

Erik Satie: Prelude to the Postmodernism

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1. Introduction

Postmodernism is an important and influential idea in the field of cultural studies and cultural critics. As an element of culture, music is unavoidably to be a subject of several postmodernist scholars (e.g. Theodor Adorno). However, because of the nature of postmodernism, to a large extent, the label “postmodern” mainly appeared with pop music but not the so called “serious music” or “academic music”, while one of the principles of postmodern arts is “popularity”.

Of course, it doesn't mean that we don't have postmodern music from the field of “serious music” and “academic music”. For example John Cage is generally accepted as a postmodernist¹; of the minimalist composers (e.g. Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Michael Nyman etc.) it can also said their works contain certain postmodern characters.

The idea of postmodernism was found in the 1970's in the field of architecture² and imposed on other disciplines in the latter years, but it is quite interesting that there is a postmodernist-like composer who lived in the late 19th century to early 20th century: that composer is Erik Satie (1866-1925). As my title suggests, Satie did have certain postmodern characters and to some extent he can be regarded as the pioneer of postmodernism. For example, his involvement in popular music, his musical parodies, and some of his ideas on

¹ Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”, in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 62.

² But the term “postmodern” was firstly used in 1930's. About the history of postmodernism, it will be further discussed in the 2.1 of this essay.

music. Those things make him become an interesting subject for research on cultural studies.

This essay will be written in “sonata form (!)”. In the *exposition*, the two themes in contrast are “postmodernism” and “Erik Satie”. Later on, I will compare and contrast the characters of postmodernism with Satie’s music and idea in the *development*. Finally, I will try to figure out the similarities between Satie and the postmodernism, and the true postmodern composers in the *recapitulation*.

2. Exposition

2.1 The Definition of Postmodernism

The term “postmodern” first appeared in Arnold Toynbee’s *A Study in History* (1939). In the first page of the first volume, Toynbee suggested that the so-called ‘modern’ period in our history ended in the late 19th century, and the world entered into an era ‘after modernism’. That is the origin of the idea of ‘postmodern’. However, the discovery of the idea ‘postmodernism’ is much later, “in the 1970s, architects began talking earnestly about postmodernism, and with good reason, as they sought ways to make up for the manifest deficiencies of much modern architecture” (McGuigan, 1999, p.8). After this movement from architecture, ‘postmodernism’, as an idea, is concretely established.

After the development in the 1980’s, ‘postmodernism’ was refined as a more general idea for different disciplines, and the analysis of arts which is based on the postmodern theory also appeared. Many artists were labeled as ‘postmodernist’, no matter they intended to do so or not, for example, the painter Andy Warhol, the film director Jean Luc Godard, and the composer John Cage.

There is a set of well-established theories on arts under the idea of postmodernism, and we can figure out some characteristics of postmodern arts. The following are two of the most typical characteristics.

The first one is ‘popularity’. According to F. Jameson, postmodernism implied a rise of

aesthetic populism: “the postmodernisms have in fact been fascinated precisely by this whole ‘degraded’ landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and *Reader’s Digest* culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film”(Jameson, p.64). So that postmodern arts is close to the crowd. For this aim, artists do not mind to create a work which can be regarded as banal.

Another characteristic is the dissolution of the subject. Under the idea of postmodernism, an art work does not have a subject anymore. An art work no longer needs a theory or doctrine to back up, “while Modernism thrived on multiple manifestos, postmodernism's manifesto might be that no manifesto is possible: all doctrines are created equal” (Rothstein, 2000, Arts).

In conclusion, a main idea of postmodernism is to make a response to modernism. The modernist artist is always involved in avant-garde style; they do not care if the audience or the readers understand their work or not, but just want to make their creation according to their own willingness. However, the postmodernist artists do care the understanding of their audience and readers, that is why they try to make their work simple and easy to understand.

The modern artists always setup a series of theory and doctrines to follow, to obey (for example the 12-tone system by Arnold Schoenberg). However, the postmodern artists just proclaim that nothing is needed to follow, subject is not a necessity.

It is clear that the meaning of ‘post-‘ not only expresses the diachronic sequence of

periods, but also “indicates something like a conversation: a new direction from the previous one”(Lyotard, 1985, p.48). Therefore, it is better to say that artists are not postmodern only because they were born later, but because they are doing something in response to modernism, to make a difference from modernism.

2.2 An Introduction to Erik Satie

Erik Satie is an underrated composer who lived in the timespace of 19th and 20th century. However, he was an eccentric figure in Paris during his lifetime.

On 17th May 1866, Erik Satie was born in Honfleur, a town located on the Normandy coast. In his childhood, there are two important people who influence him to contribute his unique characters in the later year. One is his uncle, Adrien, whose odd character attracted the young Satie so much and become a figure that Erik imitated for his whole life. The other one is his first piano teacher, Vinot, who is the organist of St. Catherine's. Those two people gave Satie two fundamental aspects of his own character, “his love for music, and his irrespressible irreverence and deep-rooted hatred of convention in all its forms” (Myers, 1968, p.14).

In 1879, Satie entered the Paris Conservatory. In the Conservatory, Taudou was his harmony teacher and Mathias was his piano teacher. Naturally, Satie was not a good pupil in the eyes of the teachers because of his strange character while made him unable to impress his teachers. Maybe due to this reason, “his harmony professor thought he had a gift for the piano, while his piano professor considered he might be talented as a composer” (Myers, 1968, p.16),

and as a result, Satie showed that actually he is a genius of both sides.

1887 is an important year for Satie. His first piano album was published, and it included two pieces which composed in 1885: *Valse-Ballet* and *Fantaisie-Valse*. Also, two of his most popular works, *Trois Sarabandes* and *Trois Gymnopedies* were composed in the same year of the first publication of his piano works. Also, he started his service in the 33rd Infantry Regiment at Arras, but he could not stand the harsh life in military service, so he made himself get bronchitis in the wintertime by showing his breast in the cold wind at night.

Beginning in 1890, Satie started his 'Rosicrucian period'. Satie met Joseph Peladan, who is an author and the founder of the 'Rose + Croix du Temple et du Graal', and influenced by Peladan. In this period, Satie mainly composed incidental music, for example, music for Peladan's play *Le Fils des Etoiles* (1891) and the *Trois Sonneries de la Rose Croix* (1892). From that time, Satie began to show his discontent to the idea of Wagner, and there are "quite obviously un-Wagnerian tendencies displayed in the music" (Myers, 1968, p.23).

In 1905, Satie returned to school and he chose Schola Cantorum and studied with D'Indy, Serieyx and Roussel. (Rooksby, E. Erik Satie's Life in Historian English. <http://shift.merriweb.com.au/satie/satiebio.html>)

Besides composition, Satie also played piano in cabaret, historians labeled this period as Satie's 'Montmartre period'. His experience of being pianist in cabaret extended his interest in cabaret songs, also, his music parody!

In 1915, Serge Diaghilev commissioned Satie to compose ballet music for Ballet Russes; then Satie wrote the Cubist ballet, *Parade* (1917), which is one of the most important works by himself. And at the same time, he launched his idea of *musique d'ameublement* (furnishing music). After the piano duet *La Belle Excentrique* (1922), Satie stopped to write piano works, and concentrated on songs and orchestral works.

On 1st July 1925, Erik Satie died in the Hospital St Joseph, Paris.

3 Development

Satie died in 1925, and postmodernism was *born* in 1939. However, it is interesting that some of Satie's music and ideas are extremely similar to the characteristics of postmodernism. In this section, the similarities between them will be discussed.

3.1 Depthless and Counterculture

Music is regarded as a high-culture even until now; the situation in the life of Satie is the same. But Satie's compositions did not show such an approach. Most of his music is popularized, and sometime just a parody. It is obvious that Satie was trying to impose a depthless approach toward music, and to some extent, it is counterculture.

Since Satie had played piano in cabaret, he composed numerous cabaret songs (which are similar to the pop song in the present time), waltz, cakewalk, and theatre songs. It is his involvement in popular music in his early years. Even in his later works, he also used a simple way to compose music. When other composer's works were getting more and more complex, Satie's music is still simple, and easy to listen to.

Also, Satie made a series of humoristic works on the piano, which earned him a nickname 'music joker'. The use of the technique of quotation and collage, and the use of nonsense titles is his way to archive his musical parodies. One example is his *Dessicated Embryos*. In this work, he quoted a whole melody from L. Puget's song, also some fragments from the music of F. Chopin and E. Audran. Many other works like *Descriptions*

Automatiques (one children's song, two Revolutionary songs were quoted), *Vieux sequins et vieilles cuirasses* (based on the motif from Offenbach's *Orfee aux enfers*, and Gounod's *Faust*), also used similar techniques (Whiting, 1999, p.367-377).

Besides the nonsense titles and quotation from familiar tunes, the scores of Satie's music also show that he never took music as a serious art. For example, the ridiculous expression markings of his music, such 'as light as an egg', 'here comes the lantern', 'open your head', 'play like a nightingale with a toothache', 'work it out yourself', etc, and the most extreme case is his *Vexation*, which required the player to 'repeat the theme 840 times. (Cloto. About Satie. <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Workshop/5205/cla-Satie.htm>). Also, most of Satie's scores *do not* have bar lines.

All of the above shows that Satie's frivolous attitude toward music, and it is a symbol of counterculture in the context of postmodernism. In postmodernism, "counterculture is aimed to break down the 'depth' which is concerned by the modernists, in other words, treat arts as a 'game', and blur the boundary between 'arts' and 'non-arts'" (Li, 1996, p.116), and those characters can be found in Satie's music.

3.2 The Dissolution of Subject

As a performing art, music is a communication between musicians and audience, however, Erik Satie's idea of *musique d'ameublement* crushed this traditional concept of music. His first experiment on furnishing music, is the best example to illustrate his idea.

The music was composed for a picture exhibition which was held in 1920. A little band (including Satie himself) played the music in the gallery, and Satie announced that the audience that no need to pay attention to the music, just treat it as does not exist. However, people just stood in front of the band and watched their performance seriously. It makes Satie busy to urging the people to talk and make noise, and to walk around the gallery to appreciate the pictures but not the music.

Satie's idea is to make music itself not to be the subject of an art form; it just like the wallpaper. No need to notice its existence; if you notice it, that is fine; if you don't, that is not a pity. Just like M. Pierre Bertin said in the introduction before the exhibition in 1920, "This music... Claims to make its contribution to life in the same way as a private conversation, a picture, or the chair on which you may or may not be seated"(as cited in Myers, 1968).

The dissolution of subject is a character of postmodernism. While modernists claim 'God is dead', postmodernists claim 'the human is dead'. While modernists treat music as a kind of art form, and try their best to construte a perfect structure for music (e.g. Arnold Schoenberg), postmodernists let the music exist as a thing like air in our nature (e.g. John Cage's 4'33"). The subject value cannot be found. It is the dissolution of subject. And this idea is similar to Satie's idea of furnishing music.

4 Recapitulation

Erik Satie has a unique interpretation on what music is. Although Satie has many similarities with postmodernism, it is not justified to say that Satie is a postmodernist, just like the wall painting by African tribes cannot be regarded as 'naive painting'. But without a doubt, Satie's ideas did impress the later composers, especially the minimalists.

His idea seems common nowadays, especially the similarities with the idea of postmodernism. However, we cannot ignore a point which is that, Satie died already in 1925, all his ideas were decided and practiced before 1925. It just shows that Satie's vision is beyond his time. Satie did write the following under his self-portrait "I have come into a world very young into an era very old" (as cited in Cloto. About Satie. <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Workshop/5205/cla-Satie.htm>)

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