe Art Nouveau and its associated acts bear witness to this fact, as it was known as *Jugendstil* in Germany, Tiffany Style in the United States, *Stile Liberty* in Italy, and *Wiener Secession* in Austria-Hungary.

The roots of Art Nouveau may perhaps lie in Victorian Great Britain, where William Morris launched the Arts and Crafts Movement as a reaction to increased industrialization. Arts and Crafts provided a starting point for the ideas of Art Nouveau in its call for the reevaluation of handmade goods, especially in the realm of home furnishings. The ideals of Arts and Crafts harmonized with the cry of “Art for art’s sake” (*L’Art pour l’art*) that went up from Oscar Wilde and his Decadent, Aesthete, and Symbolist circles of friends in London and Paris.⁹ Such a vision of extending art to every part of life might not have had much lasting significance, if not for the rise of an increasing number of *nouveaux riches* in America and Europe. Armed with money, leisure time, and a desire to establish themselves in society, members of this new class fostered the growth of Art Nouveau, and the home emerged as a new canvas for the arts.¹⁰

In France, the crucial Art Nouveau element of exoticism owed much to the efforts of German-born businessman and art collector Siegfried Bing. Bing’s interest in Japanese art and furnishings led to a career in tastemaking (a combination of what we might today call “trendsetting” and promotion) when he decided to capitalize on the mania for all things Japanese in the late nineteenth century. With the establishment of his *Maison de l’Art*

⁹ Debora Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 213.

¹⁰ Weisberg, *Art Nouveau Bing*, 8.

Nouveau in Paris, a curious hybrid between a museum and a showroom, Bing promoted the work of not only Japanese craftsmen, but also of many young artisans from across Europe. At the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris, Bing's collection reached new audiences of both Parisian and foreign visitors.¹¹

The café and cabaret culture that sprang up in the neighborhood of Montmartre, located on the outskirts of Paris, encouraged the dissemination of Art Nouveau through the eclectic décor of its spaces and the incorporation of Japanese-inspired artistic techniques in its posters. As shown in Figure 3, artists such as Théophile Steinlen and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec copied the flat dimensions and stark outlines of Japanese art, modeling their lettering after Japanese characters. They also drew inspiration from the sinuous “whiplash” curves and intricate detail seen in the art and design of the Arab world and India. One café was even named the Café du Divan Japonais, a clear reference to the link between *Japonisme* and home furnishings. Erik Satie, who worked as a musician at Le Chat Noir and contributed to a Montmartre periodical called *La Lanterne japonaise* under the name Virginie Lebeau in the late 1880s, knew this world and these influences well.¹²

As an orchestral conductor and accompanist at first Le Chat Noir and later the Auberge du Clou, Satie was in the circle of performers like Loïe Fuller, whose Art Nouveau-style pavilion at the 1900 Paris Exhibition was located near Bing's. Silverman claims that Fuller's dancing “embodied the ideals of art nouveau” due to its exoticism, the curving lines she created by way of flowing veils, and her seemingly organic energy.¹³ Fuller would later provide the lighting design for Satie's ballet *Mercury*. Satie was also acquainted with music-

¹¹ Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France*, 126. Weisberg, *Art Nouveau Bing*, 185.

¹² Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, xxi.

¹³ Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France*, 209.

hall dancer Jane Avril and painter Toulouse-Lautrec, both of whom were associated with Art Nouveau.¹⁴ Frequenting such places and befriending such people, Satie could not have escaped at least some measure of familiarity with Art Nouveau.

In addition to his exposure to the Art Nouveau world, the exoticism that characterized the movement's designs also appears in Satie's works. He was inspired to write the *Trois Gymnopédies* after reading Gustave Flaubert's *Salammbô*, a tale of the ancient Near East that influenced others, including Debussy. The Czech artist Alphonse Mucha, whose beautiful drawings of women and floral motifs have come to symbolize Art Nouveau, created a new cover for the novel in the late 1890s. Satie, like Debussy, was struck by the non-Western music he heard at the 1889 Paris Exposition, and the mystical *Gnosiennes* written that year testify to his remembrance of the Romanian folk and Javanese gamelan music he encountered there.¹⁵ Satie composed the piece shown in Figure 2, *Verset Laïque et somptueux*, for the 1900 Paris Exposition, another indication of the degree to which these exhibitions occupied a place in his world.

¹⁴ Steven Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian: From Cabaret to Concert Hall* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 524, 173.

¹⁵ Pierre-Daniel Templier, *Erik Satie* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1969), translated by Elena L. and David S. French, 11-12.



Figure 2: Example of Satie’s decoratively-written and notated manuscript for *Verset Laïque et somptueux*.¹⁶

Satie’s preoccupation with medievalism was another important factor in the otherworldly quality of his music. Biographer James Harding relates that “when [Satie] should have been attending lessons at the Conservatoire he was lurking reflectively in the dark corners of Notre-Dame cathedral. At the Bibliothèque Nationale he pored extensively over books about Gothic art by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc.” Satie’s *Quatres Ogives*, a set of piano pieces composed in the late 1880s, take their name from an architectural term describing the type of curve often seen in Gothic churches.¹⁷ Satie would also go on to found his own religious sect, the “Metropolitan Art Church of Jesus Christ the Conductor,” after a period of collaboration with Sâr Péladan’s Mystic Order of the Rose + Cross.¹⁸ In the dedication on his *Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire*, no. 45 of 1892, Debussy addressed his friend as “Erik Satie, gentle mediaeval musician who turned up in our century for the joy of his good

¹⁶ Erik Satie, “Verset Laïque et somptueux,” 1900. <http://www.satie-archives.com/web/verset.html>

¹⁷ James Harding, *Erik Satie* (New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1975), 22-23.

¹⁸ Erik Satie, 1892 letter to M. Gaultier-Garguille, in *Correspondance Presque complète*, edited by Ornella Volta (Paris: Fayard, 2000), 32.

friend Claude A. Debussy.”¹⁹ Similarly, Art Nouveau showed the influence of the Arts and Crafts and Symbolist movements that predated it, both of which had drawn inspiration from the art of the Middle Ages.

Satie liked to describe himself as coming “into the world very young, at a very old time.”²⁰ Art Nouveau, with its emphasis on youth and the energy of new life, was much like Satie, balancing the old and the new. While Satie and practitioners of Art Nouveau hearkened back to older traditions, such as medievalism and *japonisme*, they also strove to create art that would fit the rapidly changing world in which they lived. Just as many younger artists looked to Satie as an innovator and guide when he was in his forties and fifties, Gabriel Weisberg speaks of Art Nouveau as a “youth movement” that had been “orchestrated by a middle-aged man,” namely Siegfried Bing.²¹

Apart from simply inhabiting the world of Art Nouveau, Erik Satie’s life reflected a significant characteristic of the movement: a yearning for living space away from the pressures of urban life. During the twenty-seven years that he occupied a small room at 22 rue Cauchy in Arceuil, a suburb of Paris, Satie’s friends and family never entered his home.²² The composer’s brother, Conrad, recorded his impressions of a 1914 conversation in which Satie described his domestic world, one that he did not readily share with others:

Cigar boxes with celluloid folders containing notes (one slips over another, as on a calendar) on precise, unreal subjects—the notes are in calligraphic writing, meant to be looked at and all making a similar impression. Among other things there he’s got an island of his own, to escape to, more beautiful than the Mont St. Michel, with a president dressed in green, whose portrait

¹⁹ Dedication on *Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire*, no. 45, Claude Debussy to Erik Satie, reproduced in Ornella Volta, *Satie Seen Through His Letters*, translated by Michael Bullock (London: Marion Boyars, 1989), 144.

²⁰ Jerrold Seigel, *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830 -1890* (New York: Viking, 1986), 324.

²¹ Weisberg, *Art Nouveau Bing*, 66.

²² Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, xxiv.

he's drawn. (He doesn't want to show me his home, dreamer that he is, and I understand that. I'm the same in my own home. Friends' visits smash my imaginary toys and upset my thoughts where they're stacked in corners, in apparent disorder.)²³

Similarly, Art Nouveau emphasized the importance of the interiors of modern life, both physical and mental. Silverman sees a "reaction against the menace of public life" as the root of this preoccupation with hidden, interior spaces.²⁴ The modernizing efforts that Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann undertook for Napoléon III in the middle of the nineteenth century transformed Paris into a city of boulevards and parks. Haussmann's public works campaign gave the city a more contemporary feel that coincided with a louder and faster way of life for residents. While many were caught up in the excitement of this new age, others had a hard time adjusting.

Silverman details the connection between the "sensory overstimulation of the urban metropolis" and Art Nouveau's focus on the interior: "[As] the city was identified as an agent of 'neurasthenia' the interior took on new role as a soothing anaesthetizer of the citizen's overwrought nerves...The meaning of interior space was transformed by its new association with the visually charged fluidity of the "*chambre mentale*."²⁵ For many Parisians of the *fin de siècle* period, the home became both a place to escape from the nervous agitation of the city and canvas for expressing the activity of the internal state. An interest in dreams, hypnosis, and the supernatural coincided with the rage for all that was exotic and mystical.

²³ Conrad Satie, "Notes of a conversation with Satie taken down by his brother Conrad in 1914," in *Satie Remembered*, edited by Robert Orledge, translations by Roger Nichols (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1995), 160.

²⁴ Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France*, 20.

²⁵ Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France*, 79.

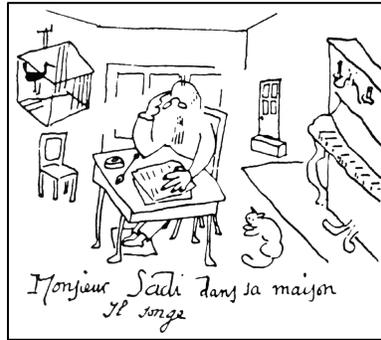


Figure 3: A drawing by Satie from a letter to Jean Cocteau, 1917. The caption reads “Monsieur Sadi [an alternate spelling used by friends in Montmartre] in his house—he’s thinking.”²⁶

As seen in Figure 3, Satie often worked in isolation. With his bent toward the medieval and mystical, he created detailed dream worlds full of homes, even going so far as to illustrate them and detail their contents for advertisements he created but never published. Satie’s descriptions were precise; one read, “Comfortable Old House of ill repute in Cast Iron. / Terrifying Appearance, / Beware of the Garden. / Crude Old Furniture. / (Belonging to a Wizard),” and another, “Medieval private Hamlet, fanciful, enclosed within high walls.”²⁷ After his death, his friends found wads of these illustrations stuffed behind his piano—interiors within interiors. Ornella Volta records how those closest to him felt upon entering his room for the first time: “According to Jean Wiéner it looked like an immense spider’s web. Robert Caby said he felt as if he were stepping into the composer’s brain.”²⁸

Silverman relates a similar preoccupation with imaginary interiors in Joris-Karl Huysmans’s character Des Esseintes, the protagonist of his Symbolist novel, *A rebours*: “[The novel] recorded the inner world of [Esseintes] through the unfolding of his experience in a succession of elaborate interiors he himself had crafted. The objects in those interiors were

²⁶ Drawing by Erik Satie on letter to Jean Cocteau, 1917.

²⁷ Satie, *A Mammal’s Notebook*, 160, 161.

²⁸ Volta, *Satie Seen Through His Letters*, 71.

the vehicles for his synaesthesia and visual fantasies.”²⁹ Satie was also interested in the idea of synesthesia, a neurological sensation made famous by French authors and poets like Marcel Proust, Charles Baudelaire, and Arthur Rimbaud. In 1914, using the pseudonym *L’Homme à la Contrebasse*, Satie even wrote an essay entitled, “Synesthésie,” for the *Revue Musicale S.I.M.*³⁰

In his book, *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830-1890*, Jerrold Seigel writes at length about Satie’s complex approach to balancing the public and the private spheres of life: “Satie hid his timidity and fear of public exposure behind a façade of boldness and exhibitionism, creating a thick veil of eccentricity beneath which his enormous need for privacy and his powerful impulse for fantasy were given free rein.” Later, Seigel speaks of the formerly bohemian Satie’s change in wardrobe around 1898 as his attempt to “hide behind a bourgeois façade.” Seigel also views Satie’s writings as an avenue through which he could “hide behind pretended self-revelations,” due to his tendency to write about himself, but in vague, often absurd ways.³¹ For example, under the telling heading “Hidden Corners of My Life,” Satie revealed the following:

After a fairly short adolescence I became an ordinarily drinkable, more or less passable young man, nothing more. It was at this point in my life that I began to think and write musically. Yes.
What a terrible idea!... a truly terrible idea!
Indeed, I rapidly developed an unpleasant habit of originality (*very original*), which was out of context, anti-French, against nature, etc.
Life therefore became so unbearable for me that I resolved to retire to my estate and spend my days in an ivory tower—or was it some other metal? (*very metallic*)³²

²⁹ Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France*, 77.

³⁰ Satie, “Synesthésie,” *Revue Musicale S.I.M.* (July/August, 1914), reproduced in Volta, *Ecrits*, 141.

³¹ Seigel, *Bohemian Paris*, 323, 327-328.

³² Satie, *A Mammal’s Notebook*, 107.

These words contain a curious mixture of detail and imprecision, a testament to Satie’s complicated approach to self-disclosure. For example, the quality of the metal of the tower appears more important than Satie’s development as a composer.

Finally, Seigel says that the Metropolitan Art Church of Jesus Christ the Conductor, the religious order of which Satie was both priest and congregation, “was a decorative structure whose pretended range and size sheltered both Satie’s unacknowledged fantasies of recognition, and his isolation.”³³ While he never connects Satie to Art Nouveau, it is interesting to note that Seigel repeatedly uses words like “decorative” and “façade” to describe the patterns of concealment in Satie’s life. Figure 4 shows detail from a letter Satie sent to himself as the Metropolitan Art Church’s head. Like his illustrations for the home advertisements, this letter was to be for his eyes only, but Satie put painstaking effort into the signature and seal. For him, the world contained in his mind was obviously one worthy of time and attention.



Figure 4: Detail of a letter from Satie to himself, ca. 1893-1896.³⁴

³³ Seigel, *Bohemian Paris*, 328.

³⁴ Erik Satie, Letter to himself, ca. 1893-1896, from: <http://www.satie-archives.com>

In creating background music for intimate gatherings, Erik Satie's compositional ethic was closely aligned with another artistic movement with close ties to Art Nouveau: the British Arts and Crafts movement. One of the leading figures of Arts and Crafts, William Morris, specialized in the creation of exquisitely detailed floral patterns that were used for multiple types of decorative art, including wallpaper, textiles, and stained glass. Like Erik Satie, Morris loved medieval and Gothic art, which led him to associate with the Symbolists and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. This penchant for the medieval also inspired him to create intricate designs inspired by the decorative styles of the Middle Ages. In addition to his design firm William Morris & Co., Morris also founded the Kelmscott Press, which sought to reproduce medieval printing and engraving techniques. Like Morris, Satie incorporated medieval principles of calligraphy and decoration into his writings.³⁵

In 1893, the members of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society articulated their views on various types of decorative art in a set of essays with a preface by Morris. In his essay, the illustrator and designer Walter Crane spoke of the "modern habit of regarding the walls of a room chiefly as a background to pictures, furniture, or people," and outlined the task of the wallpaper designer: "The designer must work to the given width, and though his design may vary in depth, must never exceed 21 inches square, except where double blocks are used. His main business is to devise his pattern so that it will repeat, satisfactorily over an indefinite wall space without running into awkward holes or lines."³⁶ For Crane, repetition, precision, and functionality were to be the guiding principles over grand and complex artistry.

³⁵ E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2011), 27-29.

³⁶ Walter Crane, "Of Wallpapers," in *Arts and Crafts Essays*, edited by Peter Stansky and Rodney Shewan (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893), 57-58, 56.

Much like a wallpaper designer, Satie composed his music in a cellular fashion, eschewing the more complicated development patterns of most classical composers. For example, rather than using thick harmonies to develop his musical phrases, Satie often experimented with techniques like repetition. Robert Orledge quotes Satie's friend Charles Koechlin's opinion that "Satie was perfectly capable of Germanic development, but simply chose not to perpetuate this method in a 'long sonata or some thundering symphonic poem' that was alien to his aesthetic," questioning "why [development in the style of Haydn, Beethoven, or Wagner] needed to exist at all. As a reaction to this obligatory expansion, he honed down his material into a 'super-condensed form,' which had the perfection of a Japanese netsuke or haiku."³⁷ For Satie, a devoted miniaturist, producing smaller pieces of exquisite detail trumped fame as a composer of rhapsodies or symphonies in the Classical or Romantic styles.

An infamous example of Satie's use of repetition is shown in Figure 5. *Vexations*, a piece Satie composed after ending his only known intimate relationship, contains the following address to the performer: "To play this motif 840 times in succession, one would do well to prepare oneself beforehand, in the deepest silence, with serious immobilities."³⁸ Orledge notes that if one attempts to follow the direction to play the piece's sole phrase 840 times as marked, the performance "can take between twelve and twenty-four hours, depending on the interpretation of the tempo marking 'Très lent.'"³⁹ This repetition of a single phrase or cell allowed Satie to create the musical equivalent of wallpaper.

³⁷ Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, 161.

³⁸ Erik Satie, inscription on manuscript of *Vexations*, translated by Antony Melville in *A Mammal's Notebook*, 183.

³⁹ Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, 144. "Très lent" translates as "very slowly."

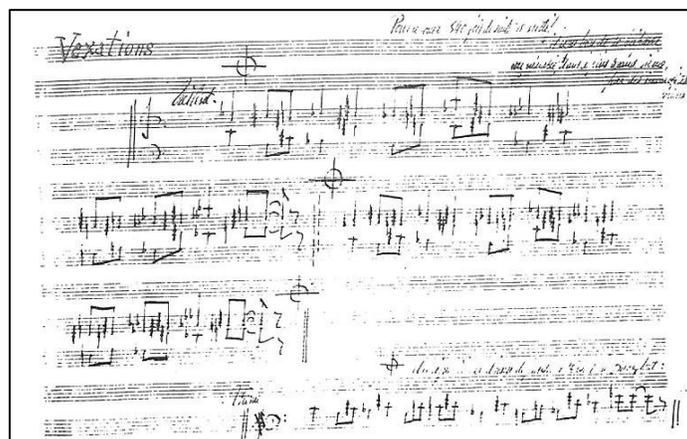


Figure 5: Manuscript for Satie's *Vexations*, 1893.⁴⁰

The aforementioned *musique d'ameublement* serves as another example of the relationship between Satie's music and the idea of creating a background for the affairs of everyday life. Although Satie did not write much "furniture music," and never published any that he did write, the idea of setting a stage or filling a space had been a consistent part of his compositional aesthetic since his cabaret days. With pieces such as the *Trois Gymnopédies*, the music for the ballets *Uspud* and *Parade*, as well as his later score for the film, *Entre'acte*, Satie worked to generate an atmosphere through music that did not overpower other activities. In fact, Satie considered the first outing of his furniture music at a combined art gallery and concert to be a disaster because people refused to ignore it! Satie's fellow composer of *musique d'ameublement*, Darius Milhaud later recalled the event in his autobiography:

A programme note warned the audience that it was not to pay more attention to the ritornelles that would be played during the intervals than to the candelabra, the seats, or the balcony. Contrary to our expectations, however, as soon as the music started up the audience began to stream back to their seats. It was no use for Satie to shout: "Go on talking! Walk about! Don't listen!" They listened without speaking. The whole effect was spoilt... Satie had not bargained for the charm of his own music.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Erik Satie, *Vexations* [manuscript], 1893, from: <http://www.satie-archives.com>

⁴¹ Darius Milhaud, *Notes Without Music*, translated by Donald Evans, excerpted in Orledge, *Satie Remembered*, 154.

The tensions between art as functional, as purely decorative, or to be enjoyed for its own sake were present in Satie's project. As Satie's only known furniture music collaborator, Milhaud's insights once again prove valuable:

Just as one's field of vision embraces objects and forms, such as the pattern on the wallpaper, the cornice of the ceiling, or the frame of the looking-glass, which the eye sees but to which it pays no attention, although they are undoubtedly there, Satie thought it would be amusing to have music that would not be listened to, "musique d'ameublement," or background music that would vary like the furniture of the rooms in which it was played... Satie wrote another "ritournelle d'ameublement" for Mrs. Eugene Meyer... But for this *Musique pour un cabinet préfectoral* to have its full meaning, she should have had it recorded and played over and over gain, thus forming part of the furniture of her beautiful library in Crescent Place, adorning it for the ear in the same way as the still-life by Manet adorned it for the eye.⁴²

In a similar vein, Walter Crane ended his essay on wallpaper with the following words: "But few of us can afford to employ ourselves or skilled artists and craftsmen in painting our rooms with beautiful fancies: but if we can get well-designed repeating patterns by the yard, in agreeable tints, with a pleasant flavour perchance of nature or antiquity, for a few shillings or pounds, ought we not to be happy?"⁴³ It seems this was just the type of commission the composer of *musique d'ameublement* would have relished.

⁴² Milhaud, *Notes Without Music*, 153, 154. *Musique pour un cabinet préfectoral* translates as *Music for a prefectural office*.

⁴³ Crane, "On Wallpapers," 60-61.



Figure 6: Detail of one of Hector Guimard's Paris metro entrances, 1899-1900.⁴⁴

A final consideration of Satie's relationship to Art Nouveau centers on the idea of ornamentation. Figure 6 shows an example of Art Nouveau ornamentation in Hector Guimard's iron work design for a Paris metro entrance at the turn of the century. In fact, the city had opened the metro for the 1900 Exposition Universelle, an additional indication of the role of world's fairs in solidifying and spreading aesthetic trends. The decoration of something as utilitarian as the city's transportation system points to the value designers and architects placed on ornamentation during the Art Nouveau period. In 1856, the British architect and designer Owen Jones had published an entire collection of colored patterns and design ideas in a massive volume entitled, *The Grammar of Ornament*. Drawing from Byzantine, medieval, Indian, and other "Eastern" sources, Jones inspired later designers to embrace an eclectic and cosmopolitan approach to their work.⁴⁵

In *Details of Consequence*, Gurminder Kaur Bhogal highlights another architect's influence on Art Nouveau and ornament: Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc. Viollet-le-Duc's ideas, as mentioned previously, also held sway over Satie during his formative years as a composer. Bhogal outlines Viollet-le-Duc's principle of "good ornamentation" as that which

⁴⁴ Hector Guimard, Paris Metro Entrance [photograph], 1899-1900. Ralph Lieberman: Architectural Photography, from: <http://library.artstor.org>

⁴⁵ Stacey Sloboda, "The Grammar of Ornament: Cosmopolitanism and Reform in British Design," *Journal of Design History* 21 (2008), 223, 225.

“fulfills its true purpose when it supports and serves the structure; [which] operates on a smaller scale so as not to disrupt the continuity of the whole; and [when] in keeping with its subsidiary role, ornament is applied in moderation.”⁴⁶ Again, as discussed above, exploring the relationship between function and aesthetics was central to Art Nouveau.

On the surface, relating Satie to Art Nouveau via a discussion of ornament may seem puzzling, since his music is notable for its uncluttered harmonies and reaction against Wagnerian excess; however, if we can extend our conception of ornament beyond simply the sonic qualities of Satie’s music to other elements of his work, such an association may not seem so strange. Satie did not view himself solely as a musician, but also as a designer and humorist, and he integrated all of these pursuits into his work—indeed, often into a *single* work.

Figure 7 shows Satie’s manuscript for an innovative project called *Sports et Divertissements*, on which he collaborated with artist Charles Martin in 1914. The small fragment pictured is a perfect example of three of the main elements Satie used to ornament his music: ornate calligraphy, humor (as evidenced by the title, “Unappetizing Chorale”), and an unusual amount of text within his scores.



Figure 7: Satie’s manuscript for the “Unappetizing Chorale” that opened *Sports et Divertissements*, 1914.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Bhogal, *Details of Consequence*, 34.

⁴⁷ Erik Satie, “Choral inappétissant” [manuscript], 1914, from: <http://www.satie-archives.com>

Several instances of the first method—Satie’s careful attention to visual detail—have already appeared in Figures 2, 4, and 5. Besides the ironic wit also previously seen in samples of Satie’s writing, a list of his more peculiar titles should serve to demonstrate the second type of ornament: *Flabby Preludes for a Dog*, *Three Pear-Shaped Pieces*, *Bureaucratic Sonatina* (not actually a piece of music at all), and *Prelude to “The Death of Mr. Fly.”* Extra-textual comments or indications, the final element, appear in Satie’s direction to the performer of the “Unappetizing Chorale” that a certain set of notes should sound “grim and cantankerous.” Whereas most composers would consider such a specific indication unnecessary, since the quality of the music as played would communicate the sense, Satie consistently chose to add such vivid pieces of text to his scores. Perloff speaks of his music as being “adorned with text,” and Seigel claims that “it is hard to think of any composer before Satie who made so much of the extramusical packaging and description of his work...Often Satie refused to let his music speak for itself.”⁴⁸ These additions and decorations all served as variations on the theme of ornament that helped to set Satie’s work apart from that of other composers.

Of course, there are limits to the relationship one can draw between Erik Satie and Art Nouveau. Scholars have made well-supported claims about Satie’s status as a Dadaist, Cubist, or Surrealist, but these schools do not tell the full story of Satie’s influences. While Art Nouveau cannot contain the full measure of Satie’s creative vision due to the vast amount of evidence detailing his collaboration with artists from these other movements, it does help to explain some aspects of his life and work. One could object to applying Art Nouveau to Satie on the basis that many of his works appeared ten to fifteen years after the heyday of the

⁴⁸ Perloff, *Art and the Everyday*, 80. Seigel, *Bohemian Paris*, 333.

movement in Paris, but it seems narrow-minded and difficult to pinpoint the time limit of possible influences on an artist's work. What is certain is that Satie was composing and publishing music within the period of Art Nouveau's dominance, and that his career unfolded in the movement's central nervous system in Paris.

One might also argue that the emphases on nature and on femininity that were so pronounced in Art Nouveau do not appear in Satie's work. In fact, when it came to women, Satie was somewhat reserved, compared to friends like Debussy or Picasso who were famous for their affairs.⁴⁹ He had one known liaison with the Montmartre artist's model and painter, Suzanne Valdon, but this ended disastrously.⁵⁰ His mother died when he was young, and his relationship with his stepmother was not always harmonious, in spite of her own musical pursuits.⁵¹ His friendships with women like Paulette Darty, Valentine Hugo, and Sylvia Beach notwithstanding, it is thus not surprising that Satie did not seem particularly interested in incorporating Art Nouveau's feminine elements into his work. Similarly, the gap between Art Nouveau's organic, floral forms and Satie's music may perhaps be explained by his biography. He did not like to travel, choosing rather to center his life in and around the decidedly urban landscapes of Paris. Again, Art Nouveau helps to illuminate Satie, but no single movement can completely contain him.

The uniqueness of Satie's work was perhaps its greatest quality, so it makes sense that he does not perfectly "fit" into one or even two categories. Satie was disgusted with the fawning "Debussytes" who had begun to imitate his friend, and he emphatically declared,

⁴⁹ Templier, *Satie*, 71.

⁵⁰ Evidence of this appears in an 1893 letter from Erik Satie to his brother Conrad, in which he speaks of breaking things off with Suzanne, in Volta, *Correspondance Presque complète*, 43-44.

⁵¹ Templier, *Satie*, 6.

“There is no school of Satie. Satisme could not exist. I would oppose it.”⁵² Without diminishing this independence and his innovations, though, an examination of Art Nouveau actually enriches our appreciation for Satie’s ability to craft works that strike the listener as both modern and timeless, French and otherworldly. Hailing Satie as a visionary of twentieth-century music, composer John Cage may have offered the most appropriate interpretation: “It’s not a question of Satie’s relevance. He’s indispensable.”⁵³

⁵² Satie, “Pas de Casernes,” in *Le Coq 2* (1920), 8. In *Erik Satie: Ecrits*, edited by Ornella Volta (Paris: Editions Champs Libre, 1981), 45.

⁵³ Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, 259.

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