

# First Recital

On May 17, 2009 I experienced my first piano recital, or, as it shall be forever recalled, my Baptism of Fire. I'm still in recovery. When my husband and I walked into the large studio belonging to my piano instructor and saw twenty unfamiliar people sitting in chairs looking at us expectantly I thought, "no bloody way." Raymond and I slunk into an empty bench in the back row and waited through about six performances of various qualities before I realized it was now or never. Walking toward the piano it struck me for the first time how much the soundboard looked like a black blade. In my head a deep voice thundered, "Elizabeth Kay, approach the guillotine!"

Plenty of people suffer from stage fright, even the pros. Rosa Ponselle, the great American soprano, fainted at an audition that Caruso had set up for her. She retired early saying she was tired of vomiting before her performances. The Italian tenor Franco Corelli never got over his fear of performing and actually had to be pushed on stage. These days some performers take Inderal, a beta blocker known as "the musicians underground drug" because it reduces performance anxiety. But given the choice, I'd much rather be like Friedrich Gulda, a prodigious talent, who played Beethoven like a Great God at Carnegie Hall, then rushed backstage, changed his clothes, and took a taxi to Greenwich Village where he jammed all night with other jazz musicians. Now that's making music!

A few days before the adult recital my piano teacher, Ronald Grinage, suggested that it might help if I thought of the audience as a bunch of cabbage heads. So, being a dutiful student, I addressed the slightly out-of-focus cabbage patch and said in what I thought was my normal voice, "I'm going to play "Eric Satie's Gymnopédie #3."

"What did she say she's going to play?" said a woman loudly in the front row.

"Eric Satie's Gymnopédie #3, Ron repeated from his seat at a comfortable distance from the piano.

I had intended to play the Gymnopédies #1 and #3, but at that very moment decided to stick to the shortest and most simple, even though I had put an unbelievable amount of work into learning both pieces. In fact, I'd been working on them off and on for 35 years.

My recital marked the culmination of nearly a decade of piano lessons. Ten years sounds like a long time, but it is not when it comes to learning classical piano. Hadn't my first piano teacher, June de Toth, cheerfully remarked, "The first thirty years are the hardest, but after that it gets a little easier." She wasn't kidding, either. Plus, when one has an ordinary life involving jobs, homes, spouses, pets and general chaos ten years is nothing. As I've come to realize, I'm not exactly a natural at this. What takes gifted people a few weeks to learn takes me three months. But if my gray matter is barely up to the task, my tenacity and the fact I passionately love music almost make up for it.

Probably few people remember hearing the *Gymnopédies* for the first time, but I do. I was 13 or 14 and walking between the kitchen and the den in my parent's house in Tampa when a melody playing in the background of a coffee commercial on TV stopped me dead in my tracks. Far below my prickly teenage persona something responded to the stately, calm music. It was like running into a old friend one hasn't seen in years and only dimly recognizes, to whom one says, "Ahhh, . . . don't I know you?"

Later I learned that the *Gymnopédies* were by the French composer Erik Satie (1866-1925) and that he had written three of these lovely pieces. The word *Gymnopédie* cannot be defined, but seems to allude to ancient dances or exercises performed by Greek youths -- elegant, timeless, a bit quirky, achingly melancholy -- like a faded fresco on a wall in the palace of Knossos. To my ear the *Gymnopédies* will always contain a mixture of profound solitude coupled with exquisite contentment.

Most of what I know about Satie comes from "The Banquet Years" (1955) by Roger Shattuck, one of the finest things ever written about any period and it's artists. In his marvelous essay Shattuck describes the structure of the *Gymnopédies* as:

" . . . a model melodic line with a Gregorian ring over a swaying ostinato bass. The accompaniment, with its deceptive changes in key and mode, never runs exactly parallel to the melody, yet never abandons it. It is the fine adjustment of these two elements that makes the style of the *Gymnopédies* so hauntingly simple."

If this description is too erudite for most musical lay people, Shattuck better captures the essence of Satie's enigmatic magic in this quote:

"It is as if he spent his life watching the waves breaking on a tiny section of shore, fascinated by both the monotony and the variety of their fall. Form in Satie means neither a course nor a drifting. It is a fascination with a series of points which turn out to be one point. His music progresses by standing still."

Satie was a colorful character who stood out amongst equally colorful avant-garde personalities in Paris during the *fin d'siecle* years between 1885 and World War I. This "bizarre and disconcerting man," as his friend Henri Sauguet described him, "was at once extremely sensitive, comical, touchy, ironic, tender and utterly anti-conventional." Satie approached music in his own inimitable way. "Before writing a work I walk around it several times accompanied by myself," said the man who titled his compositions *Trois Morceaux en forme de poire* (Three Pieces in the Form of a Pear), *Trois Valses distinguées du précieux dégouté* (Three Distinguished Walzes of the Disabused Affected Man), *Affolements granitiques autour de 13 heures* (Granite-like Panics Around 13 O'Clock), and *Croquis et agaceries d'un gros bonhomme en bois* (Sketches and Exasperations of a Big Boob Made of Wood.)

He had little money, but when he came into an inheritance after his father died he used it to buy a dozen identical gray corduroy suits, which he wore for the rest of his life. Picasso drew him in biting contour lines twiddling his thumbs in just such a rumpled suit. As a young man living in bohemian quarters in Montmartre Satie had a tempestuous love affair with the ex-trapeze artist-turned-painter, Susanne Valadon (also the mother of painter Maurice Utrillo). But when Satie

began hanging banners outside his window inscribed with criticisms of her fidelity to anyone who cared to read them she gravitated elsewhere and he began drinking heavily. “You want to know why I’m not married?” he told his sister-in-law. “The fear of being cuckolded, just that. And I would deserve it. I’m a man women cannot understand.”

While still a young man, Satie was befriended by Claude Debussy, four years his senior. Debussy would later orchestrate the *Gymnopédies*. He also caught the attention of a teenager named Maurice Ravel who was hanging around the *Cafe de la Nouvelle Athenes* where Satie was the pianist, and who glommed on to the older man like a kindred soul. In time both Debussy and Ravel would present Satie’s music to the public, thus adding to his reputation.

Between bursts of intense creation were long periods of silence. At times he was near penniless and lived in complete obscurity in the outskirts of Paris in waterless, unheated rooms. Then, after absenting himself for twelve years he suddenly reemerged on the Parisian art scene at age 40 when he returned to school to study the formal aspects of music. His sojourn in bleakness had not chastened his impish nature; he was soon titling homework exercises “Irkesome Example” and “Agreeable Despair,” and inscribing his music scores with instructions such as “Like a nightingale with a toothache.”

Once when Stravinsky declined a commission by some music publishers complaining that the fee they proposed was too small, the same commission was offered to the impoverished Satie. He also declined, insisting the fee was insultingly large.

In later life he collaborated on books and ballets with Braque, Derain, Picasso, Léger, Cocteau, Diaghilev, and Brancusi. He died in 1925, impoverished, but surrounded by the greatest visual and musical artists of the era.

Satie would have been gratified to know that in my time his *Gymnopédies* were being used to sell coffee. In 1920 he and the composer Darius Milhaud conceived the idea of “*musique d’ameublement*” or furniture music. The idea was that music should “contribute to life the way a casual conversation does, or a picture in the gallery, or a chair in which one is or is not seated.” In other words, music should not really be listened to attentively but should take a backstage to other events, exactly the way background music functions in restaurants, shopping malls and hotels today. Satie was quite excited by the idea. “Furniture music for law offices, banks, etc.,” he raved. “No marriage ceremony complete without furniture music . . . Don’t enter a house which does not have furniture music.” As usual, he was being simultaneously serious and absurd.

At 19 I moved with friends into a grand old, deteriorating house in Lutz, Florida, rumored to have been one of “Al Capone’s summer homes,” though I’ve never found any historical evidence to support this. Nor does it make much sense that Al Capone would have wanted to spend his summers in the sweltering Florida heat, but that’s another story. In any case, this once gracious, red-tiled, white stuccoed, Spanish-style 2-story house with (it was whispered) “Scandinavian demonic symbols” painted on the cypress wood ceilings, had a secret hidey-hole in the wall for stashing bootleg whiskey, or so I was told. Shaded by towering pine trees draped with Spanish moss, the house sat on on 10 acres of lakefront property that was still mostly

cypress swamps and orange groves. But of all these riches, the dearest to me was an old upright piano, still remarkably in tune despite the sub-tropical climate.

I have no recollection of how I came to possess the music to the *Gymnopédies*. Certainly I didn't own any music except folk songs for the guitar. Maybe I found it through the university. But I'd like to think that Satie's music was waiting for me in the piano's bench, along with other music books, which I've kept all these years along with the now brittle pages of those original *Gymnopédies*. Satie was a shy youth in his early twenties when he composed them, close to my age when I found them. I spent countless hours at that piano in the mornings before classes, transposing what I knew of the guitar to the keys, figuring out what notes the clusters of black dots represented, and then slowly, slowly . . . incredibly slowly . . . figuring out how to play the *Gymnopédie's* as best I could. #1 was extremely hard, but I muddled through it. #2 was impossible -- too many accidentals. But #3, the most beautiful, I managed to learn all the way through, more or less.

Though I went on to make my living in the visual arts I continued to peck away at the *Gymnopédies* whenever I was fortunate enough to have a piano, which wasn't often. Time passed. 35 years to be exact. Here at last was my chance to "present" the *Gymnopédies* -- to get them out of my system at long last. I had never played in front of an audience but, as I sternly reminded myself, "you've worked with the public for 25 years so how bad can this be?" In fact, it was utterly terrifying. As I sat down and began to play my trembling hands looked like my dog's legs in the vet's office. Raymond, all the way in the back, could see them shaking and simply shut his eyes. Even so -- and it was nearly a miracle -- despite the attack of palsy my fingers hit the right notes -- at least I think they did, and I my best to put into the music the complex emotions which I understand all the more keenly after a life time of living.

When the piece concluded some minutes later I felt so depleted I could hardly speak. I tried to make light conversation with people afterwards, some of whom were polite enough to murmur they had enjoyed it -- but it was a act I could barely maintain.

I'm sure Monsieur Satie would have snorted at the absurdity of it all. Next year I'm stocking up on Inderal.

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