

**'THE ROCK IS STILL ROLLING':  
CAMUS' ABSURDITY AND THE MUSIC OF SATIE**

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It is nigh on impossible to find examples of musicological scholarship that have correlated Western art music to the philosophical concept of absurdity as theorised by Albert Camus. Erik Satie's music has characteristics that can be related to aspects of absurdity, despite pre-dating Camus' theory. Much of the theory of absurdity will come from Camus' extended essay entitled *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), which delineates his thinking on absurdity as part of the human condition: essentially that life is rendered meaningless by its unceasing, repetitive cycles. My thesis will focus on two of Satie's works in relation to absurdity, *Socrate* and *Vexations*. Their characteristic features, such as repetition and immobility, bear a striking resemblance to the corresponding plays of the Theatre of the Absurd. The term for this category of plays and their grouping was coined by Martin Esslin, whose comparison of absurdity to another art form has been invaluable in the formulation of my own methodology. Whilst Satie may not have written in a consciously absurd way, ultimately I aim to reveal that a new and illuminating reading of Satie's music can be generated through the lens of absurdity.

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A special thanks to my friends and family for their support; their encouragement and humour throughout my own Sisyphean journey has been similarly enduring and unrelenting. But in a good way.

## **DECLARATION**

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not been previously presented for an award at this, or any other, university. All sources are acknowledged in the Resource List.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This thesis provides a new perspective on Erik Satie's music by using Albert Camus' philosophical theory of absurdity as a lens through which to explore two of Satie's works, *Socrate* and *Vexations*. Traditionally, scholars who have described music as 'absurd' take the everyday definition of the ridiculous, the incongruous, the humorous. Camus' definition of absurdity is in many ways the opposite, relating more to the futility of the search for the meaning of life, as postulated in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942).<sup>1</sup> At first glance, it seems that the closest that music has come to fulfilling Camus' theory is through the angst-ridden songs within popular music that claim to despair at the perceived meaninglessness of existence: products of the popular concept of the 'existential crisis'. These are regularly featured in online articles such as 'Ten Songs to Tend to Your Existential Crisis',<sup>2</sup> and 'Ten musicians fuelled by existentialism',<sup>3</sup> with some focussing on the music of specific writers, such as 'David Bowie's 6 Most Existential Songs'.<sup>4</sup> It must be noted here that whilst existentialism and absurdity are two different things, they are related in their fundamental theories. However, it seems nearly impossible to find any Western art music that has been called absurd according to Camus' definition.

Music that could be compared to absurdity must be in its essence repetitive, but most significantly, this quality must be revealed in a static, directionless, and cyclical way. Satie's music fits these requisites exactly, and although it cannot be alone in its capacity to be correlated to aspects of absurdity, it is particularly striking in its connections. My discussion of these connections begins with an explanation of Camus' theory of absurdity, followed by a study of *Socrate* (1919),<sup>5</sup> a texted piece in three movements. I will then examine *Vexations* (1893),<sup>6</sup> a solo piano piece, the score of which consists of three lines and which can last for up to 24 hours. I hope to identify the correlations between these works and Camus' theory of absurdity: not to read these pieces of music as absurd, but to use the lens of absurdity to create a new and potentially illuminating reading of the works.

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin Books), 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Clark, 'Ten Songs To Tend To Your Existential Crisis', *Her Campus at Exeter Cornwall*, 7 March 2016, accessed 16 September 2016, <http://www.hercampus.com/school/exeter-cornwall/ten-songs-tend-your-existential-crisis-0>.

<sup>3</sup> Jesse Livingston, 'Ten musicians fuelled by existentialism', *Westword Music*, 22 May 2013, accessed 16 September 2016, <http://www.westword.com/music/ten-musicians-fueled-by-existentialism-5713453/2>.

<sup>4</sup> 'David Bowie's 6 Most Existential Songs', *Culture Pop*, accessed 16 September 2016, <http://culturepop.com/music/david-bowies-6-most-existential-songs/>.

<sup>5</sup> Erik Satie, *Socrate: drame symphonique en 3 parties avec voix* (Paris: M. Eschig, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> In Erik Satie, *Pages mystiques* (Paris: M. Eschig, 1969).



My thesis begins with an explanation of Camus' theory of absurdity. Camus believed that life consists of repetition and routine – his analogy to the Greek myth of Sisyphus compares our lives to the character of Sisyphus himself, a man condemned for eternity to roll a rock up a mountain, only for it to fall back down again. There is a universal need for us to understand the workings of the world, and our reason for living when we never seem to be completely satisfied – the rock never reaches the top of the mountain, which represents the lack of resolution of life's problems. The feeling of absurdity arises from the fact that the world is inherently irrational and therefore can never be understood. There is, therefore, a lack of meaning to be found in such a world. A natural feeling of emotional detachment follows this – why continue to live without reason or purpose? It is only through what Camus calls 'revolt' – an active determination to find an individual purpose or goal – that we can live meaningful lives.

My chapter on absurdity ends with the basis for my methodology: a discussion of Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1980).<sup>7</sup> In this seminal text, Esslin examines plays by writers such as Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov and Eugène Ionesco, reading their theatre works through the lens of absurdity. The term 'The Theatre of the Absurd' was coined by Esslin to describe this group of writers and their oeuvre. His innovation lies not only in his grouping of these writers, and this creation of a term for them, but in his application of specifically Camus' theory of absurdity – not the everyday 'ridiculous' definition – to the plays. Furthermore, Esslin's innovation extends to his analysis of the characteristics shared by these plays, and his exploration of the specific features that have links to Camus' absurdity. To offer a brief example, these plays often have a cyclical structure, reminiscent of Sisyphus' unceasing struggle. This book is instrumental in the formulation of my own methodology, as I aim to do the same with Satie's music. However, it is wise to treat Esslin's book with some caution due to some limitations in his theory and some new perspectives on the Theatre of the Absurd. Michael Bennett's *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd: Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Pinter* (2011)<sup>8</sup> is an invaluable source for its discussion of further developments in Theatre of the Absurd scholarship. As well as critiquing Esslin and also focussing solely on Camus' absurdist thinking rather than Sartre's existentialist philosophy, Bennett has some original and insightful ideas regarding comparisons between the Theatre of the Absurd and parables.

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Penguin Books, 1980).

<sup>8</sup> Michael Bennett, *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd: Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Pinter* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

In order to understand the characteristics of absurdity and to examine the two pieces in more detail, an exploration of the available resources is crucial. There are several articles by Robert Orledge, a leading expert on Satie, in addition to his book, *Satie the Composer* (1990),<sup>9</sup> which are incredibly detailed and insightful. Orledge's emphasis is on analysis, and an understanding of the compositional processes employed by Satie is useful in finding the links between absurdity and his music. In this respect, *Satie the Composer* is particularly informative in its dissection of the music through analysis of Satie's sketches and Orledge's discussion of the artistic influences on his music. Orledge also prizes a short piece of writing by Satie on aesthetics (to be discussed during the course of this thesis), using that also as a method of analysis. Alan M. Gillmor's *Erik Satie* (1988) places a similar emphasis on analysis, unpicking the music in a similar way to Orledge.<sup>10</sup> However, rather than probing Satie's musical processes in such great detail, Gillmor highlights the contextual factors that influence the works. This applies to *Socrate* in particular, which he considers to be a much more 'serious' work than the 'leg-pull' that is *Vexations*.<sup>11</sup>

Satie's thoughts during and after the composition of *Socrate* are revealed in his letters, as shown in Ornella Volta's book, *Satie Seen Through His Letters* (1989),<sup>12</sup> and Nigel Wilkins' article, 'Erik Satie's Letters to Milhaud and Others' (1980).<sup>13</sup> Satie's letters are astutely edited and discussed by the two scholars, and are useful in revealing additional background information. Mary E. Davis' *Erik Satie* (2007)<sup>14</sup> is a short but illuminating biography of Satie, providing a broad overview of his life, and is particularly helpful in its brief discussion of the medieval influence on his work and thinking, and on furniture music in general and in *Socrate*. As well as being a usefully recent biography, she also gives a brief insight into the development of the scholarship on Satie. The first biography of Satie was Pierre-Daniel Templier's, originally published in French in 1932.<sup>15</sup> His book is in two parts, the first on Satie's life and the second on his works. Davis notes that as Satie was forgotten by the public and concert programmes, this was the key resource on Satie until Myers published his biography (1968)<sup>16</sup> in English.<sup>17</sup> His book moves chronologically through Satie's

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Orledge, *Satie the Composer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>10</sup> Alan Gillmor, *Erik Satie* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>12</sup> Ornella Volta, *Satie Seen Through His Letters* (London: Marion Boyars, 1989).

<sup>13</sup> Nigel Wilkins and Erik Satie, 'Erik Satie's Letters to Milhaud and Others', *The Musical Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (July 1980).

<sup>14</sup> Mary E. Davis, *Erik Satie* (London: Reaction Books, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Pierre-Daniel Templier, *Erik Satie* (Massachusetts: The Riverside Press, 1969).

<sup>16</sup> Rollo H. Myers, *Erik Satie* (London: Denis Dobson, 1948; New York: Dover, 1968). Citations refer to the Dover edition.

<sup>17</sup> Davis, *Erik Satie*, 8.

life, exploring his life and music in connection with the progression of his life. Davis observes that, following the discovery of the use of Satie's sketches producing an invaluable insight into his meticulous compositional techniques, the scholarly focus on Satie moved from biography to his compositional process,<sup>18</sup> as seen in the resources in the previous paragraph.

There are several books that place Satie in a wider context. Steven Moore Whiting specifically focuses on Satie in relation to cabaret and its influence in *Satie the Bohemian: From Cabaret to Concert Hall* (1999).<sup>19</sup> His small section on *Vexations* is expanded in his article, 'Serious Immobilities: Musings on Satie's "Vexations"' (2010),<sup>20</sup> which I shall discuss in due course. Another writer who looks at artists from a broader perspective is Roger Shattuck who explores the French cultural context during Satie's lifetime in his book *The Banquet Years: The Arts in France, 1885-1918* (1958).<sup>21</sup> On an even broader scale, Daniel Albright's book *Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature and Other Arts* (2000)<sup>22</sup> discusses modernist artists who were involved in collaborations incorporating several types of artistic media, and how these media interact within an artwork. Regarding Satie, he mainly examines *Parade* as an example of different art forms combining within one artwork, but his insight into Satie's modes of thought are applicable to *Socrate* and *Vexations* also.

The most recently published of my resources, Caroline Potter's *Erik Satie: A Parisian Composer and His World* (2016), provides a similar contextualisation of Satie's music, placing him in the cultural context of his own environment.<sup>23</sup> This thesis benefits greatly from this book, in particular from the three chapters on Satie's use of repetition: his mechanical aesthetic. Potter argues that this repetition was inspired, at least in part, by the advent of machinery and machine-producing music. The book concentrates on parts of Satie's cultural context not only in technology but also within artistic movements, rather than aiming for a general overview. It reveals Satie as a true contemporary composer, interested in his modern, ever-changing environment despite his fascination with the ancient and medieval past.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>19</sup> Steven Moore Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian: From Cabaret to Concert Hall* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> Steven M. Whiting, 'Serious Immobilities: Musings on Satie's "Vexations"', *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 67, no. 4 (2010).

<sup>21</sup> Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Arts in France, 1885-1918*, (London: Faber and Faber).

<sup>22</sup> Daniel Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature and Other Arts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

<sup>23</sup> Caroline Potter, *Erik Satie: A Parisian Composer and His World*, (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2016).

There are several more specifically focussed articles that cover a wide range of concepts in both *Socrate* and *Vexations*. Pietro Dossena's 'À la recherche du vrai Socrate' (2008)<sup>24</sup> focuses on the genesis of a few bars in the first movement, tracking its compositional process from Satie's sketches to the finished work. Dossena writes a commentary on how this enhances understanding of the genesis of the overall work. Whilst this is not always relevant to the needs of this thesis, he makes some crucial observations regarding the homogeneity of the music. "The Only Musician with Eyes': Erik Satie and Visual Art' (2013), by Simon Shaw-Miller, details Satie's views on visual art, noting it as a significant creative influence and observing the importance of image in terms of Satie's presentation.<sup>25</sup> Shaw-Miller's significance to this thesis comes from being one of few scholars to have studied, in detail, the inspiration that the visual arts had on Satie's actual compositional processes and his theories on musical form.

W. H. Mellers' article 'Erik Satie and the 'Problem' of Contemporary Music' (1942) is one of the earliest resources, and it is abundantly clear from the outset that he allows his personal fondness for Satie to permeate the text.<sup>26</sup> The effect of this is that his descriptions seem overly romanticised – particularly in his section on *Socrate*, which he discusses in detail, perhaps because of what he perceives to be its unique qualities not only within Satie's oeuvre but within musical history, past and future. However, Mellers' sentimental descriptions still provide a valuable insight into views on *Socrate* at the time and into one particular scholarly listener's observations and experience of the work. Even though the article is not purely on *Socrate*, it features heavily as a 'contemporary' work; it is the thinking about it at the time that is the most interesting revelation by Mellers.

Mellers' article, like many other sources on Satie's output, does not include any mention of *Vexations*. This is because whilst *Vexations* is believed to have been composed in 1893, it was not published until 1969. Many scholars do not take the work seriously. Orledge's 'Understanding Satie's "Vexations"' (1998), however, does.<sup>27</sup> Orledge takes apart the notes and meticulously reconstructs Satie's processes with a mixture of evidence from Satie's sketches and some of his own inferences, in order to understand how Satie himself created the work, in terms of harmony and tonality. He even formulates a theory regarding the symbolism of the numbers supposedly exploited by Satie. The latter idea is an

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<sup>24</sup> Pietro Dossena, 'À la recherche du vrai Socrate', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 133, no. 1 (2008).

<sup>25</sup> Simon Shaw-Miller, "The Only Musician with Eyes': Erik Satie and Visual Art'. In *Erik Satie: Music, Art and literature*, edited by Caroline Potter, 85-114 (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013).

<sup>26</sup> W. H. Mellers, 'Erik Satie and the 'Problem' of Contemporary Music', *Music and Letters* 23, no. 3 (1942).

<sup>27</sup> Robert Orledge, 'Understanding Satie's 'Vexations'', *Music and Letters* 79, no 3 (Aug 1998).

interesting reading of the work, if not entirely persuasive, but Orledge's ideas on musical construction are certainly a legitimate possibility.

Gavin Bryars' 'Vexations and its Performers' is another prominent article in its compilation of a record of the performance history of *Vexations* until the time of the article's publication in 1983.<sup>28</sup> This early publication date is redeemed by the article's inclusion of a set of notes between Bryars and Christopher Hobbs during their complete performance of the work, which offers an invaluable insight into the performers' and listeners' experience. Matthew Mendez also touches upon this experience in his chapter in *Erik Satie: Music, Art and Literature*, entitled 'History, Homeopathy and the Spiritual Impulse in the Post-war Reception of Satie: Cage, Higgins, Beuys' (2013), especially in terms of boredom, memory, Zen philosophy and the consciousness.<sup>29</sup> The chapter is distinctive in its focus on the spiritual aspect of Satie's music, especially in connection with musicians who were particularly influenced by Satie, such as John Cage. Another writer to focus on Satie's connections with Cage in depth is Michael Nyman in 'Cage and Satie' (1973), which compares Cage to his greatest influence.<sup>30</sup> Nyman discusses their similarities and nuanced differences in their thoughts on furniture music (functional music that provides and encapsulates background sounds), silence and boredom, especially as regards *Vexations*. This short but perceptive article enables a further understanding of Satie's use of boredom and time in this work through the comparison between the composers.

Whiting takes a different approach. His article mentioned above discusses the work in depth, comparing the structure of *Vexations* to that of the holohyme, a type of internally repetitive poetry that circulated in the cabaret scene. However, Whiting does disparage the idea of taking seriously the performance instruction, which asks the performer to play the piece 840 times. He questions each ambiguity in turn: the implications of the reflexive verb in 'play to oneself', what Satie means by the 'motif', and the structure of each cycle. Stephen Whittington's article, with its amusingly similar title to Whiting's of 'Serious Immobilities: On the Centenary of Satie's *Vexations*' (1999), echoes the idea that the performance

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<sup>28</sup> Gavin Bryars, 'Vexations and its Performers', *Journal of Experimental Music* (17 March 2004): 2, accessed 16 September 2016, [http://www.experimentalmusic.co.uk/emc/Jems\\_files/Bryarssatievexations.pdf](http://www.experimentalmusic.co.uk/emc/Jems_files/Bryarssatievexations.pdf). Originally published in *Contact* 26 (Spring 1983).

<sup>29</sup> Matthew Mendez, 'History, Homeopathy and the Spiritual Impulse in the Post-war Reception of Satie: Cage, Higgins, Beuys', in *Erik Satie: Music, Art and Literature*, ed. Caroline Potter (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013).

<sup>30</sup> Michael Nyman, 'Cage and Satie', *The Musical Times* 114, no 1570 (Dec 1973).

instructions must be seen as a joke, not a legitimate command.<sup>31</sup> He discusses boredom and memory, as well as repetition and notation, covering a broad range of the key concepts, and acting as a sound overview of the general scholarly thoughts about the work.

Cumulatively, these resources provide a detailed basis for the analysis of Satie's music through the lens of absurdity. Whilst *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Theatre of the Absurd* were written several years after Satie's death, it could be argued that absurd thinking was latent in the scholarly and artistic consciousness of the composer's time. One possible factor in this could have been Friedrich Nietzsche, whose denunciation of Enlightenment philosophy<sup>32</sup> as well as traditional philosophy was highly influential to the artists and philosophers that were to follow him.<sup>33</sup> The eighteenth-century Enlightenment, also known as the 'Age of Reason', aimed to liberate human thought from the 'superstitions of religion and traditional philosophy'.<sup>34</sup> Nietzsche's aims were similar – he too advocated freedom of thought and action,<sup>35</sup> but in a different way,<sup>36</sup> challenging the philosophical underpinnings of Western society<sup>37</sup> and attempting to improve it.<sup>38</sup> Due to this, Irving M. Zeitlin argues that he must be seen as a twentieth-century philosopher, despite his death in 1900. Nietzsche's thinking applies to the philosophical enquiries of much of the twentieth century, in terms of the waning of religious beliefs and the subsequent 'moral crisis'.<sup>39</sup> This particularly applies to philosophers such as Camus and Sartre, in terms of their similar interrogations of how to act and what to believe in a world that has lost its meaning. Indeed, it is well documented that Nietzsche's successors included a significant number of existentialists,<sup>40</sup> who studied his work in detail.<sup>41</sup>

This admiration of Nietzsche applies particularly to France, a country in which Nietzsche particularly wished his works to be known;<sup>42</sup> not only because he admired its

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<sup>31</sup> Stephen Whittington, 'Serious Immobilities: On the Centenary of Satie's *Vexations*', 1999, accessed 16 September 2016, [http://www.academia.edu/171971/Serious\\_Immobilities\\_On\\_the\\_Centenary\\_of\\_Erik\\_Saties\\_Vexations](http://www.academia.edu/171971/Serious_Immobilities_On_the_Centenary_of_Erik_Saties_Vexations).

<sup>32</sup> Stanley Rosen, *The Mask of Enlightenment: Nietzsche's Zarathustra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 5.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>35</sup> David Williams, ed., *The Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 2.

<sup>36</sup> Irving M. Zeitlin, *Nietzsche: A Re-examination* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 2.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Schacht, *Making Sense of Nietzsche: Reflections Timely and Untimely* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 6.

<sup>39</sup> Zeitlin, *Nietzsche: A Re-examination*, 4.

<sup>40</sup> Schacht, *Making Sense of Nietzsche*, 6.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Tanner, *Nietzsche* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 2.

<sup>42</sup> Alan D. Schrift, 'Nietzsche's French legacy', in *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. Bernd Magnus and Kathleen Higgins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 323.

culture and language, but because he considered it to have 'cultural superiority over Europe'.<sup>43</sup> He had an impact in particular on the writer André Gide,<sup>44</sup> who exerted a substantial influence on French intellectuals contemporary with Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, a writer and philosopher with some similar beliefs to Camus and a key figure in existentialism.<sup>45</sup> Nietzsche's effect on other writers and in the other arts was also profound, especially in music – most famously Richard Wagner and Richard Strauss. Many years before Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus*, Nietzsche's first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872),<sup>46</sup> included ideas that anticipate absurdity. Whilst he was not the only philosopher to have these ideas, his are certainly notable. In this book, there is a passage that describes what seems to be a striking precedent to the feeling of absurdity, as he speaks of humankind realising the irrationality of the world and coming to understand that 'their action could not change anything in the external nature of things'. As they come to the realisation of the 'truth' of this, 'man now sees everywhere only the horror or absurdity of existence ... He is nauseated'.<sup>47</sup>

Satie's personal and professional circles largely consisted of the contemporary artists of the time.<sup>48</sup> So even though he could not have been aware of Camus' and Sartre's philosophies, and possibly was not consciously aware of Nietzsche's, it is possible that Satie was able to discern what became a growing philosophical move away from the idea that there was a fixed meaning and purpose in life, as promoted so prominently by Nietzsche. This hypothetical link to Nietzsche is admittedly tenuous. However, whether he consciously or subconsciously wrote music which has parallels with absurdity, it is still of interest to examine these – if potentially coincidental – correlations.

Satie's modern thinking is well documented. He was not afraid to experiment and certainly did not feel restrained by social norms, as can be seen even in his personal life. His unusual dress, peculiarly solitary character and often secretive behaviour play a large part in his notoriety as a particularly mysterious and eccentric composer.<sup>49</sup> His knowledge of the other art forms – especially literature and visual art – was an essential and inspirational part

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<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Ernst Behler, 'Nietzsche in the twentieth century', in *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. Bernd Magnus and Kathleen Higgins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 295.

<sup>44</sup> Behler, 'Nietzsche in the twentieth century', 282.

<sup>45</sup> Aronson, *Camus and Sartre: The Story of a Friendship and the Quarrel that Ended it* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 44.

<sup>46</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*, trans. Shaun Whiteside, ed. Michael Tanner (London: Penguin, 1993).

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Schacht, *Making Sense of Nietzsche*, 131.

<sup>48</sup> Caroline Potter, ed., *Erik Satie: Music, Art and Literature* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), xiii.

<sup>49</sup> Templier, *Erik Satie*, 58-59.

of his compositional processes.<sup>50</sup> His experimentation spanned three broad periods. These are generally accepted to begin with his Rosicrucian period – his delving into esotericism and mysticism – which had a profound influence on his composition at the time.<sup>51</sup> This is when he wrote his famous *Gymnopédies* and *Gnossiennes*, which were instrumental in the introduction of his name into the canon, and the lesser-known *Vexations*. Satie earned his living for a long time as a cabaret pianist, a job that he later decried ‘more stupid and dirty than anything’,<sup>52</sup> and famously worked at the Chat Noir, moving in both its social and professional circles.<sup>53</sup> He moved to Arcueil in 1898, where he spent most of his life. During this time he continued his compositional output with more of the piano pieces for which he is so well known. This period was followed by Satie’s dissatisfaction with his musical illiteracy, and his consequential completion of the bulk of his mature musical education at the Schola Cantorum in 1908.<sup>54</sup>

Jean Cocteau came into his life in 1915. A year later, the ballet *Parade* – a collaboration between Satie (composer), Cocteau (author), and Picasso (set- and costume-designer, who brought his Cubist ideas to life in the ballet) – was to be the scandal of Satie’s career.<sup>55</sup> Satie eventually felt Cocteau’s influence to be stifling, and was able to move away from his grasp by the time he came to write *Socrate*.<sup>56</sup> During the composition of *Socrate* and in the years until his death, his musical thoughts seemed to centre on ‘furniture music’: functional music, intended to provide a background sound to everyday life, adding to an experience in the same way as other utilities such as light or heat.<sup>57</sup> Despite its composition predating Satie’s writings on furniture music, *Vexations* certainly demonstrates elements of the style, as I will demonstrate in my chapter on the work. His sketches for *Socrate* show that the idea of furniture music was in his mind during its conception. Furniture music does not vary, produce interest or attract attention. These qualities create a sense of detachment, which is a symptom of absurdity.

This thesis will begin with a more detailed explanation of absurdity than given above, including a discussion of Esslin’s methodology in his *Theatre of the Absurd*, as mentioned, with the comparison between his and Bennett’s work. This methodology feeds into the subsequent chapter exploring *Socrate*, followed by a discussion of *Vexations*. The

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<sup>50</sup> Shaw-Miller, “The Only Musician With Eyes”, 99.

<sup>51</sup> Myers, *Erik Satie*, 25.

<sup>52</sup> Davis, *Erik Satie*, 73.

<sup>53</sup> Gillmor, *Erik Satie*, 58-60.

<sup>54</sup> Davis, *Erik Satie*, 75-76.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>56</sup> Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian*, 484.

<sup>57</sup> Gillmor, *Erik Satie*, 232.



principal characteristic of these two works is repetition: the cycles it produces and the lack of direction it creates. These cycles are mirrored in absurdity, in the trials of Sisyphus, in the absurdity of human nature. The analysis of Satie's music in the following body of writing will elucidate and illuminate the potential new readings that can be discovered through the lens of absurdity.

## CHAPTER 2: ABSURDITY

In the following explanation of absurdity, I will be focusing on Camus' theory in particular. Much of the exploration of his theory of absurdity comes from his extended essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*: a piece of writing that is short yet effective in casting light on the origins, nature and consequences of absurdity as perceived by Camus. I shall also be making reference to Jean-Paul Sartre, as the two writers' theories contain fundamental similarities – as well as fundamental differences, which shall also be explained. After an extension of the brief summary of absurdity from earlier, I will investigate the merits of Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd*, which reads plays in connection with an absurd viewpoint much in the way that my thesis will examine Satie's music.

Camus and Sartre had something of a complex relationship.<sup>58</sup> Their different philosophical paths led to their respective contrasting political stances, and whilst this was a major factor in the eventual rupture of their friendship, their argument also revolved around personal issues. One particularly significant issue that cannot have aided any reconciliation is that Camus seemed to be perpetually in Sartre's shadow. Sartre constantly had a group of young followers who hovered around him, for his left-wing thinking was popular at the time with young people,<sup>59</sup> evocatively known as his 'satellites'.<sup>60</sup> Camus did not want to be associated with Sartre's satellites in any way.<sup>61</sup> However, due to Camus' age and their similar philosophies, to the public eye it seemed as though Camus was following in Sartre's footsteps,<sup>62</sup> despite his concerted efforts to maintain that he was not an existentialist in the way as Sartre. Camus' reaction could partly have been caused as a result of this unwanted association.<sup>63</sup> As Olivier Todd says, they were never seen by the public or other writers and philosophers as 'intellectual accomplices'.<sup>64</sup>

Their respective philosophies are supported in no small degree by their literary works. In fact, they were both offered the Nobel Prize for literature, which only Camus accepted;<sup>65</sup> allegedly, Sartre's refusal to accept was a refusal to become 'institutionalised'.<sup>66</sup> However, the fact that Camus was offered the award first could have been another potential

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<sup>58</sup> Aronson, *Camus and Sartre*, 2.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>61</sup> Todd, *Albert Camus: A Life*, 213.

<sup>62</sup> Aronson, *Camus and Sartre*, 60.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>64</sup> Todd, *Albert Camus: A Life*, trans. Benjamin Ivry (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2000), 213.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 371.

<sup>66</sup> 'The Nobel Prize for Literature 1964', *Nobelprize.org*, accessed March 4 2016, [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1964/sartre-docu.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1964/sartre-docu.html).

cause for conflict. This significance that they placed on their fictional literature means that their philosophies – Camus' in particular – have a limited amount of formal logic.<sup>67</sup>

This was not a problem in Camus' eyes, for he was not at all concerned about his audience finding contradictions in his ideas, proclaiming that he had no wish to become 'a philosophical genius'.<sup>68</sup> In fact, he even avoided the label of 'philosopher', preferring the title of 'artist'.<sup>69</sup> More importantly, however, he did not want to be labelled as an existentialist, but an absurdist.<sup>70</sup> For although Camus and Sartre began to explore their theories from a very similar starting point, their paths then diverged quite significantly; Sartre's theories followed those of the phenomenologists, which Camus avoided. This divergence can be seen in his manner of speaking of both phenomenologists<sup>71</sup> and existentialists<sup>72</sup> as separate categories in his essay on absurdity, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which has the word 'absurd' in every chapter title except for 'The Myth of Sisyphus', whom Camus calls 'the absurd hero'.<sup>73</sup> Phenomenology does not study the human condition in the way that absurdity does; it is merely an 'attitude for understanding', as Camus terms it.<sup>74</sup> He believed that it merely describes the world as perceived by the self rather than explaining it;<sup>75</sup> it is an investigation of the self in relation to its environment, rather than a 'consolation'<sup>76</sup> or a way for the self to exist in and confront the world as absurdity is. He claimed that a further difference in the origin of their theories was that his were inspired by Greek philosophy, whereas the French existentialism of Camus' time came from nineteenth-century German thinking.<sup>77</sup>

The advent of the Second World War undoubtedly inflicted great change upon philosophical and cultural thinking at the time. Quite possibly as a result of the war, Camus took his established theories on absurdity formulated in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and expounded on the idea of revolt: the need for political action. He speaks of revolt as following on from absurdity – it is 'one of the only coherent philosophical positions' after we accept that once the absurd is known it must be kept alive in one's consciousness.<sup>78</sup> Sartre also became a political activist following his theories on the concept of 'nausea'. This concept was acknowledged by Camus to be much the same as absurdity, although he did not

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<sup>67</sup> Todd, *Albert Camus*, 144.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

<sup>69</sup> Aronson, *Camus and Sartre*, 83.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>71</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 25.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>77</sup> Todd, *Albert Camus*, 379.

<sup>78</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 52.

credit Sartre by name, merely stating that “nausea’, as a writer of today calls it, is also the absurd.’<sup>79</sup> The following explanation of absurdity will focus on Camus’ theory as detailed in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

### **The Origins of Absurdity: Discovering the Question ‘What is the point of life?’**

As mentioned in the introduction, the word ‘absurd’ can be somewhat misleading in translation. In English it means something more along the lines of ‘nonsensical’, with potentially humorous connotations. Camus’ meaning as defined in *The Myth of Sisyphus* is ‘impossible’ or contradictory’.<sup>80</sup> Camus begins his essay by stating that the ‘absurd sensitivity’ of which he is to speak ‘can be found widespread in the age’.<sup>81</sup> Sartre also defined it as being in the human condition. I shall begin my summary of his theories using the analogy with which Camus ends his essay, a metaphorical situation that describes this universal human condition and aids in developing an understanding of how to move forwards from it.

In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to roll a boulder to the very top of a mountain. Once he reached the top, the stone would fall back down. His punishment was to repeat this endlessly, for the gods believed that ‘there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labour’.<sup>82</sup> This is a very similar image to Schopenhauer’s image of the wheel of Ixion – Ixion was bound to a wheel that was spinning ceaselessly, having been similarly condemned by the gods to an eternal punishment. However, whilst Schopenhauer uses his image of the human condition to explain how the fine arts liberate the self from this torture of the spinning wheel,<sup>83</sup> there is no release in Camus’ absurdity. For Camus, the absurd repetition is a depiction of the fate of humankind.

So whilst Sisyphus (or the self, according to Camus) is rolling his rock up the mountain, ‘one day the ‘why’ arises’; suddenly the previously unquestioned everyday habit, the routine, the repetition of daily life is halted by an inquiry of its meaning. This is ‘the first sign of absurdity’, ‘the odd state of soul in which the void becomes eloquent, in which the

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>80</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 28.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>83</sup> Kivy, *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 253.

chain of daily gestures is broken',<sup>84</sup> and existence is thus recognised to be meaningless. Habit and routine are revealed to be nonsensical, and one cannot see any reason for living.<sup>85</sup>

This loss of illusion in the face of nothingness naturally leads to a search, a vain attempt to re-establish understanding and purpose in life. Throughout his writing, Camus refers to human nature as having an 'insistence upon familiarity', an 'appetite for clarity',<sup>86</sup> a 'nostalgia for unity',<sup>87</sup> a 'longing to solve', and a 'need for clarity and cohesion'<sup>88</sup> – to give just a few examples. Humans have an instinctive desire for knowledge of their purpose in the world, he argues, and in order to find this meaning for their existence, they search for it in the world. But in Camus' eyes, this quest is all for nothing, for the world is revealed to be irrational and unreasonable.<sup>89</sup>

And so the absurd is conceived: it is a 'confrontation' between this irrationality and the 'longing for clarity' that the self desires but cannot find.<sup>90</sup> It is, therefore, born of this 'human need' and the 'unreasonable silence of the world.'<sup>91</sup> However, whilst humans try to find a reason for living in a world that cannot provide one, this does not mean that either human beings or the world are absurd in themselves.<sup>92</sup> Absurdity springs only from their confrontation, from 'their presence together', so without the human mind or the world, there is no absurdity.<sup>93</sup> It inextricably binds them together<sup>94</sup> whilst simultaneously causing a 'divorce' between them.<sup>95</sup> One cannot reason with the irrational,<sup>96</sup> and yet as a 'horde of irrationals ... surround [the self]', one cannot escape the 'appetite for the absolute'<sup>97</sup> for which 'the heart vainly seeks'.<sup>98</sup>

This seemingly pitiful state of affairs is what is commonly referred to as an 'existential crisis' – though often without full knowledge of what this really means. Camus' 'anguish',<sup>99</sup> his 'discomfort',<sup>100</sup> Sartre's 'nausea',<sup>101</sup> Heidegger's 'anxiety',<sup>102</sup> Kierkegaard's

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<sup>84</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 11.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>99</sup> Todd, *Albert Camus*, 145.

<sup>100</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 13.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

'dread':<sup>103</sup> these influential existentialist thinkers of or before Camus' and Sartre's time were universal in their conception, if not naming, of a feeling of longing for purpose and (as Camus concludes a section of his absurd logic) a 'total absence of hope', a 'continual rejection', and a 'constant dissatisfaction' caused by the 'unceasing struggle' of life.<sup>104</sup> Absurdity itself does not help with this problem; it is 'powerless to calm [the] anguish' of reason.<sup>105</sup> So what are the thoughts that lead on from this?

### **The Consequences of Absurdity: Finding Meaning in Meaninglessness**

Absurdity is Camus' starting point, and he goes on to explore what follows from this. The initial reaction to the feeling of absurdity seems to be that of detachment. This can be seen not only in Camus' and Sartre's philosophical writings but also from their fiction; their characters are depicted in isolation from their environment and community, particularly as seen from the construction of their internal monologue. Therefore, we witness an emotional separation, seen in their descriptions of their perceptions of their actions, emotions, and reactions to their surroundings. Camus' *The Outsider* and Sartre's *Nausea* are excellent examples of this.

Their theoretical writings reveal the same kind of feelings. Sartre's perception of humankind's separation from the world<sup>106</sup> mirrors Camus' description of the 'divorce' between a person and their life, similar to the distance between an actor and their setting.<sup>107</sup> Camus speaks of absurdity as providing humans with a 'lucid indifference', where they do not explain or solve phenomena but instead experience and describe.<sup>108</sup> This seems to be a fairly natural response, once we feel that the world, its properties and our lives have no meaning or purpose. Or, at least, this is the natural response once we have surmounted the desire for suicide.

'There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide.'<sup>109</sup> This is the sentence with which Camus introduces his theory, followed by his exploration of the consequences of absurdity. 'Judging whether life is or is not worth living' is the 'fundamental

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>103</sup> Patrick Gardiner, *Kierkegaard: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 111.

<sup>104</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 30.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>106</sup> Mark Carroll, "It Is": Reflections on the Role of Music in Sartre's 'La Nausée', *Music and Letters* 39, no. 3 (Aug. 2006): 399.

<sup>107</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 5.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 1.

question'<sup>110</sup> – and it is this question that he endeavours to answer. There is a certain logic to suicide, if one considers that there is no point to life, but this is not the ultimate solution. So we move swiftly on from this towards the next step: acceptance that there is no purpose, and an understanding of how to confront life from this point.

This is a highly significant difference between existentialism and pure absurdity. As Camus explains in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the existentialists conceive of absurdity as the 'irrational', as 'reason becoming confused and escaping by negating itself. The absurd is lucid reason noting its limits'. The absurdist world is 'unreasonable and only that' – it is 'neither so rational nor so irrational'.<sup>111</sup> Essentially, the existentialists attempt to escape the absurdity of the world by finding reason in the irrationality of it. Absurdist accept the irrationality, and accept that reason has its limits, so there is no point trying to search for any reason beyond that. To continue with the image of Sisyphus, we see him accepting his fate and merely continuing to live and act without striving to find any further meaning. Indeed, it is the reason he is able to carry on; he is fully aware of his destiny, 'the whole extent of his wretched condition',<sup>112</sup> and this is why 'his fate belongs to him'.<sup>113</sup> 'All is well';<sup>114</sup> his 'lucidity' both 'constitute[s] his torture' and simultaneously 'crowns his victory'.<sup>115</sup> So there is a happiness in this, a joy within the struggle: 'happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable.'<sup>116</sup> Camus' belief was that the goal of the individual should be their 'fulfilment and happiness',<sup>117</sup> and whilst others regard his thinking to be pessimistic, he himself did not.<sup>118</sup> His absurd thinking, just like his absurd piece of writing, ends in an uplifting, if somewhat bittersweet way, captured in his original title for the book: 'Sisyphus, or Happiness in Hell'.<sup>119</sup> We must remember that whilst Sisyphus begins in 'sorrow',<sup>120</sup> his ultimate end is that of 'silent joy'.<sup>121</sup>

Upon knowing one's fate, the individual must then find a way to live in knowledge of it. The freedom which this knowledge provides, after the escape from our 'everyday sleep' and waking up to the realisation of absurdity,<sup>122</sup> is followed by the consequences of

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>117</sup> Todd, *Albert Camus*, 145.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>120</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 117.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 57.

absurdity: 'revolt, freedom and passion'.<sup>123</sup> We must act in the world, with full awareness of our freedom to do so, and with determination and conviction. Our freedom comes from the knowledge of our lack of future and lack of an objective morality – 'belief in the meaning of life always implies a scale of values, a choice, our preferences. Belief in the absurd, according to our definitions, teaches the contrary'.<sup>124</sup> Nietzsche was a prominent influence on the absurdists and existentialists, in his questioning of the supposed 'truths' of traditional morality that had previously gone unquestioned.<sup>125</sup> Camus did not wish to suggest a 'universal morality',<sup>126</sup> for we are free to seek our own. So without a set morality, the implication is that it is not possible to behave immorally; neither morality or immorality exist.<sup>127</sup> And so we set our own moral code<sup>128</sup> – for there is 'no truth, but merely truths' – one of the ways in which the starting point of phenomenology correlates with absurdist thought.<sup>129</sup> This is perhaps why Camus describes this climate as an 'epoch ... one of the most divided in its conclusions'.<sup>130</sup>

The way in which we discover some form of personal morality is through action. For Camus and Sartre, this can be seen as almost retrospective – Camus describes Sisyphus, in going down to pick up his rock, as looking back up at the mountain, at his life, 'contemplat[ing] that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate'.<sup>131</sup> For Sartre, it is only after death that we become who we are 'in a fixed and stable way'.<sup>132</sup> It is our actions which create meaning in the world.<sup>133</sup> This comes from one of the fundamental slogans of existentialism, 'existence comes before essence'<sup>134</sup> – it is not the individual's inner behaviour and beliefs that create their moral code, but their external actions. The only resource left is action – we must continue to push our boulder up our mountains, in full knowledge that it will fall back down again, but with our own personal reasons for doing so; 'the rock is still rolling'.<sup>135</sup> As Camus ends his essay, tying back in with the joy that is reclaimed through the

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>125</sup> Todd, *Albert Camus*, 142.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>127</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 65.

<sup>128</sup> Todd, *Albert Camus*, 145.

<sup>129</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 41.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>132</sup> Aronson, *Camus and Sartre*, 237.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>134</sup> Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Methuen & Co., 1966), 26.

<sup>135</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 119.



acceptance of absurdity, 'The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.'<sup>136</sup>

### **The Theatre of the Absurd: An Example for a Music of the Absurd?**

Esslin notes that the writers of the Theatre of the Absurd were not aware of belonging to any collective artistic movement at the time of their writing,<sup>137</sup> instead responding to the 'tendencies inherent in the general movement of thought in a period of transition'.<sup>138</sup> Esslin makes an important clarification in his introduction, which reiterates a point made earlier – he defines absurdity as Camus does, rather than using the word to mean anything humorous and nonsensical.<sup>139</sup>

There have been several critiques of Esslin following his pioneering book, including Michael Bennett's *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd: Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Pinter*. Whilst Bennett does agree with some of Esslin's theories, he finds fault with some fundamental aspects of Esslin's definition of absurd philosophy, as will be seen shortly. Bennett goes further than just criticising Esslin, and reads in detail four plays analysed by Esslin as absurd. However, Bennett rejects the word 'absurd' and instead reads one play from each of the playwrights in the title of the book as 'ethical parables'<sup>140</sup> – a story which presents a contradiction without fully resolving at the end, urging the audience to create their own meaning and ending to the story, which in doing so teaches the audience how to live their lives. As mentioned in my introduction, Esslin's book is of vital importance within this academic field and to my thesis, as he was the first to coin the term 'The Theatre of the Absurd' with a conscious and deliberate use of Camus' definition of the absurd, and, despite Bennett's justified criticisms, his ideas are still useful in their own right as an observation of some characteristics of these plays.

Esslin's initial definition of absurdity is formulated mainly on the basis of the philosophies of Camus, but to an extent also those of Sartre and Nietzsche. He explains it as a feeling of the 'senselessness of life' and the 'inevitable devaluation of ideals'.<sup>141</sup> Later in the book, his definition encompasses irrationality, purposelessness and futility. He describes the writers of the Theatre of the Absurd as revealing how humanity searches for ways to

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 22.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 409.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>140</sup> Bennett, *Reassessing The Theatre of the Absurd*, 2.

<sup>141</sup> Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 24.

confront a universe that has become 'disjointed' and 'purposeless',<sup>142</sup> and a world that acts beyond our control.<sup>143</sup> He summarises the nature of the Theatre of the Absurd as expressing the 'anxiety and despair' which arise from the knowledge that man is surrounded by darkness; he 'can never know his true nature and purpose', and will not be given any sort of moral code by which to live.<sup>144</sup> Since Esslin's writes about his understanding of the concept of absurdity as corresponding deliberately with that of Camus' and Sartre's, it might seem that the plays within his defined category of the Theatre of the Absurd are absurd in a truly philosophical sense. However, Bennett proves this not to be the case, as demonstrated in the following section, not least because Camus' and Sartre's theories diverge significantly. Interestingly, Esslin chooses not to discuss Camus' own questions on absurd art, which ask whether such an art is possible and what properties it would possess if so. This is because Esslin did not believe Camus' and Sartre's plays to portray absurdity in an absurdist way, in an artistic sense at least;<sup>145</sup> the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd do not define the concept of absurdity or argue for its presence in the world or the human condition in the same way that the philosophers' plays present and explain absurdity.<sup>146</sup> Bennett agrees with Esslin on this point, which will be further explored in due course.

Bennett's issue with Esslin's theory lies principally with two specific elements in Esslin's interpretation of absurdity.<sup>147</sup> Bennett says that Esslin 'miscontextualises and mistranslates' a quotation by Ionesco, which is central in Esslin's definition. The quotation, as used by Esslin, is as follows: 'Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose ... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless' (ellipses in original quotation).<sup>148</sup> Firstly, Esslin uses this statement by Ionesco to define absurdity as a life without 'purpose'. In fact, Ionesco writes '*Est absurde ce qui n'a pas de but*', and the word '*but*' has connotations of 'goal', 'target', and 'end'.<sup>149</sup> Therefore, Ionesco actually states that there *is* a purpose to life, contrary to what Esslin believes, and it is this goal of life that is not universal and must be found individually, as explained previously in this section on absurdity. Additionally, the ellipses remove the clause in which Ionesco speaks of the 'final goal' as guiding human history, and it

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 389.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 415-6.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>147</sup> Bennett, *Reassessing The Theatre of the Absurd*, 2.

<sup>148</sup> Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 23.

<sup>149</sup> Bennett, *Reassessing The Theatre of the Absurd*, 9.

is this goal that gives it meaning. It is when man is cut off from his roots, and therefore human history, that he is lost, and his actions are 'useless'.<sup>150</sup>

The second issue that Bennett has with Esslin is that he groups Camus and Sartre together, implying that existentialism is essentially synonymous with absurdity, when actually the texts of which Esslin speaks 'revolt against existentialism'.<sup>151</sup> According to Camus, the world is not the 'nothingness' as claimed by the existentialists; there is reason to be found within the contradiction between the world and our desires, through contemplation of the paradox between these two.<sup>152</sup> Contemporary readings of Camus show his anti-existentialism through the very fact that Sisyphus is happy in his struggle, as revealed in the last few words of *The Myth of Sisyphus*:<sup>153</sup> 'The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy'.<sup>154</sup> Existentialism is a bleak, despairing void, whereas absurdity is an acceptance of the lack of universal meaning and an active ambition to make one's life meaningful.

This theory of absurdity aims to be an accurate and real description of the human condition. Esslin states that when representing reality, these writers of the Theatre of the Absurd must first destroy any illusion, which is the very first step before one can accept absurdity, since absurdity is when the illusion of habit and certainty is destroyed and the self must face the void and nothingness of reality. Jean Genet's 'game of mirrors' is a device that provides an effective example of this. He presents an 'apparent reality', only for it to be revealed as an illusion, which is then revealed itself again to be an illusion once more – and so on infinitely. This is a way in which he exposes the 'fundamental absurdity of being': the lack of certainty and the nothingness of reality. We believe we have a way in which to view the world for what it really is, but it is always shown to be a 'mere reflection in a mirror, and the whole structure collapses'.<sup>155</sup>

Esslin states that there are, therefore, no solutions or meanings to be known in advance – nothing is 'pre-fabricated' or 'ready-made'.<sup>156</sup> A basic principle of Nietzsche's philosophy, and perhaps one of his most influential points, was that humanity lost its certainty of what it had, previously, undoubtedly deemed to be reality. This was followed by a distinct sense of disappointment – a point Esslin sees Camus making use of himself.<sup>157</sup> The

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>154</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 119.

<sup>155</sup> Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 206.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 389.

undertaking of the artist is therefore to make people aware of this as a fact of the human condition.<sup>158</sup> Carl Jung wrote that artists at the time were treating reality as a stranger, or “estrang[ing] [the] self from reality.”<sup>159</sup>

Esslin notes two matters that arise from this endeavour of the artist. The first aim of the artist is to criticise people who live without awareness of this ultimate reality of the human condition, through their art. The second is, as just discussed, to reveal the absurdity of the human condition in a world without certainties, and to consider how to then face one’s existence in the world.<sup>160</sup> According to Esslin, the plays of this genre express the lack of a ‘generally accepted cosmic system of values.’<sup>161</sup> He states that one must take this not as cause to despair but as a ‘starting point of a new kind of consciousness’; the ‘mystery and terror’ can be confronted ‘in the exhilaration of a new-found freedom’.<sup>162</sup> This freedom which engenders the creation of the individual’s own self and moral code is what has enabled the dramatists of the Theatre of the Absurd to create the various worlds in which they set their scenes, which, according to Esslin, retain the ‘realism of feeling and experience of being’<sup>163</sup> that are able then to portray the human condition realistically.

Bennett argues for the realism of the plays through the fact that they are, in essence, parables. Parables are, as he quotes G. W. Brandt as saying, ‘earthy, concrete and sensuous’,<sup>164</sup> as opposed to abstract and unrelated to humanity and human behaviour. Whether or not the Theatre of the Absurd playwrights intended their work to be read as parables (although it is not difficult to believe that they were writing with potentially didactic intentions), they can certainly be read in this way, and in order to speak to humanity, they must reflect it in some way. Bennett argues that the way in which these parables become stories which tell their audience ‘how to live’<sup>165</sup> is by providing a contradiction or paradox – this paradox is crucial because this is how he defines the parable.<sup>166</sup> More specifically, he calls the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd ‘parabolic dramas’.<sup>167</sup>

He describes the main features of a parabolic drama as follows: the creation of a metaphorical story; a self-imposition into the situation of the play through the creation of

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 390.

<sup>159</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 404.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 390-1.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 392.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 411-412.

<sup>164</sup> quoted in Bennett, *Reassessing The Theatre of the Absurd*, 126.

<sup>165</sup> Bennett, *Reassessing The Theatre of the Absurd*, 293.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 22.

the situation and a related paradox (the 'orientation and disorientation'); lack of resolution of the paradox, making the audience members resolve it for themselves;<sup>168</sup> and creating a heterotopia – a mélange of different viewpoints that must be 'navigated' by the audience in order to construct their own interpretation.<sup>169</sup> Essentially, Bennett argues, the playwright makes the audience contemplate the paradox presented to them; unlike Esslin, who argues that the plays *are* contradictory and therefore irrational and meaningless, Bennett argues that the plays consider a contradiction without being inherently contradictory themselves.<sup>170</sup> The narrative 're-describes' the world, creating disorder that needs to be reordered by the audience.<sup>171</sup> The audience members may not have control over the events of the play, but they do have control over what they believe its meaning to be.

Bennett's specific definition of a parable is that it is built around a certain type of paradox – he speaks of an 'apparently ... self-contradictory statement or proposition' which could be proven to be true after 'investigation, analysis or explanation.'<sup>172</sup> Bennett describes the main source of confusion for audiences and critics as the contradiction between the onstage action and language,<sup>173</sup> and argues that for Esslin his reading of the lack of meaning came from this incongruity. Bennett argues that a more up-to-date reading of Camus involves not just taking the meaning to be the contradiction as a fact in and of itself, but instead the meaning comes from thinking about and personally resolving the contradiction, and thereby questioning the essence of the moral. This is the job of an ethical parable: forcing the audience to work out the paradox.<sup>174</sup>

Bennett argues that this newer reading of Camus and therefore newer reading of the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd could come from the change in what 'nothingness' has come to mean. The contradiction in the plays does not just come from the onstage action and language, but from the heterotopia (as mentioned previously) and from the stagnation of narrative progress contrasted with the relentlessness of time moving forward, as in the nature of a temporal art form.<sup>175</sup> The consequent potential lack of meaning, the 'nothingness', is a very Sartrean, existentialist viewpoint. But as mentioned, Bennett believes these plays and playwrights to revolt against existentialism, because of the creation of meaning on the part of audience members – Sartrean nothingness is actually Heideggerian,

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<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

heterotopic possibility.<sup>176</sup> It is not negation but an opportunity for growth and to find a purpose.<sup>177</sup> Bennett's reading of the plays in this manner is a contrast to Esslin's reading of the plays as having specific 'absurd' characteristics and a total lack of meaning – but it is certainly true that there are still some characteristics shared by several plays.

An observation of the characteristic repetitiousness of these plays can contribute to a deeper understanding of the ways in which absurdity reveals itself in the Theatre of the Absurd. It is a quality conveyed in various ways and through diversely ranging means, both significant within this genre and transferable to musical analysis. This may seem a fairly standard feature of temporal and/or narrative artistic forms – circular structures are hardly uncommon – but these plays are cyclical in a strikingly different manner to conventional drama. The repetitiousness is seen as 'transcribing reality'<sup>178</sup> more than a social or realist play, and this is key: the plays in this absurd genre are analysed here as depicting reality most accurately.

Esslin points out that the playwright Arthur Adamov's starting point was that 'in this life ... the same situations fatally recur'.<sup>179</sup> Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is perhaps one of the best-known plays of the Theatre of the Absurd. It consists of a series of repetitions – of events, situations, conversations, and even the hopes that the two main characters insist on fixing on Godot. These hopes pinned on the mysterious Godot are always shown to be futile,<sup>180</sup> rendering the entire play pointless according to Esslin, and static in terms of development towards any resolution. For example, in the play, Estragon is beaten up and left in a ditch every night, and is obsessed with removing his boot which is causing him extreme discomfort – the latter in particular is one of many continual and repetitive topics of conversation. Jean Genet's *The Maids* portrays a ritual in endless repetition by two characters, seemingly a lady and her maid, who actually turn out to be two role-playing maids, 'never reach[ing] a natural climax'.<sup>181</sup> On a symbolical level, in Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, Bennett notes the nature of birthday parties as intrinsically cyclical and repetitive.<sup>182</sup> On a larger scale, Eugène Ionesco's *La Cantatrice Chauve* has no end as such; it simply starts all over again from the beginning.

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 33-4.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>178</sup> Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 263.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>182</sup> Bennett, *Reassessing The Theatre of the Absurd*, 65.

To Esslin, in the Theatre of the Absurd, dialogue and action are ‘mere game[s] to pass the time’ in a ‘purposeless world that has lost its objectives’.<sup>183</sup> The style of conversation demonstrates two things – the first that the ‘emptiness of polite conversation’ is pointless and futile, but realistic,<sup>184</sup> and the second that it is inconclusive, ‘incoherent’, ‘ungrammatical’ and ‘elliptical’. Bennett notes the cyclical as well as repetitive nature of Meg’s conversations in *The Birthday Party*, as she repeatedly asks her husband Petey an endless list of subjective questions. Petey ‘kills each potential conversation’ with increasingly brusque responses and does not respond with further questions for Meg, and so a cycle is created as Meg continues to ask questions and Petey suppresses conversation.<sup>185</sup>

It is not only the style of the conversation that is circular and futile – the content often is also. Circularity is a microcosmic and macrocosmic structural device that reveals much about the absurdity of the human condition and nature of the world. Esslin notes Pinter’s belief that the flaws of political, social and realist plays are that they ‘focus on inessentials and exaggerate their importance’. ‘Inessentials’ are things that are less true to life, those that are ‘not a fundamental aspect of existence’. These supposedly realist plays convey the message that once a ‘limited objective’ is reached all problems are solved, such as in the classic narrative ending that the boy gets the girl, and all ends ‘happily ever after’. In reality, the next step is the materialisation of more problems, as well as the ‘real problems’ of existence and the self, with which humans have to contend.<sup>186</sup> The reality is that of Sisyphus – humans seek to overcome an obstacle, and when they are successful another emerges.<sup>187</sup> It is not the end, or the beginning, but just a fact of life that is depicted in a truly realistic play.

*La Cantatrice Chauve*, by Ionesco, as mentioned above, is a perfect example of a play with a Sisyphean circular structure. Not only does the end become the beginning once more, there is a violent, impassioned argument just before the ending of the play. The significance of this is that the ‘final explosion’ is completely useless, as the play returns to the beginning. In this play, the characters and the situation that they are in are ‘static’ and ‘interchangeable’,<sup>188</sup> which is a feature of these plays that will be discussed further in due course. This is characteristic of several of these plays – for example also *Waiting for Godot*, as discussed, where the entire proceedings of the play are entirely futile and make no

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<sup>183</sup> Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 86.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>185</sup> Bennett, *Reassessing The Theatre of the Absurd*, 65.

<sup>186</sup> Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 291.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 73-4.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

difference to what actually happens.<sup>189</sup> These two examples of structural circularity have a significant impact on the feeling of resolution – the lack of which is a key theme of these plays.

For Esslin, this absence of conclusion and its contradictory nature constitutes a lack of meaning. However, as mentioned, Bennett argues that there is meaning to be found – and his own reading is that it is expected that the audience must work to find it. For example, in *Waiting for Godot*, Bennett's interpretation is in contrast to the old-fashioned reading of two people waiting for a 'god' who never arrives, which is thought to symbolise a loss of hope and meaning in the climate following the Second World War.<sup>190</sup> Instead, Bennett sees Beckett as showing the audience how to live – it is a 'Sisyphean triumph'<sup>191</sup> – as the characters learn how to wait actively by finding meaning in their lives whilst waiting.<sup>192</sup> In her review of Bennett's book, Gina Macussi MacKenzie picks up on Bennett's use of Victor Turner's work on liminality. She states that when Esslin argues that something is absurd, what is happening is that the characters are in a liminal state for too long. Whilst Bennett does not label it as such, he also argues for this idea of liminality within these plays. A clear example noted by MacKenzie is this interaction between Vladimir and Estragon – these characters learn to live and communicate not just whilst waiting, but whilst waiting in a protracted liminal state.<sup>193</sup>

This waiting in a liminal state is shown to be the source of meaning within the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd because there is nothing that the characters can do themselves to relieve their suffering. As previously mentioned, Estragon struggles to remove his boot, which is causing him a great deal of discomfort, and yet he does not focus on the suffering being caused but instead the struggle and how to overcome it. When he is eventually able to remove his boot, he finds that it has not changed anything, and he is still in pain. This is the disorientation part of the parable – the fact that he is still suffering even after removing what he believed would end his suffering reveals the meaninglessness of his success.<sup>194</sup> And yet at the end of the play, after the vain hoping for the end of their struggles and the arrival of Godot, both of which do not materialise, the two seem to have found everything that they need to continue living. Bennett sees this in the ending of the play, as Vladimir asks

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>190</sup> Bennett, *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd*, 29.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>193</sup> Gina Masucci MacKenzie, 'Theatre's New Threshold: A Review of Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd: Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Pinter', *Journal of Modern Literature* 36, no. 1 (2012): 175-176.

<sup>194</sup> Bennett, *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd*, 37.



‘Well? Shall we go?’ and Estragon replies, ‘Yes, let’s go’. The stage direction then reads, ‘*They do not move*’. Bennett notes the dictionary definition of the word ‘go’, and finds the one that seems most appropriate to their journey to be in the sense of ‘to go on’, as in ‘to live and move’. The use of ‘let’s’ shows that they go on together. They have found meaning in each other’s company, and they have found a way in which to live their lives.<sup>195</sup>

Of course, presumably we can turn this back on Bennett, a fellow audience member, and say that this is his own interpretation – he is the audience member who has found his own meaning in the end of the play, following his own rules by actively participating in finding meaning. This act of audience participation is crucial; the audience must be active in finding meaning because, as Bennett presents it, that is the purpose of the plays – we make our lives meaningful through action and revolt, through *doing* something, in the same way that the characters do, such as Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*. This action is not necessarily physical, but also mental; in Pinter’s *The Birthday Party* it is revealed that the characters do not question or interrogate themselves or their motivations – this too is a form of revolt, but mentally, as an actively introspective search for the self.<sup>196</sup> Bennett argues that these characteristics noted by Esslin as absurd in the plays of this genre – circularity, the Sisyphean structure and the repetition – are not meaningless: in fact completely the opposite.

Having looked briefly at some aspects of structure, we shall now consider form. Esslin gives an insight into the difference between the plays of Camus and Sartre and those of the Theatre of the Absurd writers. Initially, one would think that Camus would be able to write plays that fall neatly under Esslin’s umbrella. But Esslin’s observation is that the philosophers argue for the concept of absurdity through old conventions – there is no circular structure, repetition, stasis, or lack of resolution to such a striking and overwhelming degree such as in the Theatre of the Absurd. He notes Ionesco’s claim that real creativity is attained when new thoughts are expressed in a new way. Ionesco states that ‘form and structure ... are as important as conceptual content’<sup>197</sup> – a statement mirroring Beckett’s thoughts that form, structure and mood are inextricably linked to its content.<sup>198</sup> However, according to Esslin, Camus and Sartre masterfully depict their characters and morals with ‘highly lucid and logically constructed reasoning’.<sup>199</sup> This creates an internal paradox between the form and content of their plays, as they argue for the irrationality that is the

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 50-51.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>197</sup> Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 129.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 24.

human condition, through a rational and logical form.<sup>200</sup> As Bennett observes, the Theatre of the Absurd presents absurdity without attempting to define or argue for the feeling of absurdity. In fact, he does not even believe it to be necessary to define the concept of the absurd to discuss the Theatre of the Absurd, as the point of the plays is not to define it or describe the experience of it but to show the audience how to find meaning in an absurd world, taking its absurdity as given.<sup>201</sup> Both writers are essentially saying that the writers of the Theatre of the Absurd remove the contradiction between their meaning and the way in which they express this topic, instead aiming for a unification of these aspects of their work.

What is key is that the formal structure of plays by Camus and Sartre follow the usual exposition-conflict-final solution progression, the commonly accepted standard narrative procedure. The kind of dramatic tension produced in this kind of narrative is profoundly different, and it implies that resolution in the form of a solution is possible.<sup>202</sup> For example, Camus' play, *Le Malentendu (Cross Purpose)*, tells the story of a mother and daughter who own a hotel and make their money by killing and robbing guests. The mother's estranged son comes to visit, but decides not to reveal his identity until the following day, and stays overnight in the hotel. That night, they take his money and kill him. The following morning, they discover his passport and realise who he is. The mother kills herself from grief, and the sister decides to commit suicide also, leaving the murdered son's wife distraught and alone at the end of the play. The play follows a narrative procedure, in three acts, with a distinct beginning, middle and end; whilst it deals with absurd concepts, there is no such repetition, circularity or other formal absurd characteristic to be found.<sup>203</sup>

The Theatre of the Absurd writers, however, do not present their work in such a way. Esslin's theory on their formal structure is that they describe a situation, and rather than presenting several different events following a linear development, they show one image from varying angles.<sup>204</sup> It is a poetic image, which does not present the audience with ideas or information or even drama,<sup>205</sup> but instead attempts to create an understanding of its world in one moment.<sup>206</sup> Of course, the nature of the dramatic art form necessitates its extension in time,<sup>207</sup> which results in its formal structure manipulated into a device to reveal

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Bennett, *Reassessing The Theatre of the Absurd*, 3-4.

<sup>202</sup> Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 405.

<sup>203</sup> Albert Camus, 'Cross Purpose', trans. Stuart Gilbert. In *Caligula and Other Plays*, 105-162 (London: Penguin Books, 2006).

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 393.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 395.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 394.

a complete image by 'unfolding it in a sequence of interacting elements'.<sup>208</sup> In presenting a totality, it constructs a 'truer picture of reality itself', from the experience of the individual.<sup>209</sup> These broken down elements that are presented to the audience forces them to fit the pieces of the jigsaw together,<sup>210</sup> for the 'instantaneous vision' has to be broken in order to be rebuilt.<sup>211</sup> As we have seen, Bennett is very much in accordance with this audience activity of creating an individual perception of a situation. Esslin writes that the creation of these images are honest to reality in transmitting a sense of the experience of the human condition.<sup>212</sup>

Esslin's argument on this point is persuasive and does seem to be the case in these plays – even Bennett does not argue as he sees repetition, stagnation and lack of progress within this genre, as mentioned above. He agrees with Esslin in terms of the plays lacking a satisfying conclusion, and the playwrights seem even to play off this idea, as they deliberately eradicate the ending of their plays.<sup>213</sup> However, he defines form differently. He sees the structure of the parable – and therefore the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd – as having two distinct arcs in the form of orientation and disorientation (as mentioned previously), as opposed to this exposition-conflict-resolution structure. The parable misses out the 'resolution' section,<sup>214</sup> as audience members have to create resolution for themselves.<sup>215</sup> Bennett defines the orientation section of the parable as making the audience longing for the source of anguish to be eradicated. The disorientation section removes the supposed cause of suffering but creates the issue of the anguish remaining present.<sup>216</sup> Order becomes disorder, and the play/parable ends thus, followed by the audience members' personal resolution which is not presented on stage but created within these recipients' minds.<sup>217</sup> Whilst this differs to Esslin's presentation of the structure as being completely static, the two are not mutually exclusive. However, Bennett notes directors' up-to-date readings of Camus as moving towards this presentation of the play as parable, and provoking a self-questioning response from the audience.<sup>218</sup> According to

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 403.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 395.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 412.

<sup>213</sup> Bennett, *Reassessing The Theatre of the Absurd*, 19.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 34.

Bennett, the narrative is subversive, with this defined formal structure, and, most importantly, demands meaning from its audience.<sup>219</sup>

Bennett and Esslin do agree on the realism portrayed through these plays, and argue that this is the reason for their effectiveness in terms of their provocation of meaning and their ability to relate universally to the human condition. One of the techniques through which these writers are able to portray the universal state of the self is by having no distinct characters, only 'basic human attitudes', and instead of a plot there is only a type of situation (as explored above). Individuality and events are replaced by patterns.<sup>220</sup> The elimination of individuality is deliberate,<sup>221</sup> Esslin says, for the loss of identity renders the characters completely interchangeable,<sup>222</sup> as can be seen in Ionesco's play *Jacques, ou La Soumission*, in which all the members of the family are called Jacques.<sup>223</sup> Bennett discusses Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, a play in which everyone in the small village setting gradually turns into a rhinoceros. Ionesco's belief in the universal nature of humanity is revealed,<sup>224</sup> with – or perhaps through – the exploration of the issue of conformity versus individuality.<sup>225</sup> This issue of individuality is foreshadowed in the title itself, as the word 'rhinoceros' in French is the same whether singular or plural. In the first edition of the play, the proof-reader added an article to the title, making it '*Le Rhinoceros*', but in the following editions Ionesco asked for the title to be removed, which creates this distinct and deliberate ambiguity as to the plurality of the word.<sup>226</sup> Additionally, as well as everyone turning into a rhinoceros, the characters are confused by how many rhinoceroses there are; after the second sighting of a rhino they discuss whether it was the same rhino as the first or a different one.<sup>227</sup>

It is not a negative, however, that all individuals are shown to be fundamentally the same; Ionesco stated that 'to discover the fundamental problem common to all mankind, I must ask myself what *my* fundamental problem is'.<sup>228</sup> Esslin sees that as an artistic device and a fact of the human condition; we know that artists can understand and represent our feelings (of absurdity) upon introspection because those feelings are universal. They understand the horror of the knowledge that we must confront the world, the solitude and

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>220</sup> Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 75.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>224</sup> Bennett, *Reassessing The Theatre of the Absurd*, 90.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 127.

isolation that is suffered against the magnitude of our surroundings,<sup>229</sup> and the powerless feeling of the self within society,<sup>230</sup> in spite of being members of a community.<sup>231</sup> However, Bennett has an additional view; in Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, it is not just about the loss of the individual but the inability of everyone in the village to defy rhinocerotis; everyone believes it is their societal duty to submit to being transformed, because that is what everyone else is doing.<sup>232</sup> These plays provoke the question of what the self even is – for Sartre's slogan 'existence before essence' shows that the Platonic ideal of the individual no longer holds, for the state of the self can change at any given moment, and so that which constitutes the individual is lost.<sup>233</sup> In terms of Camus, these plays question what the self must do, highlighting the importance of action and revolt, and the significance of doing what constitutes an individually meaningful life.

Camus' absurd philosophy governs the form, style and content of these plays. This is why I shall use Bennett's and Esslin's books to support my own reading of absurdity in Satie's music: understanding how writers portray the absurd in another art form and how it is observed by scholars using Camus' absurd philosophy is invaluable. Whilst not unquestionably transferable to music, this methodology is still useful to study, for there is no such existing comparison to absurdity to be found in musicology. The next step, therefore, is to explore the ways in which absurdity and its observable representation in theatre can be compared to Satie's music.

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<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>232</sup> Bennett, *Reassessing The Theatre of the Absurd*, 95.

<sup>233</sup> Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 153.

### CHAPTER 3: SOCRATE

*Socrate*, a 'symphonic drama in three parts with voice', is exceptional in both its longer duration and in its direct contrast to the more light-hearted and humorous nature of several of Satie's other works. It is not unusual in its basic structure, however, as it is in three movements; Satie often structured his music in this way.<sup>234</sup> These three movements contain three very fleeting sketches of certain scenes in Socrates' life – the initial title of the work was *Vie de Socrate*, or 'Life of Socrates',<sup>235</sup> but of course its relative brevity means that it cannot be the summary it was perhaps initially intended to be. The text of Satie's choice depiction was taken specifically from Victor Cousin's French translation of Plato's *Dialogues*, since he found it to be 'very attractive',<sup>236</sup> due to its 'clarity, simplicity and beauty',<sup>237</sup> more so than the newer translation by Mario Meunier.<sup>238</sup> This translation is described by scholars as being an accurate one, without lyricism or poeticism, and therefore seems like a deliberate choice; the impersonal, academic text augments and enhances the equally detached, calm, emotionally distant music. Satie took short extracts from the *Symposium*, *Phaedrus* and *Phaedo*, and then shortened and removed further any superfluties from the 'vast Platonic corpus', leaving a text with little philosophical content.<sup>239</sup> The 'plot', if it can be referred to as such, is as follows:

#### **Part 1: 'Portrait of Socrates' (from *Symposium*)**

At a gathering, an intoxicated Alcibiades praises Socrates to the group of 'mes chers amis', almost to the point of sycophancy, comparing his affective abilities on people to those of the satyrs Silenus and Marsyas, describing Marsyas' legendary flute-playing in particular. However, unlike the satyrs, Socrates does not need a flute to move people; he can produce the same effect with mere words. Socrates seems to shrug off the compliments in his one-line ending to the movement, saying that since Alcibiades has praised him it is time for him to compliment his own neighbour on the right.

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<sup>234</sup> Potter, *Erik Satie*, 138.

<sup>235</sup> Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, xxxiv.

<sup>236</sup> Quoted in Wilkins and Satie, 'Erik Satie's Letters to Milhaud and Others', 410.

<sup>237</sup> Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, 316.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, 209-10.

<sup>239</sup> Dayan, 'Erik Satie's Poetry', 415.

**Part 2: 'On the Banks of the Illisus' (from *Phaedrus*)**

This pastoral interim movement is an informal fragment of colloquy between Socrates and Phaedrus. As Phaedrus points out, thankfully neither of them are wearing sandals, so they can walk along with their feet in the river whilst seeking a pleasant place to rest. They aim for a particular tree suggested by Phaedrus. They are very near to the place in which a legend says that the nymph Orithyia was carried away by Boreas, the god of the North Wind, and so Phaedrus asks if Socrates believes this myth. Socrates voices his unwillingness to believe it without finding a possible rational explanation for the nymph's disappearance first. On reaching the tree, he praises Phaedrus' decision to come to such a peaceful, cooling area.

**Part 3: 'Death of Socrates' (from *Phaedo*)**

This movement, in which Phaedo recounts the story of Socrates' execution, is not only the longest of the three, occupying more than half the work's total duration, but also the most discussed and most analysed. A number of Socrates' friends and followers were there with him at his execution, and Socrates spoke to them of pleasure and pain, and of the dying swan's song as a sign of joy at departure from life, as it brought them closer to the gods. The jailor speaks of his sorrow that he must order Socrates to drink the poison that will kill him, but also of his knowledge that Socrates will not blame him, unlike the other men he has had to face. He brings the poison, which Socrates drinks without hesitation or reluctance to accept his fate. He lies down on the bed, gradually losing physical feeling from his feet to his heart, speaking his last words – a request to Crito to pay a debt he owes to the god Aesculapius – before he dies. Phaedo ends the narrative with his admiration of Socrates as 'the wisest and most just of all men.'

The music that Satie uses to illustrate the above is slow, tranquil and static, rarely disturbed by a discord. It is repetitive, written with great clarity and simplicity. The orchestral accompaniment is often ostinato-based, and there are no complex rhythms or discordant harmonies. The melodies and harmonies do not develop or progress, and the work is therefore rendered immobile, without teleological progression; there is no real climax or direction. The unassuming vocal melody is written for four characters, scored for either one or four sopranos. It appears as one long, extended melodic phrase, with plainchant and modal influences. The overall impression, as remarked upon by scholars and critics, is that of stasis, timelessness, and simplicity.

The work was commissioned by the Princesse Edmond de Polignac. With her wealth, she was able to install herself as a patroness of the arts, and founded a salon attended by several celebrated artists across various art forms. She commissioned works from other composers, notably Stravinsky, and often offered vital support.<sup>240</sup> Satie began the composition of *Socrate* on 6<sup>th</sup> January 1917, and the first performance was at the Polignac salon with the singer Jane Bathori, who had sung for the première of *Trois Mélodies* in 1916, accompanied by Satie on piano.<sup>241</sup> The first public performance with piano was on 14<sup>th</sup> February 1920,<sup>242</sup> followed a few months later by the première of the orchestral version as part of an all-Satie concert on 7<sup>th</sup> June 1920.<sup>243</sup> The Princesse de Polignac's commission provided Satie with a rare but ideal situation:<sup>244</sup> the freedom to choose the content of his work, his method of working, and the ability to write without financial worries.<sup>245</sup> Another coincidence remarked upon by some scholars of Satie is that of Debussy's death in 1918; Templier is not alone in arguing that this was a significant factor in Satie's decision to write a lengthier and more serious work than he had previously attempted,<sup>246</sup> and without fear of judgment from his most severe critic. However, Orledge is sceptical of this seemingly 'liberating effect', as most of *Socrate* was written before Debussy's death.<sup>247</sup> Whether he was affected by these various circumstances or not, Satie was inspired to create what seems to be universally accepted as his masterpiece.

The exceptional quality of this work, both within Satie's oeuvre and within music composed at the time, is perhaps what provokes the scholarly response that gives it this favourable title. Although Satie had previously showcased his inspiration from the Greeks in his well-known *Gymnopédies* of 1888, which the atmosphere of *Socrate* revisits with what Orledge describes as the same 'timeless simplicity and restraint',<sup>248</sup> the later work is considerably longer,<sup>249</sup> and written with much more serious intentions. This is one of very few later works that are not related in some way to cabaret music,<sup>250</sup> and this work in particular was devised and completed entirely and most intentionally separate to Cocteau

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<sup>240</sup> Davis, *Erik Satie*, 118.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>242</sup> Robert Orledge, 'Satie and the Art of Dedication', *Music and Letters* 73, no. 4 (Nov 1992): 557.

<sup>243</sup> Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian*, 489.

<sup>244</sup> Dossena, 'À la recherche du vrai Socrate', 4.

<sup>245</sup> Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, 9.

<sup>246</sup> Templier, *Erik Satie*, 41-2.

<sup>247</sup> Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, 66.

<sup>248</sup> Robert Orledge, 'Satie & Les Six', in *French Music Since Berlioz*, ed. Richard Langham Smith and Caroline Potter, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 229.

<sup>249</sup> Bruce Trinkley, 'Notes in Homage to Erik Satie', *The Journal of General Education* 27, no. 1 (Spring 1971): 27.

<sup>250</sup> Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, 194.



and his influence.<sup>251</sup> The work is often described as atypical within his oeuvre. Mellers describes it as an ‘extremely important and contemporary work’;<sup>252</sup> Richard Langham Smith as a ‘minor masterpiece of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’.<sup>253</sup> The composition of *Socrate* has even led Satie to be named by Whiting as ‘one of the sources of neoclassicism’,<sup>254</sup> although the composer Ned Rorem believes the work not to be ‘ahead of time but outside of time’.<sup>255</sup> perhaps a romanticised notion but a notable alternative idea. For all these reasons above, it is generally accepted as unique within the history of music and his own works. Gillmor believes it to be his ‘chief claim to immortality’.<sup>256</sup>

Satie’s feelings during composition seem to have been somewhat insecure, however, and he was acutely aware of the difficulty of the task he was undertaking.<sup>257</sup> This is in large part due to the text and his reverence for it; his letters written at the very beginning of his composition to Valentine Gross reveal his worry about not doing justice to Plato’s words, about being ‘scared of failing with this work’ that he wanted to be ‘white and pure like the Antique’.<sup>258</sup> He was ‘all over the place’ about it, and ‘no longer kn[ew] where to put [him]self’.<sup>259</sup> His work was ‘une acte de piété’, ‘une rêverie d’artiste’, ‘un humble hommage’ (‘an act of piety’, ‘an artist’s reverie’, ‘a humble homage’),<sup>260</sup> and his respect for the text led him to want to write a ‘complementary experience’, not a narrative.<sup>261</sup> A few weeks later, he wrote to Hugo again in absolute ecstasy about his work: ‘It’s a dream! ... I’m swimming in happiness. At last, I’m free, free as the air, as water, as the wild sheep. Long live Plato! Long live Victor Cousin! I’m free! Very free! What happiness!’<sup>262</sup> He seems indeed to be free from his worry here. His creative beginning is most fascinating. He describes his intention to create a work that is ‘white and pure’ – an ambiguous picture from which many take their own descriptions of his work. Gillmor describes this as being the subconsciously assumed Western idea of the ancient Greeks; it is ‘pure’, ‘abstract’ and ‘remote’.<sup>263</sup>

So why this task, why ancient Greece, why Socrates? Many have suggested a distinctive comparison between Socrates and Satie, both in terms of their life events and

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<sup>251</sup> Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian*, 484.

<sup>252</sup> Mellers, ‘Erik Satie and the ‘Problem’ of Contemporary Music’, 222.

<sup>253</sup> Richard Langham Smith, ‘The Serious Satie’, *The Musical Times* 132, no. 17 (Aug 1991): 393.

<sup>254</sup> Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian*, 556.

<sup>255</sup> Quoted in Gillmor, *Erik Satie*, 228.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>257</sup> Myers, *Erik Satie*, 56.

<sup>258</sup> Volta, *Satie Seen Through His Letters*, 154.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>260</sup> Quoted in Mellers, ‘Erik Satie and the ‘Problem’ of Contemporary Music’, 221.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>262</sup> Quoted in Volta, *Satie Seen Through His Letters*, 154.

<sup>263</sup> Gillmor, *Erik Satie*, 220.

personalities;<sup>264</sup> Templier states that there is ‘no doubt’ that Satie discovered all these comparative aspects between their characters. Of course, as Gillmor points out, it is unknown how much Satie really knew about Socrates’ life.<sup>265</sup>

It is fair to say that some resemblances between the two figures are particularly striking. Whilst some scholars would disagree with this merging of the two identities, such as Davis who describes the idea of Satie as a modern Socrates as ‘bizarre’,<sup>266</sup> there are comparisons observed by other scholars which range from the general to the specific. Gillmor writes that the Platonic scholar Alfred Edward Taylor speaks of Socrates as ‘something of an ‘oddity’, and this was also Socrates’ public image – an “amusing eccentric, a combination of pedant, paradox-monger, free-thinker”’.<sup>267</sup> Socrates’ wish was to live a ‘plain and simple life’, rejecting any materialistic additions to it;<sup>268</sup> surely comparative to Satie’s, who once refused a commission because his fee was too high – a commission previously rejected by Stravinsky because it was too low<sup>269</sup> – and was always ready to be charitable whether or not it was within his means to be.<sup>270</sup>

Socrates’ death by hemlock, as described in the last movement of *Socrate*, was ordered by the state on account of two serious charges: he refused to worship the ‘officially recognised gods of state’, and he was accused of corrupting the minds of the youth.<sup>271</sup> These accusations have been compared in various sources to the legal case Satie was forced to endure a few months after the composition of *Socrate* had begun, after a postcard he sent to Jean Poueigh with an offensive if immature message, following Poueigh’s negative review of Satie’s latest ballet, *Parade*. Poueigh filed a libel case against Satie and won, resulting in an eight-day prison sentence and fine. Satie managed to appeal against the prison sentence and the Princesse de Polignac paid his fine.<sup>272</sup> As mentioned above, Socrates’ alleged corruption of the youth of Athens has been said to bear resemblance to Satie’s adoption of Les Six, or ‘Les Jeunes’ (The Young Ones’) as he called them,<sup>273</sup> mentoring them in their move away from the Wagnerian tradition.<sup>274</sup> He also actively took part in many community

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<sup>264</sup> Potter, *Erik Satie*, 239.

<sup>265</sup> Gillmor, *Erik Satie*, 119.

<sup>266</sup> Davis, *Erik Satie*, 124-125.

<sup>267</sup> Quoted in Gillmor, *Erik Satie*, 220.

<sup>268</sup> Harding, *Erik Satie*, 175.

<sup>269</sup> Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, 222.

<sup>270</sup> Potter, *Erik Satie*, 187.

<sup>271</sup> Gillmor, *Erik Satie*, 219.

<sup>272</sup> Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, xxxii.

<sup>273</sup> Orledge, ‘Satie & Les Six’, 231.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

activities to help young people.<sup>275</sup> Even this link, though perhaps tenuous, is yet another curious similarity between the two figures of Satie and Socrates. An even more tenuous though amusing link is that Satie and his sculptor friend Brancusi, who based three of his sculptures on Satie's *Socrate*, nicknamed each other Socrates and Plato – Satie as Socrates and Brancusi as Plato.<sup>276</sup>

Despite the seemingly tenuous links between the two figures, it seems likely that Satie would have been aware of some, if not the majority, of these similarities. It would be logical to think that he would write his music with great empathy, 'writing himself into the work' as many composers are said to do. It is remarkable, therefore, to see the level of detachment in the work, commented on by several if not every scholar of Satie. The initial reaction to the work is that it is 'problematic' and 'atypical';<sup>277</sup> as Ned Rorem asserts above, it seems to be both ahead of its time and 'dateless'.<sup>278</sup> There certainly seems to be a distance between the work and the listener. This is somewhat romanticised in older scholarship – the impersonality of the work is described by Mellers as a 'solitariness which is peculiarly terrifying',<sup>279</sup> with the music as an 'expression of a spiritual loneliness so complete as to be almost without consolation'.<sup>280</sup> Mellers sees this impersonality as an effect of the listener's inability to "connect' it with anything familiar'.<sup>281</sup> Myers speaks of Satie's personal feelings of loneliness translating to the music somehow, his isolation creating a 'solitary music' that 'could only have been conceived by a mind ... dwelling in a sort of spiritual stratosphere, in a rarefied isolation'.<sup>282</sup> Gillmor provides a slightly more recent view, speaking of the 'psychological vacuity' which disconnects Satie entirely from his music.<sup>283</sup>

More recent scholarship examines further the possible causes for this feeling of detachment that comes from the self-effacing quality of the music itself. Orledge attributes this effect to the gentle dynamic, unhurried pulse and the repetition of the interval of a fourth.<sup>284</sup> Potter speaks of repetition, taken to the extreme, having the ability to remove expressive content;<sup>285</sup> whilst the use of repetition may not be as extreme in this work, the other features such as those just mentioned by Orledge above certainly enhance the effect

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<sup>275</sup> Potter, *Erik Satie*, 196.

<sup>276</sup> Potter, *Erik Satie*, 203.

<sup>277</sup> Dossena, 'À la recherche du vrai Socrate', 3.

<sup>278</sup> Myers, *Erik Satie*, 98.

<sup>279</sup> Mellers, 'Erik Satie and the 'Problem' of Contemporary Music', 220.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>282</sup> Myers, *Erik Satie*, 56.

<sup>283</sup> Gillmor, *Erik Satie*, 228.

<sup>284</sup> Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, 133.

<sup>285</sup> Potter, *Erik Satie*, 143.

already begun by the repetitive devices and general uniformity of the work. Satie is well known for his anti-Wagnerian rejection of expression and progression,<sup>286</sup> and the creation of his furniture music; as will be discussed further later in the chapter, this is music which provides a background to everyday life, and is not an emotionally stimulating piece of work to which one can listen attentively. This repetitive, static, self-effacing music can be said to have an inherent sense of detachment, and that this is its purpose – Albright speaks of furniture music as a background onto which the mind can place its own thoughts, and is nothing to do with the emotion of the self.<sup>287</sup>

Whilst scholarly analysis focuses on interesting and unconventional compositional processes and his forward-thinking musical ideals, I am going to take this idea of detachment further. Detachment is very much connected to absurdity; detachment from one's environment, from one another, even from one's own life upon recognising the circularity and futility of existence is a paramount consequence of absurdity. The link between *Socrate* and absurdity is therefore a particularly pertinent one to study. My aim is to look at *Socrate*, and particularly at this characteristic of detachment that permeates the work largely through repetition and stasis, exploring it further through the lens of absurdity to reveal a new layer of understanding.

### **Satie's Use of Repetition and Musical Development**

It is well acknowledged that a key characteristic of Satie's work is its stasis and immobility. This is exhibited through repetitious rhythms, patterns and motifs, a limited amount of variation, and a lack of teleological progression. Davis highlights this aspect of *Socrate* in her book, stating that the three movements do not create a narrative structure but instead a 'triptych of moody landscapes'.<sup>288</sup> Along with many other scholars, she believes the form of the work to be based on this repetition and immobility.<sup>289</sup> There is no forward progression, and instead of musical development there is only 'nuanced variation'.<sup>290</sup> Orledge echoes this in his writings, calling it a 'detached, monochrome effect'.<sup>291</sup> Many scholars comment on the simplicity of the work, and Dossena hypothesises that this might be due to its 'internal

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<sup>286</sup> Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent*, 361.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>288</sup> Davis, *Erik Satie*, 122.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-4.

<sup>291</sup> Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, 133

uniformity', as he describes it.<sup>292</sup> In Satie's quest to limit expressive gesture, he generates this lack of movement through repetitive structures and 'anti-teleological' objectives.<sup>293</sup>

Further exploration reveals the use of 'nuanced variation' spoken of by Davis and other scholars. There are many features of the piece that remain constant and stable throughout, such as the rhythms, slow pulse, vocal lines and use of intervals, as mentioned above. The rhythms are simple, consisting solely of crotchets and quavers.<sup>294</sup> The pulse is always consistent,<sup>295</sup> and the tempo is slow in each of the three movements – at the rate of a 'resting heartbeat',<sup>296</sup> with the notes not huddled together but distributed fairly equidistantly.<sup>297</sup> To complement the slow tempo, there is an unfailingly low dynamic, very infrequently rising to *forte*. This is aided by the orchestration, which only becomes full suddenly at the very end of the work,<sup>298</sup> and otherwise provides only the sparsest texture with each part fulfilling a very similar role throughout the work: Orledge observes that the strings lay the basic foundation, with 'comments and additions' from the wind and brass instruments.<sup>299</sup>

The vocal melody might be expected to add variation, but a nuanced variation can also be seen in this aspect of the music as well. It is surprisingly difficult to describe its effect; Templier observes that the symmetrically-constructed<sup>300</sup> vocal line moves conjunctly,<sup>301</sup> with a 'number of small independent phrases' moving with a placid, unceasing momentum.<sup>302</sup> The melody is not thematic, and it is certainly not a tune one can hum along to. It moves gently but randomly whilst remaining conjunct, in an 'undulating' manner, as described by Gillmor,<sup>303</sup> without order or logic and therefore without pattern, and with no increase or decrease in drama. It merely drifts above the surface of the accompaniment, without repetition – 'non-repeating', as Shattuck calls it<sup>304</sup> – but without variation in tone, mood or tension. Mellers notes that there are no syllables accented more than others,<sup>305</sup> and no melisma.

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<sup>292</sup> Dossena, 'À la recherché du vrai Socrate', 13.

<sup>293</sup> Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent*, 190.

<sup>294</sup> Gillmor, *Erik Satie*, 222.

<sup>295</sup> Mellers, 'Erik Satie and the 'Problem' of Contemporary Music', 221.

<sup>296</sup> Dayan, 'Erik Satie's Poetry', 417.

<sup>297</sup> Shattuck, *The Banquet Years*, 128.

<sup>298</sup> Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, 139.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>300</sup> Templier, *Erik Satie*, 98.

<sup>301</sup> Gillmor, *Erik Satie*, 222.

<sup>302</sup> Harding, *Erik Satie*, 180.

<sup>303</sup> Gillmor, *Erik Satie*, 222.

<sup>304</sup> Shattuck, *The Banquet Years*, 132.

<sup>305</sup> Mellers, 'Erik Satie and the 'Problem' of Contemporary Music', 221.

Potter speaks of this distinctive quality of Satie's in her book, *Erik Satie: A Parisian Composer and His World*, and in particular his mechanical aesthetic. She cites the barrel organ – one of the core elements in constructing the Parisian street-life soundworld – as an unavoidable stimulus of not only Satie's musical inspiration but also that of poets and other musicians in the late nineteenth century, as part of their natural artistic exposure.<sup>306</sup>

The barrel organ played short, simple, repetitive tunes which were inspired by popular music – all of which are prominent qualities of Satie's work, probably not coincidentally.<sup>307</sup> As an easily-operated mechanical instrument, played simply by turning a handle, it became highly symbolic. Many artists exploited this image of the poor, unskilled musician making a living from turning the handle of the barrel organ on the streets of urban Paris, because of its implicit political ideals: an anti-bourgeois identification with these performers who lived on the margins of society.<sup>308</sup> The scholar Florent Albrecht summarises its usage as 'a topos in decadent literature for proclaiming urban solitude, pessimism and unhappiness'.<sup>309</sup> As Charles de Sivry observes, there is a paradox in the barrel organ's setting within everyday life as both an accompaniment to daily life and also as a fundamental part of its creation. It is both disconnected from an author and ambiguous in the performer's identity,<sup>310</sup> in its production of 'annoying and strangely haunting' familiar tunes.<sup>311</sup> The disconnection and therefore detachment from the identity of the creator is one that is natural and inevitable with mechanical instruments such as these.<sup>312</sup> It is fascinating that Satie took so much from this mechanised music and yet wrote his music deliberately for human performers; he makes unclear the division between background and foreground music, and the familiar tunes easily played by barrel organs can be distorted as he wishes, not least by the mistakes natural and inevitable in human performers which are exploited and exaggerated by Satie.<sup>313</sup> Whilst the paradox of the deliberately repetitive musical structures performed by humans instead of being easily performed by machines could be explored further, ultimately it is just the immobility and repetition echoed by the barrel organ in the music of Satie that will be my focus.

Satie seems to have had a need for repetition as a scheme to control his life, from his identical sets of clothing to his routine described in his satirical but revealing 'La Journée

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<sup>306</sup> Potter, *Erik Satie*, 13.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

du musicien' ('Diary of a Musician'), and even his extensive and unchanging daily walk from his home in Arcueil to Paris and back. This repetition inevitably permeated his music; Potter even compares Satie's endless walking to Sisyphus' eternal journey up his mountain, albeit in an offhand way. She notes that this inordinate amount of travelling on foot must have had some impact on the 'regular walking pace' of his music.<sup>314</sup> This also reflects the way in which Satie's music was repetitive – it was not mechanistic in a futurist, violent, active way, but rather with mechanical 'inertia', as remarked upon by Daniel Albright.<sup>315</sup> This is the purpose of the repetition – to create a blank background. The words so often used by Satie to describe pieces whose primary feature is repetition are 'whiteness' and 'immobility', for music without any direction or development, in direct opposition to the previous traditions of the sonata and symphony.<sup>316</sup> Shattuck even goes so far as to say that in rejecting development, the music of *Socrate* 'denies its own existence'.<sup>317</sup> Furthermore, Albright observes that the frequent examples of repetition found in Satie's music could be seen as a device to remove the expression from his music.<sup>318</sup> So once Satie strips down his music, eradicating all musical direction and expression, he is left with a static surface, a white canvas; however, the traditional image of a blank canvas is an analogy to the finished product, not the starting point.

This way of thinking reached a climax in his 'musique d'ameublement', or 'furniture music'.<sup>319</sup> The term was inspired by Matisse's belief in an art which did not contain any distractions, and had a functional role, like an armchair.<sup>320</sup> As Albright describes, this is music that does not aim to produce or enhance an emotional response from its listener, but instead sets a background to everyday life. He calls it 'wallpaper music', 'music as environment'.<sup>321</sup> It is deliberately created so as not to be the focus of attention;<sup>322</sup> Davis notes that, seemingly contradictory to the purpose of the 'expressive medium' of music, it is specifically written not to be listened to.<sup>323</sup> This mode of thought was perhaps inspired by Satie's previous job as a cabaret pianist.<sup>324</sup> This reading would certainly illuminate his statement explaining the need to write music which both was part of the background noise

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>317</sup> Shattuck, *The Banquet Years*, 125.

<sup>318</sup> Potter, *Erik Satie*, 143.

<sup>319</sup> Potter, *Erik Satie*, 144.

<sup>320</sup> Davis, *Erik Satie*, 127.

<sup>321</sup> Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent*, 191.

<sup>322</sup> Potter, *Erik Satie*, 144.

<sup>323</sup> Davis, *Erik Satie*, 127.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid., 49.

and also paid attention to other background sounds – such as in a restaurant, with the other background sounds being the ‘clatter’ of knives and forks and the ‘street noises’.<sup>325</sup> Therefore, this music cannot be said to adhere to a definition of music as something that requires focused listening. It is, in fact, the opposite; Simon Shaw-Miller describes it as something to be ‘felt or experienced’ instead.<sup>326</sup> This idea proved too revolutionary for Satie’s time, however – in March 1920, Satie and Milhaud wrote music to be performed between the acts of a play by Max Jacob. Five musicians were placed around the hall, deliberately excluding the use of the stage as a visual focus for attention. Unfortunately, even this precaution did not have its intended effect; the audience quietly sat and listened. Despite the inclusion of the programme note inviting them to ‘talk, walk about, drink, carry on as if nothing was happening’<sup>327</sup> and Satie’s shouting of ‘Go on talking! Walk about! Don’t listen!’<sup>328</sup> would not move the audience from their seats or make them converse.

The reason that Satie’s furniture music is so important is, as Gillmor argues, that all of Satie’s music could fall under this category.<sup>329</sup> Albright seems to echo this idea, as he notes the main characteristic of Satie’s music as its lack of teleology, without forward progression. He then goes on to discuss Satie’s furniture music as a consequence of the composer’s thoughts on music and its purpose. Shaw-Miller states that furniture music, Satie’s ‘most Dadaist conception’, is an idea that highlights the most significant properties of Satie’s aesthetic as removed from the concept of absolute music.<sup>330</sup> Satie’s first conscious attempts at creating music within the genre began in 1917,<sup>331</sup> and Davis believes that his first furniture music composition in 1917 was subsumed into *Socrate*.<sup>332</sup> On his copy of Cousin’s translation of Plato, Satie wrote what Templier describes as ‘mysterious tables’,<sup>333</sup> which seem to be plans for each movement, seen below:

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<sup>325</sup> Gillmor, *Erik Satie*, 232.

<sup>326</sup> Shaw-Miller, “The Only Musician with Eyes”, 112.

<sup>327</sup> Gillmor, *Erik Satie*, 232.

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>330</sup> Shaw-Miller, “The Only Musician with Eyes”, 112.

<sup>331</sup> Potter, *Erik Satie*, 145.

<sup>332</sup> Davis, *Erik Satie*, 127.

<sup>333</sup> Templier, *Erik Satie*, 46.



<i>The banquet.</i> – Furniture music. – For a drawing room.	Frame (dance). Tapestry (the Banquet, subject). Frame (dance, reprise).
<i>Phèdre.</i> – Furniture music. – For an entrance hall.	Colonnade (dance). Bas-relief (marble, subject). (Colonnade (dance, repeat).
<i>Phédon.</i> – Furniture music. – For a glass display case.	Casket (hog’s hair, dance). Cameo (agate of Asia – Phaedo, subject). Casket (dance, repeat). <sup>334</sup>

This was not the end result, as we now see, but this sketch gives an insight into his thinking about music at the time of his writing – these seem to be descriptions of static scenes.<sup>335</sup> Potter hypothesises that *Socrate* could initially have been visualised as a multimedia project, perhaps with dancers in the settings described above, with the music to accompany them.<sup>336</sup> A blankness of the background music is a necessary quality if the dancers are to be the focus of the artwork, possibly one further explanation for the detachment of *Socrate*. The resulting music could certainly be said to have been influenced by this initial concept, in its immobility, anti-teleological progression, and its ability to distance itself from emotion and attention.

Repetition is a key characteristic of furniture music. *Socrate* is peppered with repetitive accompaniment figures in the orchestra part. Scholars comment on the ‘recurring patterns’,<sup>337</sup> and the ‘monotonous repetition of melodic figures’.<sup>338</sup> These figures occur throughout the work, and there are some motivic ideas that even occur within two or more movements. Orledge notes the repetition of a rising scale figure that occurs within each movement, connecting successive phrases. He calls them ‘a force for continuity and unity’ within the sections.<sup>339</sup> Examples are below:

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<sup>334</sup> Potter, *Erik Satie*, 146.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid.

<sup>337</sup> Myers, *Erik Satie*, 97.

<sup>338</sup> Mellers, ‘Erik Satie and the ‘Problem’ of Contemporary Music’, 221.

<sup>339</sup> Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, 133.

Example 3.1 Bars 10-11 of 'Le banquet', first movement (flute and violin parts)

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff is for the Flute and the bottom staff is for Violin I. Both are in 2/4 time. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The music consists of a melodic line with a slur over it, starting with a fermata. The dynamic marking is *p* and the instruction is *expressif*.

Example 3.2 Bars 5-7 of 'Bords d'Illissus', second movement (instrumental parts only)

The image shows seven staves of musical notation for different instruments: Oboe, Clarinet in Bb, Bassoon, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. They are in 6/8 time. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The music consists of a melodic line with a slur over it, starting with a fermata. The dynamic marking is *p*.

The use of repetition to create a feeling of stasis can also be seen in specific musical examples largely due to what Gillmor describes as Satie's favourite cellular 'mosaic' technique.<sup>340</sup> In *Socrate*, this technique starts with a limited number of short musical ideas, which are presented initially and can be transposed and manipulated, and then are pieced together – like a jigsaw puzzle, as Orledge describes.<sup>341</sup> These components are not developed in a conventional way, merely transposed and repeated within this technique; Virgil Thomson stated that Satie was determined not to use a conventional method of

<sup>340</sup> Gillmor, *Erik Satie*, 222.

<sup>341</sup> Robert Orledge, 'Satie's Approach to Composition in His Later Years (1913-24)', *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 111, (1984-1985): 170.

developing leitmotifs.<sup>342</sup> Examples of the way in which Satie varies the use of musical ideas without developing them in such a way that would create teleological progression are shown below.

The first movement begins with a repetitive accompaniment in the double bass and timpani part, as seen below. The return to F sharp in the bass line aids in establishing F sharp as a general tonal area. Over this quaver accompaniment the cor anglais plays an introductory 2 bars of A natural octaves. It is then joined by the clarinet, which plays an accompanying melody, moving in contrary motion to the cor anglais melody and in rhythmic unison. They play a falling melodic sequence, which is therefore repetitive. This melody floats over the top of the accompaniment until the vocal line begins. The bass line shifts to the viola and bassoon parts, continuing in the same vein.

Bars 29-38 have somewhat similar characteristics to that of the introduction. The accompaniment line is slurred instead of staccato, and with the timpani replaced by the 'cello line moving in contrary motion to the bass line. Instead of the alternating first note of each beat of the bar, these bass lines and accompanying chords in the upper strings and bassoon parts move down by a tone after five bars. These two examples do not seem to exhibit the exact same characteristics, therefore, but it must be noted that the idea of the accompaniment appearing in quavers, with intervals revolving around fourths and fifths, is what I am focussing on here.

Example 3.3 Bars 1-9 of 'Le banquet', first movement

<sup>342</sup> Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent*, 360.

Example 3.4 Bars 29-33 of 'Le banquet', first movement (instrumental parts only)

This same pattern as highlighted by the red square brackets above occurs again from bars 67 to 69, 73 to 82, 88 to 97, and 119 to 163, to give a few examples, in different guises. This bass line ostinato shifts in various ways, usually transposing up or down by a tone, and with different melodic features on top. As the movement comes to an end, the phrase returns to its original tonality, and we hear what seems to be a recapitulation of the beginning of the movement from bar 155-163. This musical idea then subtly pops up in the form of fifths in various forms. In the final few bars, a similar tonal area to the beginning of the movement returns, and the introductory accompaniment recurs in its slurred version. The notes remain static, however, moving from an F sharp to a C sharp – the F sharp tonal area from the beginning of the movement returns.

Example 3.5 Bars 67-69 of 'Le banquet', first movement (harp and viola parts)

Example 3.6 Bars 73-77 of 'Le banquet', first movement (instrumental parts only)

Example 3.7 Bars 88-92 of 'Le banquet', first movement (double bass part)



Example 3.8 Bars 119-123 of 'Le banquet', first movement ('cello and double bass parts)



Example 3.9 Bars 145-147 of 'Le banquet', first movement (viola and 'cello parts)



Example 3.10 Bars 173-175 of 'Le banquet', first movement (first violin part)



It can be seen, therefore, that Satie has taken this one figure, of a quaver accompanying line with varying intervals but focussing on fourths and fifths, and manipulated it in various ways throughout the course of the movement. This is just one example of his development of a musical idea in this manner – development without forward progression, merely creating variants of the same pattern.

The second movement has a similarly repetitive structure. Bars 33-36 are an excellent example of repetition of rhythm, melody and harmony – a descending scale in a crotchet-quaver pattern, as highlighted below. Following this, bars 37-46 have a musical idea and bass line that could be said to resemble distinctly the intervallic oscillating pattern in the first movement in bars 29-38, as shown above. An example from the first movement is below, for comparison. This bass line uses the melodic interval of a fourth, accompanied by sustained chords in the bassoon and horn parts, but with the addition of an oscillating motif in tones in the clarinet, and first violins in fifths. An example is seen below. This motif moves in tones around the initial hearing – the motif starts with the interval from B to E, then

moves up to C to F, then down to A and D. The rhythm is augmented to match the time signature of the movement.

Example 3.11 Bars 33-36 of 'Bords d'Ilissus', second movement (instrumental parts only)

Musical score for Example 3.11, showing instrumental parts for Flute, Clarinet in Bb, Harp, Violin I, Violin II, and Viola. The score is in 6/8 time. The Flute, Clarinet in Bb, Violin I, and Viola parts feature a melodic line with a red bracket above it. The Harp part features a rhythmic accompaniment with a red bracket below it. The Violin II part features a rhythmic accompaniment with a red bracket below it. The dynamic markings are *p* for Flute, Clarinet, Violin I, and Viola, and *f* for Harp. The Violin I part includes an *8<sup>va</sup>* marking.

Example 3.12 Bars 29-33 of 'Le banquet', first movement (instrumental parts only)

Musical score for Example 3.12, showing instrumental parts for Bassoon, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass. The score is in 2/4 time. The Bassoon part features a melodic line with a red bracket above it. The Violoncello and Double Bass parts feature a rhythmic accompaniment with red brackets below them. The dynamic markings are *p* for Bassoon, and *pp* for Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass.

Example 3.13 Bars 37-40 of 'Bords d'Illissus', second movement (instrumental parts only)

Musical score for Example 3.13, bars 37-40 of 'Bords d'Illissus', second movement. The score shows six instrumental parts: Clarinet in Bb, Bassoon, Horn in F, Violin I, Violoncello, and Contrabass. The music is in 8/8 time and features a crotchet-quaver rhythm. Red horizontal lines are drawn across the staves for the Clarinet in Bb, Violin I, Violoncello, and Contrabass parts, indicating sustained notes. The dynamic marking 'p' (piano) is present at the beginning of each part.

Bars 68-71 have this same pattern as earlier mentioned, with oscillating fourths in the bass line and the horn and first violins moving in tones, a fifth apart from each other. As in the above examples, this is accompanied by sustained pedal notes.

Example 3.14 Bars 68-71 of 'Bords d'Illissus', second movement (instrumental parts only)

Musical score for Example 3.14, bars 68-71 of 'Bords d'Illissus', second movement. The score shows six instrumental parts: Clarinet in Bb, Bassoon, Horn in F, Violin I, Violoncello, and Contrabass. The music is in 8/8 time and features a crotchet-quaver rhythm. Red horizontal lines are drawn across the staves for the Horn in F, Violin I, Violoncello, and Contrabass parts, indicating sustained notes. The dynamic marking 'p' (piano) is present at the beginning of each part.

The crotchet-quaver rhythm used in this phrase is heard throughout the movement, for example in the pattern as shown below, which is first heard in the first four bars of the movement.

Example 3.15 Bars 1-4 of 'Bords d'Illissus', second movement

Musical score for Bassoon and Double Bass, bars 1-4 of 'Bords d'Illissus', second movement. The Bassoon part is in the upper staff and the Double Bass part is in the lower staff. Both parts are in 6/8 time and feature a melodic line with a 'p' dynamic marking.

This pattern is repeated throughout the movement, for example from bars 56-61. It returns from bar 144 to the end, either as a solo melodic line or accompanied by sustained chords, in different transpositions, instrumentations, and fragmentations. It is heard in both violin and viola parts at bar 144, and then is heard a fifth lower in just the second violin and viola parts from bar 158. It is then heard a tone higher than this previous hearing from bar 168, and then begins on an A, a fifth higher than D, to the end of the movement.

Example 3.16 Bars 56-61 of 'Bords d'Illissus', second movement (instrumental parts only)

Musical score for Oboe and Violin II, bars 56-61 of 'Bords d'Illissus', second movement. The Oboe part is in the upper staff and the Violin II part is in the lower staff. Both parts are in 6/8 time and feature a melodic line with a 'p' dynamic marking.

Example 3.17 Bars 144-147 of 'Bords d'Illissus', second movement (instrumental parts only)

Musical score for Violin I, Violin II, and Viola, bars 144-147 of 'Bords d'Illissus', second movement. The Violin I part is in the upper staff, Violin II is in the middle staff, and Viola is in the lower staff. All parts are in 6/8 time and feature a melodic line with a 'pp' dynamic marking.

Example 3.18 Bars 158-161 of 'Bords d'Illissus', second movement (instrumental parts only)

Musical score for Violin II and Viola, bars 158-161 of 'Bords d'Illissus', second movement. The Violin II part is in the upper staff and the Viola part is in the lower staff. Both parts are in 6/8 time and feature a melodic line with a 'pp' dynamic marking.



Example 3.19 Bars 168-171 of 'Bords d'Illissus', second movement (instrumental parts only)

Musical score for Violin II and Viola, bars 168-171. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 6/8. Both parts play a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The Violin II part is marked *pp* and the Viola part is also marked *pp*.

Example 3.20 Bars 172-174 of 'Bords d'Illissus', second movement (flute, violin and viola parts)

Musical score for Flute, Violin I, Violin II, and Viola, bars 172-174. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 6/8. The Flute part has a melodic line with accents, marked *p*. The Violin I part has a melodic line, marked *p*. The Violin II part has a rhythmic pattern. The Viola part has a melodic line with accents, marked *p*.

Another notably recurring fragment is heard in bars 122-125, as seen below – a rising set of three chords in triads beginning on C major, and played pizzicato in the strings. This is heard again beginning on a G major chord in bars 130-131, and with the addition of the trumpet doubling the viola. This continues with just the violin parts in another different key and much higher, now bowed and slurred as if to emphasise the contrast, and with three wind parts sharing the same pattern, as shown in the example below.

Example 3.21 Bars 122-125 of 'Bords d'Illissus', second movement (string instrument parts)

Musical score for Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass, bars 122-125. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 6/8. All parts play a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, marked *p* and *pizz.*

Example 3.22 Bars 130-135 of 'Bords d'Illissus', second movement (string instrument parts)

The image shows a musical score for five string instruments: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass. The score is divided into three measures. In the first two measures, all instruments are playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic and *pizz.* (pizzicato) instruction. In the third measure, the Violin I and Violin II parts transition to an *arco* (arco) playing style, featuring a melodic line with a slur and a sharp sign. The Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass parts remain silent in the third measure, indicated by a horizontal line.

Orledge also analyses this element of Satie's music, focussing on the third movement – he describes Satie as using 'all his imaginative powers' to reveal the same motif in various different contexts. The motif he discusses is one that eventually dominates the third movement, the movement in which Socrates is executed. This has come to be known as the 'Socrates motif'. A concise version is shown below.

Example 3.23 Bar 1 of 'Mort de Socrate', third movement; the Socrates motif

The image shows a single bar of music for a vocal line. The motif consists of four rising tetrachords: G4-A4-B4-C5, A4-B4-C5-D5, B4-C5-D5-E5, and C5-D5-E5-F5. The music is marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic and *chanté* (cantabile) instruction.

Its motivic distinction and striking character have made it the defining feature of the movement. The chords of the death-bell tolling, the rhythm resembling that of a 'resting heartbeat', says Dayan, sounding 'monotonous', 'hypnotic',<sup>343</sup> constitute this motif, which is a series of four rising tetrachords. Interestingly, Orledge discovered that Satie's earliest

<sup>343</sup> Dayan, 'Erik Satie's Poetry', 417.

sketches show that he did not become aware of this motif until the later stages of his writing, when he was searching for material for the recapitulation. He then decided to use the chords to introduce the movement as well; before this discovery there was no introduction to the movement.<sup>344</sup> Although Gillmor detects ‘a dozen distinctive motivic ideas’, the form of the movement is based on this specific motif, which slowly but surely comes to subdue every other motif,<sup>345</sup> becoming what Orledge calls the ‘musico-poetic symbol’ of Socrates’ death, depicting the inevitability of his fate.<sup>346</sup>

Below is the Socrates motif as it appears in the introduction to the movement. It is a perfect example of the compositional linearity that Satie is well known for – their logic relies on their linear, stepwise movement. The rising tetrachords are followed by a falling octave in triads, again a linear motion.

Example 3.24 Bars 1-6 of ‘Mort de Socrate’, third movement (instrumental parts only)

The musical score for Example 3.24 shows the instrumental parts for bars 1-6 of 'Mort de Socrate'. The score is arranged in two systems. The first system includes parts for Flute, Oboe, Trumpet in Bb, Violin I, Violin II, and Viola. The Flute part begins with a rising tetrachord (F4, G4, A4, B4) and is followed by a falling octave in triads (B4, A4, G4; F4, E4, D4). The Violin I and II parts play a similar rising tetrachord (F4, G4, A4, B4) and are marked 'p chanté'. The Viola part plays a rising tetrachord (F4, G4, A4, B4) and is also marked 'p chanté'. The Trumpet in Bb part is silent in the first three bars. The Oboe part is silent in the first three bars. The Flute part is marked 'p'. The second system shows bars 4-6, with the Flute part continuing the motif and the other instruments playing sustained notes.

<sup>344</sup> Orledge, ‘Satie’s Approach to Composition in His Later Years’, 133.

<sup>345</sup> Gillmor, *Erik Satie*, 222.

<sup>346</sup> Orledge, ‘Satie’s Approach to Composition in His Later Years’, 133.

The next most significant return of the motif is only at bar 155, when Socrates' jailor asks him to bear the inevitable: his execution. The jailor leaves the room in tears. The upper strings play a *forte* tetrachord-rising set of triads, as the 'cello and bass descend in octaves from E in syncopation. This is followed by what seems to be a recapitulation of the beginning, but for three bars instead of four. During the falling octave in triads as in the introduction, Phaedo starts his narration again, as Socrates returns his farewell to the jailor. Then, at bar 170, the upper strings and horn again play the series of rising tetrachords, but with a different starting note. It is from this point onwards that the Socrates motif begins to overpower the movement.

Example 3.25 Bars 154-157 of 'Mort de Socrate', third movement (instrumental parts only)

Musical score for Example 3.25, bars 154-157 of 'Mort de Socrate', third movement. The score shows parts for Flute, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass. Red brackets highlight specific motifs in the upper strings and Flute. Dynamics include *f*, *p*, *p chanté*, and *p chanté*.

Example 3.26 Bars 170-172 of 'Mort de Socrate', third movement (horn and string parts)

Musical score for Example 3.26, bars 170-172 of 'Mort de Socrate', third movement. The score shows parts for Horn in F, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass. Red brackets highlight motifs in the Horn and upper strings. Dynamics include *p*.

Additionally, I have noted that bars 13-24, 28-31, 130-145, and 200-215 in the third movement could be said to feature another repetitive motif used in the second movement.

The motif is heard in the second movement in bars 93-96, for example, as seen below – it has a similar phrase structure and intervallic idea. This is also closely related to previous examples – 3.15 to 3.20 – from the second movement, although these are slurred differently to example 3.27; instead of slurring the whole bar, in the below example it is shifted back by one quaver, so that the slur goes over the bar.

Example 3.27 Bars 93-96 of ‘Bords d’Ilissus’, second movement (instrumental parts only)

The above motivic idea is rhythmically augmented in the third movement – as in the earlier example of a motif that could be said to be used across movements, the motif needs to be adjusted to adapt to the time signature, but the phrasing remains the same, as can be seen in example 3.28. The intervals are also altered to match the several examples of motifs that use fifths and fourths – as mentioned above, this is a preoccupation of Satie’s in this work. Even if the motivic ideas (as shown below) are not necessarily derived from the second movement, it is still a further example of repetition not allowing for teleological development. For example, its first hearing in the third movement as seen below is accompanied by bare fifths in rhythmic unison in the second violin part. It is then heard in bar 28 with a quaver countermelody in the clarinet and second violins, and a falling stepwise crotchet motif in the trumpet.

Example 3.28 Bars 13-16 of ‘Mort de Socrate’, third movement (instrumental parts only)

Example 3.29 Bars 28-29 of 'Mort de Socrate', third movement ('cello and double bass parts)

Example 3.30 Bars 130-133 of 'Mort de Socrate', third movement (instrumental parts only)

Example 3.31 Bars 200-203 of 'Mort de Socrate', third movement (violin and viola part)

Going back to the Socrates motif, Orledge's analysis discusses three examples of the recurrence of this motif in particular, which show Satie's ways of varying it without developing it to create forward progression. In bars 180 to 183, as the poison is brought to Socrates, the motif is heard in the woodwind in fifths with a quasi-countermelody in quavers

in the strings – it echoes the tetrachords with the quaver offbeat a third above the previous note, as seen below.<sup>347</sup>

Example 3.32 Bars 180-183 of 'Mort de Socrate', third movement (instrumental parts only)

The image displays two systems of musical notation for the instrumental parts of 'Mort de Socrate', third movement, bars 180-183. The first system includes parts for Flute, Oboe, Cor Anglais, Clarinet in Bb, Bassoon, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The second system includes parts for Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Cor Anglais (C. A.), Clarinet (Cl.), Bassoon (Bsn.), Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), and Violoncello (Vc.).

Key features of the score include:

- Flute:** A melodic line starting in bar 180, highlighted with a red bracket.
- Oboe:** A melodic line starting in bar 180, highlighted with a red bracket.
- Cor Anglais:** A melodic line starting in bar 181, highlighted with a red bracket.
- Clarinet in Bb:** A melodic line starting in bar 181, highlighted with a red bracket.
- Bassoon:** A melodic line starting in bar 181, highlighted with a red bracket.
- Violin I and II:** Playing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, marked *pizz.* (pizzicato).
- Viola:** Playing a melodic line with a long note in bar 181, marked *p*.
- Violoncello:** Playing a melodic line with a long note in bar 181, marked *p*.

<sup>347</sup> Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, 136.

In bars 225-228, as Phaedo describes how Socrates' friends begin to weep for him, the motif sounds again, but with descending tetrachords instead of ascending, and against fifths in the first violin part. Orledge suggests that this change in movement reflects these falling tears.<sup>348</sup>

Example 3.33 Bars 225-228 of 'Mort de Socrate', third movement (violin and viola parts)

Orledge's third example is at the moment when Socrates says that the poison is beginning to work, at bar 258. This is universally acknowledged to be a significant moment due to it being perhaps the only chromatic dissonance within the work; the motif is sounded in the strings with a bittersweet oboe countermelody, and the oboe melody contains a C sharp whilst the Socrates motif contains only C naturals.<sup>349</sup>

Example 3.34 Bars 258-260 of 'Mort de Socrate', third movement (instrumental parts only)

The motif then slowly drops by an octave every four bars, until it is left with the bassoon, 'cello and viola parts playing *piano* and *expressif* for two bars as Socrates says his final words. This is how the motif fades away into nothing, mirroring Socrates' departure

<sup>348</sup> Ibid.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid.



from life, after numerous repetitions and an intense build up, and leads into the coda. The coda is to be discussed shortly.

These examples from each of the movements of *Socrate* are an illustration of the way in which Satie uses a motif in varied ways without developing it in a way that could encourage teleological progression. Satie's aim was not to develop his motifs, as Albright demonstrates in his book. Albright quotes Virgil Thomson, who took great inspiration from Satie. Thomson noted Satie's warning to Debussy: 'Look out for this business of developing leitmotifs. Music should stay where it is, not follow the play. It should be like a decor. A property tree doesn't go into convulsion because an actor crosses the stage.'<sup>350</sup> Albright speaks of Satie's belief that music should not be the focus but instead aid the text of the work. It should be a 'pleasant and commodious environment' so that the words can be heard and understood most clearly.<sup>351</sup>

The way in which Satie uses his cellular 'mosaic' technique is of great importance in the creation of stasis – moving forwards in time but not in terms of musical progression. Orledge notes that, in contrast to using a dominant/tonic relationship as his harmonic 'rule', Satie instead aims for contrast in key and register when transposing his motifs. There are no conventional Western modulations (between the tonic, dominant, or relative major or minor) or even chromatic modulations, as he desired a more 'striking' effect.<sup>352</sup> The effect is therefore, as Gillmor writes, somewhat arbitrary,<sup>353</sup> and Shattuck describes this haphazard transposition process continuing until, for example, the rising scale figure mentioned above clears the slate, and the process begins again.<sup>354</sup> The combination of this motivic manipulation and the lack of variation of the other musical features as mentioned previously is crucial in the creation of the sensation of immobility in the work.

As seen in the analysis above, the principal method of motivic transposition is by shifting motifs up or down by one tone. This is partly why *Socrate* is widely labelled linear music – the notes, melodies and motifs flow on from each other, seemingly without a great degree of harmonic concern, as it is mainly stepwise movement. This includes the vocal melody, which, as mentioned, does not repeat itself motivically, only in its general tone. It is a continuous, unbroken stream that, even though divided between different parts, manages to retain a remarkable fluidity and continuity. Poulenc described Satie's music as 'horizontal', claiming that this kind of music first seen in *Socrate* would 'succeed

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<sup>350</sup> Quoted in Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent*, 361.

<sup>351</sup> Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent*, 361.

<sup>352</sup> Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, 166.

<sup>353</sup> Gillmor, *Erik Satie*, 228.

<sup>354</sup> Shattuck, *The Banquet Years*, 126.

perpendicular music'.<sup>355</sup> The consequence of this linearity in the way that it is used by Satie means that there is no discernible goal to be achieved; Kramer describes *Socrate* as linear without being goal-directed.<sup>356</sup>

This lack of goal is highlighted at the end of the work, where the climax of a piece would usually occur. There are few scholars who would argue for a climax in *Socrate*, even if one might expect one to take place during Socrates' death. The closest example of a climax in the work is the moment at which Socrates says the poison is working, as mentioned previously, but the music does not build up to this event, and there is no musical consequence of the dissonance which is the climactic feature of the music at this moment. Dossena speaks of the music as a 'flat plain', with no 'high mountains or landmarks standing out against the horizon' that can be found even through analysis.<sup>357</sup> Orledge speaks of the 'slow, inexorable course' towards Socrates' death,<sup>358</sup> due to the use of the Socrates motif. Earlier, I demonstrated how the motif is used in varying ways. Eventually, this theme comes to overpower the work. Instead of arriving at a resolution, the use of this motif suddenly stops, and is replaced by a sustained pedal chord.

This coda is overall highly repetitive. There is no hint of the Socrates motif, after Socrates has died; the motif fades away as Socrates' life has done. All the strings play a repeated crotchet A, except for the violas which play a repeated E. The bassoon, trumpet, horn and clarinet also hold sustained Es. This A tonality dominates over the next 11 bars whilst this continues. The vocal melody co-operates with the accompaniment, as it remains on a low E, rising to an A for the last note of every phrase except for the one where Phaedo describes how Socrates' eyes were set in death. At bar 285, after Crito closes Socrates' eyes, the music played by the whole orchestra shifts up startlingly by a tone – everything else remains exactly the same, but now reigns a tonal area of B. The vocal line also rests on B. This lasts for only four bars, as Phaedo says, 'Here, Echecrates, was the end of our friend...'. The music drops back down to its original A tonality, as the vocal melody moves up to E, an octave higher than the beginning of the coda, as Phaedo describes Socrates – 'the wisest and fairest of all men' – falling to an A for the two syllables of the word '*homme*'.

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<sup>355</sup> Quoted in Orledge, 'Satie & Les Six', 229.

<sup>356</sup> Jonathan D. Kramer, *The Time of Music: New Meanings, New Temporalities, New Listening Strategies*, (New York: Schirmer Books; London: Macmillan, 1988), 39.

<sup>357</sup> Dossena, 'À la recherche du vrai Socrate', 14.

<sup>358</sup> Orledge, 'Satie & Les Six', 229.

Example 3.35 Bars 283-294 of 'Mort de Socrate', third movement (instrumental parts only)

The image displays a musical score for five measures of music, labeled as Example 3.35, from the third movement of 'Mort de Socrate'. The score is arranged in a system with 12 staves, each representing a different instrument. The instruments are: Flute, Oboe, Cor Anglais, Clarinet, Bassoon, Horn, Trumpet, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass. The Flute, Oboe, and Cor Anglais parts are mostly silent, indicated by rests. The Clarinet and Bassoon parts play a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents and dynamic markings of *sf* (sforzando). The Horn and Trumpet parts play a similar rhythmic pattern with accents and *sf* markings. The Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass parts play a steady, rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with a dynamic marking of *p* (piano).

The image displays a page of a musical score for a symphony, featuring ten staves for various instruments. The instruments listed on the left are Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet in A (C. A.), Clarinet in Bb (Cl.), Bassoon (Bsn.), Horn (Hn.), Trumpet (Tpt.), Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Via.), Violoncello (Vc.), and Double Bass (Db.). The score is written in a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The tempo instruction 'ralentir de plus en plus' is written above the Flute staff and below the Trumpet staff. Dynamic markings include 'p' (piano) and 'sf' (sforzando). The Flute and Oboe parts have rests for the first three measures, then enter in the fourth measure. The Clarinet and Bassoon parts play a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents. The Horn and Trumpet parts play a similar rhythmic pattern with accents. The Violin I and II parts play a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass parts play a steady eighth-note accompaniment.

Upon the return to the tonality of A, this certainly sounds like it could be a resolution. Even though the transposition to B was a little disconcerting, it fits within the general musical language of *Socrate*, and closure could be found with the return to A. But Satie does not provide this as a conclusion. Instead the music completely transforms into an

eerie cadence, with a gradually slowing tempo, alternating on every crotchet between a tritone of E sharp and B, and a fifth of F sharp and B, as shown above. Sketches show that Satie did not want to allow a resolution as expected in A, and that two sketches of the ending show a resolution up to C.<sup>359</sup> Arguably, this shift to B was prepared two bars earlier, but it was not enough to prevent – in fact, it possibly consciously prevents – a feeling of suspension, as Shattuck describes, in this ‘irresolute despairing cadence’;<sup>360</sup> Dayan echoes this sentiment, and further describes it as having a ‘disturbing and disconcertingly powerful effect of a heart stopping’.<sup>361</sup>

And so the piece ends with this anti-climactic non-ending, a culmination of endless repetitions and cycles that do not end, but merely cease to be heard. The music fades and disappears as if nothing had happened. Socrates’ motif itself builds and then leaves as Socrates does. Dossena draws the conclusion that what we can extract from Satie’s use of this technique is that instead of forward progression, he aims for homogeneity throughout the work.<sup>362</sup> He does say that this is not a law, but something that can be extracted from viewing the piece as he does, through a genetic process – through analysing the work with the use of Satie’s sketches. He particularly mentions the Socrates motif, seeing it as disrupting the homogeneity, as it is ‘a rippling of the smooth surface’ of the work; it is striking in its difference to the other motifs.<sup>363</sup> It is this difference, this non-homogeneity, which makes the motif so significant,<sup>364</sup> and augments the effect of its dissolution without resolution at the end of the work.

It has therefore been demonstrated that Satie’s *Socrate* uses repetition in a static, non-progressive way – there is no development of leitmotifs due to his cellular transposing technique, and little variation in rhythm, pulse, and within the vocal line. This creates a feeling of stasis, which is enhanced by the lack of progression and then of resolution at the end of the work. This connects to absurdity in a distinct way, for it is within human nature to yearn for a resolution – this is why the sonata form narrative of exposition, development and recapitulation, the traditional structure of the first movement of a symphony, has traditionally been perceived as so satisfying.

What makes Satie’s music different is that despite his subtitle’s implication, the work is not a ‘symphonic drama’ in this conventional sense. Dossena points out the implications of

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<sup>359</sup> Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, 139.

<sup>360</sup> Shattuck, *The Banquet Years*, 129.

<sup>361</sup> Dayan, ‘Erik Satie’s Poetry’, 417.

<sup>362</sup> Dossena, ‘À la recherche du vrai Socrate’, 15.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid., 16.

this, which perhaps reveals a touch of irony – the ‘symphonic’ tradition suggests a development of motifs, and the ‘drama’ implies some form of action. As Dossena observes, neither happens here.<sup>365</sup> There is no climax and no ultimate fulfilment of a difficult problem, which in turn resonates so strongly with the human condition as defined in absurdity.

Beckett’s *Godot* never arrives; Ionesco’s *La Cantatrice Chauve* ends with exactly the same situation and lines with which it began. Whilst there is resolution in a conventional narrative, there is no resolution in the myth of Sisyphus, for whenever one problem is solved another begins, just as the Theatre of the Absurd plays have no clear-cut ending. The human condition exists in a constant cycle without ending – Sisyphus’ rock always falls back down his mountain – and Satie’s music appears to reflect this. They both move forwards in time without progressing anywhere or arriving at a final goal.

Instead, Satie removes the human ‘yearning for clarity’ and ‘nostalgia for unity’ and replaces it with an acceptance of destiny. The ending of the work is of particular interest; if we are to view the work through an absurd lens, this departure is merely a transference from one life to another; we see Phaedo addressing another character, Echecrates, at the end of the work, as he concludes with describing the end of Socrates, the ‘wisest and fairest of all men’. It seems that a new motif begins, unconnected to Socrates’ motif, as a new cycle begins – life without Socrates, the life of other people, and everything must continue. There is no climax because life is not over; that of Socrates might be, but the lives of the narrator and other characters still carry on.

Orledge is not alone in describing a ‘new departure towards exalted regions’ in the strange cadence at the end of the work;<sup>366</sup> many scholars describe the higher plane of reality to which this work belongs. This is perhaps the reason that the work has been labelled as problematic, removed, and detached; this disassociation from the Western musical tradition could come from this absence of conflict and resolution. Alternatively, perhaps the sense of detachment is that which naturally follows the acceptance of the endless and fruitless cycle of life, the knowledge that human nature consists of everyday repetition and a need for closure that is not granted. The irony of the ‘apathy to humanity’ that Mellers sees in the work is that perhaps, instead of Satie not reflecting human needs and desires, in fact he mirrors human nature perfectly in terms of absurdity, whether he consciously intended to or not. Bennett’s idea of the Theatre of the Absurd plays as parables could possibly come into play here. According to both Bennett and Esslin, these plays resemble human behaviours and desires, and Bennett believes that they force the audience to make meaning out of

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<sup>365</sup> Dossena, ‘À la recherche du vrai Socrate’, 3.

<sup>366</sup> Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, 139.

contradiction. This is perhaps comparable to the effect of Socrates' death, which seemingly happens without resolution or emotion; the audience must figure out the real meaning and contradiction arising from the seeming indifference to the emotional event of Socrates' death, since Satie does not do this or reorientate the listener musically. Either way, it can certainly be argued that the sense of detachment comes from Satie's refusal to create a teleological progression, removing any sense of desire and yearning, and replacing it with repetition and immobility.

### **The Influence of Visual Art**

In many of Satie's Greek-inspired works, including *Socrate*, Satie seems to have not only made peace with this inertia but consciously used repetition and a feeling of stasis, from the *Gymnopédies* to *Socrate*.<sup>367</sup> I am not arguing that Satie was aware of how well his work symbolises Sisyphus' continuous, cyclical lack of progress in this or any other work, but the stasis and circularity that prevent a forward progression certainly bear a striking resemblance to his fate. A reason for this lack of direction could be, as mentioned earlier, that Satie's compositional ideas were greatly influenced by painters rather than musicians. He actively chose to take his inspiration from visual arts rather than music, for in his opinion music was 'always a hundred years behind pictorial evolution'. This implies that Satie believed that there was more to learn about music from painters rather than from his contemporaries or previous musicians.<sup>368</sup> Orledge suggests the theory that Satie's alleged higher-order dyslexia may have caused him to have a spatial perception of music, and perhaps explains his interest in Cubism and sculpture.<sup>369</sup> Satie asked Debussy: 'Why shouldn't we make use of the methods employed by Claude Monet, Cézanne, Toulouse-Lautrec, etc.? Nothing simpler. Aren't they just expression?'.<sup>370</sup> We have already seen that he did not wish for his own or other French music to continue in the style of Wagner, and believed that a national style could be created using French visual art as a model. Shaw-Miller discusses this in detail in his chapter "The Only Musician with Eyes": Erik Satie and Visual Art', exploring Satie's compositional processes in relation to visual art, and often speaking specifically of the effect of its influence on the lack of progression in his music.

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<sup>367</sup> Potter, *Erik Satie*, 146.

<sup>368</sup> Shaw-Miller, "The Only Musician with Eyes", 92.

<sup>369</sup> Robert Orledge, 'Satie's Personal and Musical Logic', in *Erik Satie: Music, Art and Literature*, ed. Caroline Potter (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 9.

<sup>370</sup> Quoted in Shaw-Miller, "The Only Musician with Eyes", 85.

As Shaw-Miller observes, Satie did not discriminate between art and music, believing that one can influence the other, for both are ‘just expression’.<sup>371</sup> This willingness to be influenced by art is likely to have been inspired by Satie’s relationships with many artists – he was friends with and collaborated with artists such as Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Constantin Brancusi, Marcel Duchamp, Tristan Tzara, and others.<sup>372</sup> Despite his attempts to convince Debussy and others of the merits of taking inspiration from the visual arts, Satie was the sole composer to have taken inspiration from artists, more so than any other composer of his time.<sup>373</sup> In *Socrate* in particular, this inspiration was largely due to the Cubists.

Satie points out this creative stimulus most explicitly in his letter to Henry Prunières on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1918, in his description of *Socrate* as a ‘return to classical simplicity with a modern sensibility’, for which he had his ‘“Cubist” friends to thank’.<sup>374</sup> In their search for a new way to view the physical world, these artists ‘disintegrated’ the current artistic symbols and pieced them back together in a dramatic and often contentious new manner. Mellers compares this to Satie’s similar methods of taking apart his ‘classical’ materials and distorting them in his finished product.<sup>375</sup> Satie had an informed and extensive knowledge of Cubism;<sup>376</sup> Picasso’s mistress Fernande Olivier stated that he was the only person that she heard ‘argue clearly and sensibly about Cubism’.<sup>377</sup> Shattuck analogises the characteristics of early Cubism to Satie’s self-imposed restrictions to ‘straight lines and planes’, without colour or other means of expression. In *Socrate*, melody is the glue that holds the work together.<sup>378</sup> Satie is allowed to return, as he says, towards the classical ideas that he is so accustomed to using,<sup>379</sup> but with the modern Cubist movement allowing him to refresh and renew his musical language.

For the preface to the *Socrate* score, Satie requested an external piece of writing. He gave an explicit brief to his friend, the poet and critic René Chalupt, who responded with this:

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<sup>371</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid.

<sup>373</sup> Orledge, ‘Satie & Les Six,’ 224.

<sup>374</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 226.

<sup>375</sup> Meller, ‘Erik Satie and the ‘Problem’ of Contemporary Music’, 211-212.

<sup>376</sup> Orledge, ‘Satie & Les Six’, 224.

<sup>377</sup> Orledge, ‘Satie’s Personal and Musical Logic’, 10.

<sup>378</sup> Shattuck, *The Banquet Years*, 128.

<sup>379</sup> Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, 206.



This drawing, with its precise and strict lines [...], this carefully calibrated and tempered light with no zones of chiaroscuro [...] which never decomposes into impressionist flutterings, this subtle and expert equilibrium of the score engraved on the following pages; it is rather as if M. Ingres, at the request of Victor Cousin, had illustrated these passages from the 'Dialogues of Plato'.<sup>380</sup>

Ingres was a neoclassical painter whose work appealed to the likes of Picasso,<sup>381</sup> so the use of the word 'illustrated' is more than purely metaphorical. Satie himself used visual imagery to describe his work,<sup>382</sup> so it is perhaps unsurprising that Chalupt uses such overt and unambiguous visually artistic metaphors to describe *Socrate*. This extract of Chalupt's preface is also highly reminiscent of the key tenets of Cubism; his references to lines, light, and precision without distraction, are strongly evocative of the style of the movement.

This has quite an effect on the concept of progression in Satie's music as a whole. Orledge sees the influence on *Socrate* in its 'linear, monochrome flatness' as typical of early Cubism.<sup>383</sup> Shaw-Miller points out the importance Satie conferred on image in music, more so than any other composer; and this is a vital influential factor in the stationary, static nature of his works.<sup>384</sup> Shaw-Miller explores in great detail the similarities documented by Rusiñol, a painter and writer, that Rusiñol's teacher, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, exerted upon Satie's oeuvre. Puvis and Satie were both fans of classical subjects – Satie was even referred to as the 'Greek musician' by Rusiñol and others.<sup>385</sup> They both sought simplicity, sparsity of material, and a limitation of emotional effects.<sup>386</sup> Puvis' concern for restraint, simplicity and stasis is reflected in Satie's 'non-developmental musical language', as Shaw-Miller refers to it.<sup>387</sup> Moreover, Rusiñol describes Satie's music as having achieved what Puvis had achieved in painting: a simplification which creates a sense of 'sober indefiniteness', giving the listener freedom to have an emotional response provoked from within them, but with 'the path traced out for him'.<sup>388</sup>

Satie aimed for an emotional response that was not a direct, instantaneous reaction. Through exploration only can an emotional meaning be formed.<sup>389</sup> Shaw-Miller believes this

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<sup>380</sup> Quoted in Dayan, 'Erik Satie's Poetry', 45.

<sup>381</sup> Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, 226.

<sup>382</sup> Dayan, 'Erik Satie's Poetry', 44.

<sup>383</sup> Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, 226.

<sup>384</sup> Shaw-Miller, 'The Only Musician with Eyes', 85.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.*, 90-91.

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

to be an aspect of his musical thinking that Satie shared with Wagner. Satie was one of many composers who had tired of the widespread impact of Richard Wagner,<sup>390</sup> and whilst Wagner was generally seen as Satie's 'negative counterpart', the aspirations of both were to create music which was not merely absolute sound, but a holistic, multi-disciplinary experience – Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk.<sup>391</sup> However, in many significant ways, Satie's and Wagner's ambitions in this sense were polar opposites. Satie's combination of disciplines creates a dignified, held, poignant stillness. Wagner's music is endlessly thrusting forward; the power of his music is that he is able to manipulate and delay resolution in his own unique way, but ultimately successfully achieving closure.<sup>392</sup> Satie's music is not teleological – it does not aim towards a goal, submit to a higher power or need to resolve and release. Instead his aim is to create art which simply exists.<sup>393</sup> As Albright observes, Satie's music 'just lies there, furnishing the ear';<sup>394</sup> his aim is for 'perspective rather than progress'.<sup>395</sup> Shaw-Miller aptly brings his chapter to a close by discussing furniture music – for Satie wishes this music to fulfil the same purpose as a 'backdrop', and 'celebrate[s] repetition', severely cutting back on 'emotional colours'.<sup>396</sup> He creates an object, not a 'grand musical narrative'.<sup>397</sup> And so we see here the way in which Satie could be perceived as having used the methods of painters rather than musicians. He employs the immobility and stasis of the visual art of his contemporaries, its disintegrative use of materials, and, in the style of art that he chooses, its simplicity. This is all most relevant to the conventions of the Theatre of the Absurd, in the plays' static progression, lack of conventional three-part narrative and realism of portrayal, in accordance with Camus' view of absurdity not solving but describing the world.

### **The Medieval And Melody**

Despite these attempts to portray one single image, the temporal nature of both music and theatre necessitates an extension in time. Interestingly, Satie's music is very often described as 'timeless'; another reason for its detachment is its lack of a familiar setting. This could stem from his manipulation of medieval music, something by which he was always

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<sup>390</sup> Davis, *Erik Satie*, 74.

<sup>391</sup> Shaw-Miller, 'The Only Musician with Eyes', 99.

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>393</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>394</sup> Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent*, 193.

<sup>395</sup> Shaw-Miller, 'The Only Musician with Eyes', 92.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

fascinated.<sup>398</sup> Its 'haunting simplicity' and 'serenity' permeate his music, especially in *Socrate*.<sup>399</sup> Albright quotes Milhaud as saying that the vocal melody 'is of such absolute purity that if, just for fun, one followed its ascending and descending, or even static, movement, the result would be a drawing incorporating the pure lines of ancient Greek masterpieces'.<sup>400</sup> Satie's wish was to create music that was white and pure, and this idea relates back to the Western idea of ancient Greece as 'pure', 'abstract' and 'remote' – surely something to which Satie would have been susceptible. In the earlier works of his Rose-Croix period, Satie took inspiration from Gregorian chant, which became a perceptible influence on his work.<sup>401</sup> In *Socrate*, he disintegrated these ideas and reformed them in an original way – he employed Gregorian chant in the melody as part of his foundation, then took it apart and rearranged it as he wished.<sup>402</sup>

The question is then why Satie chose to use this type of music as inspiration for *Socrate*. Mellers suggests that this choice was due to the impersonality of medieval modes echoing the remoteness of the Greek spirit he wished to embody in his music and *Socrate*.<sup>403</sup> Perhaps it was because in Paris at the time, it was fashionable to distinguish French art from that of the 'barbarian' Germans, and one of the ways in which they accomplished this was by employing classical cultural ideas. An example is Cocteau's version of *Antigone*, for which Coco Chanel designed the costumes.<sup>404</sup> Templier is quite explicit that it is the spirit of medieval music, not its age, that is the reason for Satie's usage – he was not attempting to Hellenise the score with modes but rather use their 'timid, impersonal character'.<sup>405</sup> Satie's using and distorting of modal ideas in general is not uncharacteristic – but Shattuck believes *Socrate* to be the 'fullest summation' of Satie's style, whilst also being the piece that is most removed from his personality.<sup>406</sup> In fact, Satie was spoken of by Debussy as a 'gentle medieval musician lost in this century'.<sup>407</sup> Perhaps this is why his music appears to be so 'dateless', as Myers calls it; he believes *Socrate* to be so 'outside time and period' that it will remain contemporary forever.<sup>408</sup> Satie's clever and unique usage of these modalities seems

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<sup>398</sup> Dossena, 'À la recherche du vrai Socrate', 3.

<sup>399</sup> Gillmor, *Erik Satie*, 9.

<sup>400</sup> Quoted in Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent*, 92.

<sup>401</sup> Orledge, 'Satie & Les Six', 223.

<sup>402</sup> Mellers, 'Erik Satie and the 'Problem' of Contemporary Music', 212.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid.

<sup>404</sup> Davis, *Erik Satie*, 124.

<sup>405</sup> Templier, *Erik Satie*, 96.

<sup>406</sup> Shattuck, *The Banquet Years*, 131.

<sup>407</sup> Shaw-Miller, 'The Only Musician with Eyes', 90.

<sup>408</sup> Myers, *Erik Satie*, 99.

to have detached both his work and his personality from any real setting, thereby adding an extra layer to this overarching theme of detachment.

Whilst this detachment extends to the removal of the work from any fixed setting, Satie still depicts normal events: a speech at a dinner, a stroll by the river, a death. There is, of course, the knowledge that this is all revolves around a significant personage in ancient Greece, but there is still a certain emotional universality. The time placement could be seen as a symbol of Satie's conflict within his own surroundings. Orledge writes that Satie 'wrote for the future and lived very much in the present', but with his roots in plainsong, Gothic architecture, and medieval France history.<sup>409</sup> Davis echoes this, stating that as a 'backward-glancing modernist', a composer of both popular and mediievally-inflected melodies,<sup>410</sup> his synthesis of styles – perhaps his inability to connect to his own surroundings musically – reveals his personal sense of absurd detachment. One of the reasons for this feeling of detachment could come from this normalisation of the juxtaposition of two different time frames in his artistic life; it is worth nothing that the Chat Noir, one of the principal influences in Satie's artistic development, had a sign outside which said 'Stop. ... Be Modern!', and an interior filled with imitation medieval and Renaissance furniture.<sup>411</sup> The use of medieval modalities as musical inspiration does not just allow him to connect with another time but is also a method of the Theatre of the Absurd; a sense of realism and familiarity is distorted – or perhaps disordered, to use Bennett's terms.

One of the most apparent ways in which Satie has used these modal influences is in the vocal melody, which is reminiscent of plainchant. I have spoken a little about the melody already – its conjunct, stepwise movement, with little variation. Just like plainchant, Satie used the natural rhythms and inflections of the text, following breath, syllables, phrases and duration musically, so that it could sound as close as possible to normal speech.<sup>412</sup> This is enhanced by the performance direction written at the beginning of the vocal part and applying to the whole work, 'récit (en lisant)' ('narrative (as if reading)'). As Langham Smith observes, the words are 'gently intoned, never operatic';<sup>413</sup> Satie has moved far away from the traditions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century dramatic vocal parts at the forefront of the orchestration,<sup>414</sup> and instead allows for this soft narration to float mildly with musical accompaniment. This allows for the words to be heard clearly – Templier argues that the

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<sup>409</sup> Orledge, "Satie's Personal and Musical Logic", 7.

<sup>410</sup> Davis, *Erik Satie*, 74.

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>412</sup> Shattuck, *The Banquet Years*, 126.

<sup>413</sup> Langham Smith, 'The Serious Satie', 393.

<sup>414</sup> Templier, *Erik Satie*, 98.

verbal aspect of his work is the most significant.<sup>415</sup> Of course, this is most certainly debateable, but it can at least be said that Satie's concern for the clarity of the text in *Socrate* is not to be ignored. The words are not blurred by any loud or busy orchestral accompaniment or any melisma but allowed to sound clearly.

It is important that we hear what the words are; as Potter points out less contentiously than Templier, the music was originally intended to be in the background, so naturally it is the words which come to the forefront. But what comes to the forefront is something that is often quite trivial, especially in the first and second movements. The first movement, as has been mentioned, is simply Alcibaides talking about the effect Socrates' words have on him and others. This is a self-admittedly drunken description, and is almost instantly invalidated by Socrates saying that it is now his turn to similarly compliment his own right-hand neighbour, as if this is some sort of drinking game. The pastoral second movement, which is a conversation between Socrates and Phaedrus, is based around the two men finding a place to sit by the river, and deciding upon a certain tree, walking towards it. Phaedrus speaks of being able to walk barefoot in the water on a summer's day, of the benefits of sitting underneath that particular tree, and they briefly speak of the legend of Orithyia. This seems to be moving somewhere philosophically, as Socrates speaks of his doubts in the story that the nymph was carried off by the god Boreas, for wise men should doubt such things. He thinks that a more rational explanation would be that she was carried off by a strong northern wind (Boreas is the Greek god of the North Wind). The movement ends with him interrupting himself, however, by questioning if they have reached the tree they were aiming for, and praising its location for its various sensory beauties: its sounds, its smells, the breeze and the view.

This conversation that we hear so clearly is often trivial and not conducive to any narrative. This is especially apparent in the first movement, which is a drunken description, and in the second movement, which is often just small talk, but even in the third movement Satie has shortened and removed extracts from the original text. However, he still does not omit general descriptions which would continue a narrative, such as a description of their habits of waiting outside the court where Socrates was on trial, or the way Socrates strokes Phaedrus's hair. In the Theatre of the Absurd, conversation is merely a 'game' to pass the time, and it is 'inconclusive', 'elliptical', 'ungrammatical',<sup>416</sup> or, for example, as in Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, without any observable purpose.<sup>417</sup> In an interrogation scene in the play, one

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<sup>415</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>416</sup> Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 263.

<sup>417</sup> Bennett, *Reassessing The Theatre of the Absurd*, 61.

of the characters is asked a series of questions which do not seem to be leading anywhere;<sup>418</sup> he is asked why he stayed, what he took for his headaches, whether the tablets fizzed, and when he last had a bath – there does not seem to be a discernable way of constructing a picture of anything from these questions.<sup>419</sup> In Ionesco's *La Cantatrice Chauve*, one of very few examples of this style of contradictory, inconclusive conversation is as follows: 'Lucky they didn't have any children', followed a few sentences later by 'But who will take care of the children? They've a girl and a boy, you know'.<sup>420</sup> However, there is a similar effect in *Socrate* as we witness, especially in the second movement, something very casual, not dramatic.

## Identity

There is another way in which the voices and characters create a sense of detachment: by a confusion of identity. Identity issues in this work arise from the layers behind which the ancient Greek figure of Socrates is hidden; he is shown only through several mediators, as Dossena mentions in the concluding paragraph of his article.<sup>421</sup> In her book on Satie, Caroline Potter notes an interesting ancient Greek literary genre known as 'Meneppeian discourse', which uses citations from texts in such a way that a fixed meaning is impossible to find. The 'expressive goal' of this technique is to distance the author from the origins of the texts and therefore from his own creation, causing a 'profound cultural alienation'.<sup>422</sup>

The convoluted example of the words that eventually emerge from Satie's work is a fascinating instance of the way in which the figure of Socrates is wrapped in swathes of translation – Socrates is transcribed and described in Plato's text, which often transcribes the dialogue of other characters, which was then translated into French by Cousin. Satie edited this text (removing all the words of Xanthippe, Socrates' wife, in the text used in the third movement) and wrote the music for it. The distance is even more pronounced in the third movement, when the narrator, Phaedo, speaks the words of the character Socrates, but as according to the author Plato's text. And the end product of this long journey through interpretation is presented by a woman's voice; the conclusion of the game of Chinese

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<sup>418</sup> Bennett, *Reassessing The Theatre of the Absurd*, 62.

<sup>419</sup> Bennett, *Reassessing The Theatre of the Absurd*, 62.

<sup>420</sup> Eugène Ionesco, 'The Bald Prima Donna'. In *Plays, Volume 1*, trans. Donald Watson, 85-119 (London: John Calder, 1958).

<sup>421</sup> Dossena, 'À la recherche du vrai Socrate', 17.

<sup>422</sup> Potter, *Erik Satie: A Parisian Composer and His World*, 108.

whispers, as Dayan calls it.<sup>423</sup> Potter touches upon a similar example of gender obscurity in another of Satie's vocal works, *Trois poèmes d'amour*, when Satie creates another sense of gender ambiguity in the narrator. *Socrate's* lack of 'gendered connection', as she puts it, between voice and character, shows that in general making this connection was not Satie's primary concern;<sup>424</sup> typically he gave limited attention to stereotypical gender roles.<sup>425</sup>

I see this gender contradiction between the characters and singer as a further reiteration of the detachment of the characters: not only are the characters displaced within their environment, there is something awry – or at least unexpected – in their portrayal. Furthermore, it can be sung by either one singer in total or four singers, one for each character, but is usually sung by only one singer. The audience is thus further prevented from forming a connection with the characters by their blurring of identity and the interchangeability of their portrayal.

There are a limited number of ways in which Satie could differentiate the characters in a work such as this. The first and most obvious one is to change the voice type, but Satie uses only soprano. The score theoretically would allow for a tenor voice, but many scholars speak of Satie's (and in fact their own) perception of the soprano voice as most conducive to creating the white, pure, 'antique' spirit of the work that Satie desired.<sup>426</sup>

The second way in which Satie could have distinguished between his characters is to have different singers portray each character. It seems likely, however, from knowledge of its early performances with only one singer, the subtitle ('symphonic drama in three parts with voice'), and the fact that the voices do not overlap, that Satie conceived the work for only one singer to perform.<sup>427</sup> Another way in which Satie could have created a distinction between the characters is to have given each an individual melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, or other distinctive musical feature, but there is no discernible disparity in the characters' lines. Each is totally interchangeable – all soprano voices singing in exactly the same manner.

This idea is almost exactly echoed in plays belonging to the Theatre of the Absurd. The loss of identity and the rejection of individuality, replaced by mere patterns, could portray the idea that we are all the same, whilst simultaneously raising the question of the self. Sartre's 'existence before essence' may very well come into play here, as no individual essence is portrayed. In some plays of the Theatre of the Absurd, characters sharing their

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<sup>423</sup> Dayan, 'Erik Satie's Poetry', 418.

<sup>424</sup> Caroline Potter, 'Satie as Poet, Playwright and Composer', in *Erik Satie: Music, Art and Literature*, ed. Caroline Potter, (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 73.

<sup>425</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>426</sup> Gillmor, *Erik Satie*, 220.

<sup>427</sup> *Ibid.*

identity could be symbolic of all of humanity, such as Ionesco's many characters in *Jacques, ou La Soumission*, all named Jacques, or everyone in his play *Rhinoceros* turning into a rhinoceros. Human nature is once again revealed in absurd fashion, with this identity crisis dissolving without resolution.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, this culminates in a reading that *Socrate* is not a narrative work, but a descriptive one. This explains much about the work, and about the overall sense of detachment that can be viewed through the lens of absurdity. The descriptive nature of the work is largely due to its stasis; the internal repetitive devices and refusal to progress towards a musically-defined goal create a feeling of immobility. This effect is additionally constructed through the blurred identity of the characters portrayed by the performer(s), and the confusion surrounding their gender and author, to the detachment of time and place in Satie's conflict between his fascination with medievalism and his forward-thinking musical techniques, also detached from his own time. The overarching characteristic of the whole work, however, is its stasis. Whilst the features mentioned previously do have distinct correlations with absurdity and the Theatre of the Absurd, the immobility of the work, largely caused by repetition, connects distinctly with absurdity; in his aim for homogenous repetition rather than motivic development, Satie allows for his work to be compared to absurdity's emphasis on a lack of progression and repetitive cycles. The repetition of the barrel organ, which Potter argues influenced Satie's mechanical repetition, adds a further layer of identity detachment. This is aided in no small part by the text, which has been shown to be rarely conducive to a narrative.

The influence of Satie's thinking on furniture music that is evident in this work, and is very likely to be a conscious influence, adds to this sense of stasis. Its lack of emotion and narrative, and its inherent characteristics of stasis and repetition, are necessary because the music cannot be interesting or expressive. Albright notes that for Satie, music was not expressive but instead a 'barrier against expression', perhaps even against sound itself.<sup>428</sup> It must be like an auditory scene, fulfilling the same role as a visual backdrop: not an 'emotionally-quickenning' narrative, but an inconspicuous, self-effacing musical background.<sup>429</sup> But without a plot there can be no climax or resolution, and this is the most strikingly absurd feature of this and many of Satie's other works – there is no progression,

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<sup>428</sup> Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent*, 191.

<sup>429</sup> *Ibid.*



no building of intensity towards any kind of climax, merely constant cycles of repetition. Just as Sisyphus is peacefully and contentedly rolling a rock up a mountain only for it to fall back down and be rolled up again, in full knowledge that he is fated to do so forever, so Satie reveals to us a work which repeats its cycles, does not conclude, and is serene in its calm acceptance of its fate. It does not push towards an answer or attempt to solve its quest, instead accepting its endlessly revolving yet immutably immobile Sisyphean destiny.

The plays of the Theatre of the Absurd differ significantly from those of Sartre and Camus in formal structure, as mentioned in the previous chapter, due to their static, macro- and microcosmically repetitive structures, and in their lack of resolution and conclusion – and it seems that Satie’s music behaves in a similar manner. This is a case of both form and content working together to convey a message and/or evoke an image, just like in the Theatre of the Absurd. It seems to be a parallel mode of thinking to Satie’s notes on aesthetics, where the harmony is a reflection of the melody, and the latter represents the Idea. This holistic approach, with the Idea or concept of the work reflected in its other elements, is very similar to the methods of the Theatre of the Absurd.

Whilst it is unlikely that Satie’s Idea was a conscious presentation of Camus’ absurdity – not least because he wrote *Socrate* a few years before Camus’ time, although absurd thinking was nascent in the consciousness of the period, with the philosophies of Nietzsche – *Socrate* can be read in this way. From the unrelenting immobility to the identity crisis to the lack of resolution, the above is a reading both in terms of Esslin’s study and the absurd philosophy of Camus and Sartre that allows for *Socrate* to be regarded as an absurd work.

## CHAPTER 4: VEXATIONS

*Vexations* is a curious piece. Comprising of a motif repeated 840 times, performance history shows that if performed in its entirety, it can last between 12 and 24 hours.<sup>430</sup> It was found undated in Satie's room after his death, and was published posthumously in 1969. Many newspapers reviewing its performance in the 1960s cite its date of composition as around 1920, within his furniture music period.<sup>431</sup> However, it is generally acknowledged to have

Example 4.1 The full score of *Vexations*

**NOTE DE L'AUTEUR:**

*Pour se jouer 840 fois de suite ce motif, il sera bon de se préparer au préalable, et dans le plus grand silence, par des immobilités sérieuses.*

The image displays the musical score for the piece 'Vexations' by Erik Satie. It begins with a treble clef and the tempo marking 'Très lent'. The score is written for piano, with a treble and bass staff. The main motif is a complex sequence of chords and intervals, repeated throughout the piece. Below the main score, there is a section labeled 'THÈME' which shows the bass line theme, starting with a bass clef and a tempo marking 'A ce signe il sera d'usage de présenter le thème de la Basse'.

been written in 1893, during his one and only romantic relationship with the painter Suzanne Valadon. After this liaison came to a stormy end, Satie declared love to be simply 'a

<sup>430</sup> As shown in Gavin Bryars, 'Vexations and its Performers'.

<sup>431</sup> Gavin Bryars, 'Vexations and its Performers', 2.

sickness of nerves'.<sup>432</sup> Their relationship is widely documented as challenging to say the least, so it is unsurprising that scholars see the work as a channel for his frustrated emotions.<sup>433</sup> The title of the work is often connected with Satie's feelings on the relationship, although Orledge also amusingly points out the vexations of others upon encountering the perplexing work.<sup>434</sup> The composition seems to be linked to a very short piece that Satie wrote for Valadon as a gift on Easter Sunday on the 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1893, titled 'Bonjour Biqui, Bonjour!' (Biqui was Satie's nickname for her). Orledge notes that not only does Satie use a similar ink for both manuscripts and the same tempo marking, he uses a similar musical language of tritones and block chords, and the last chord of 'Bonjour Biqui, Bonjour!' is the first chord of *Vexations*,<sup>435</sup> knitting *Vexations* and Satie's relationship with Valadon closely together.

The mysterious performance instruction at the beginning of the work – 'to play this motif to oneself 840 times in a row, it would be good to prepare oneself in advance, in the most profound silence, by serious immobilities'<sup>436</sup> – makes it possibly Satie's most notorious piece. The absurdity begins with the performance instruction, even before the piece has begun; the request to play continuous reiterations of the motif to oneself already has a striking resemblance to Sisyphus' journey as he rolls his rock ceaselessly up his hill. The immobility of the performer prior to playing the work, as instructed, reflects the effect that the music might have, were it to be played in this way, echoing what we have just seen in *Socrate*. The excessive repetition, one of the fundamental aspects of absurdity, causes Gavin Bryars to describe it lightheartedly as a 'theme and vexations';<sup>437</sup> indeed, the vexatious instructions to repeat the work this many times are taken literally by several performers. According to Bryars, there have been some incomplete performances, which were halted when all the audience members left,<sup>438</sup> or when the performers were asked to leave after 16 and a half hours due to building regulations.<sup>439</sup> A few performances have managed to carry out the instruction precisely, one of the most notable being by Bryars with Christopher Hobbs in 1971, after which Bryars wrote an article detailing *Vexations'* performance history. This article includes an appendix of a written set of notes between himself and Hobbs during the performance, written in the times that the other was performing. Cage also organised

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<sup>432</sup> Davis, *Erik Satie*, 58.

<sup>433</sup> Ibid.

<sup>434</sup> Orledge, 'Understanding Satie's 'Vexations'', 391.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid.

<sup>436</sup> Potter, *Erik Satie*, 139.

<sup>437</sup> Bryars, 'Vexations and its Performers', 3.

<sup>438</sup> Ibid.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid., 6.

several performances, including the first and most influential public performance of *Vexations* in September 1963, with several pianists.<sup>440</sup> Richard Toop twice performed the entire work solo, with the two performances a year apart. The performers were affected significantly by these performances, and their reactions are most interesting. These are to be explored later.

It is not surprising that newspapers believed the work to have been composed around the time of Satie's furniture music; in theory, the piece certainly calls to mind his work of that period, and Whittington actually calls it a direct antecedent of furniture music.<sup>441</sup> Whilst the work does not occupy the same soundworld as his later furniture music genre, it can be said to contain similar characteristics of repetition and stasis. Satie's forward-thinking mentalities had a strong influence on Cage, who was obsessed with *Socrate*,<sup>442</sup> and his 'post-war Satie revival' was stimulated by his encounter with *Vexations*.<sup>443</sup> *Vexations* and the following furniture music had a spiritual as well as a musical impact on Cage's thinking about music as object. However, Nyman points out their fundamental differences in thinking on music in this way; Satie's furniture music is 'part of the noises of the environment', whilst noises of the environment are part of Cage's music. Satie's music fills awkward silences; Cage uses silence in his music.<sup>444</sup> This can clearly be seen in Cage's most notorious work, *4'33"* (1952), which Whittington calls the first movement for *Vexations*; interestingly, Cage's original title for this groundbreaking piece was 'Silent Prayer',<sup>445</sup> which supports this idea. Moreover, Orledge believes that the 'anti-art' concept behind *4'33"* would not have been possible without *Vexations*.<sup>446</sup> Smalley describes Satie as the key figure for experimental musicians because of his conceptual thinking. He claims that for these musicians, 'style is nothing; the idea is everything',<sup>447</sup> and Satie epitomises this mode of thought, as seen in his aesthetic statement that has been mentioned before: 'the Idea can do without Art'.<sup>448</sup> Satie's tool of choice for a representation of his Idea in this piece, whatever that Idea may be, must be repetition. We shall see how this piece, though in many ways a stark contrast to the orchestral and vocal *Socrate*, can also be read through the

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<sup>440</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>441</sup> Stephen Whittington, 'Serious Immobilities', 5.

<sup>442</sup> Potter, *Erik Satie*, 251.

<sup>443</sup> Orledge, 'Understanding Satie's *Vexations*', 386.

<sup>444</sup> Nyman, 'Cage and Satie', 1229.

<sup>445</sup> Whittington, 'Serious Immobilities', 4.

<sup>446</sup> Robert Orledge, 'Satie & America', *American Music* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 96.

<sup>447</sup> Roger Smalley, 'Experimental Music', *The Musical Times* 116, no. 1583 (Jan 1975): 23.

<sup>448</sup> Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, 265.

lens of absurdity, due to its cycles of repetition, which could create a feeling of stasis, and a subsequent sense of detachment.

### **Repetition in Satie's *Vexations***

We shall now examine this repetition further, as the principal feature of the piece. The structure of one repetition can be interpreted in various ways. On the one page of music that is the score of *Vexations*, Satie provides a bass 'theme' at the bottom of the page, and above it two lines of harmonisations of this theme, though the second harmonisation merely inverts the right-hand part of the first. Satie places a 'sign' before each line of music – the first harmonisation, the second harmonisation, and the bass theme – and writes next to the sign above the bass theme, 'At this sign it will be of use to introduce the bass theme'. The usual interpretation, therefore, where the bass theme is A and the harmonisations are B and B<sup>1</sup>, is A, B, A, B<sup>1</sup>. This cycle is what is then repeated 840 times, which means the bass theme is repeated 3360 times, and the same harmonies are repeated 1680 times, mirroring the cycles of Sisyphus.

A lack of direction caused by the seemingly unending cycles is perhaps what inspires Sinker's description of Satie's 'disorientating powers of repetition'.<sup>449</sup> The repetition is also on a more microcosmic scale than the 840 cycles. Almost every aspect of *Vexations* is repeated; as Orledge writes, 'a self-repeating fragment is itself repeated 840 times'.<sup>450</sup> Satie placed great significance on proportion in his compositions, being obsessed with numbers and creating reflections and mirror images within the structure. His numeric manipulation applies particularly to the number three, which is a highly symbolic number in many contexts, as well as to the Rosicrucians.<sup>451</sup> This can be seen very easily in *Vexations*, through the use of tritones within the diminished seventh chord that makes up each chord except for the second of each harmonisation. After our examination of the repetition in *Socrate*, perhaps we should not be surprised at the repetition of this particular harmony, as well as an unchanging texture, repetitive rhythm, no indication of a tempo change, and a consistent articulation and dynamic (which must be presumed as there is no marking for either).

In addition to the overall cycles being repeated in this Sisyphian manner, this general repetition and absence of variation resembles this characteristic of absurdity as portrayed through the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd, with its stasis and formal structure

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<sup>449</sup> Mark Sinker, 'Shhhhhh!', *The Musical Quarterly* 81, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 227.

<sup>450</sup> Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, xxiii.

<sup>451</sup> *Ibid.*, 167-8.

without conclusion. I have mentioned examples of this previously, such as in *Waiting for Godot*, in which the events repeat themselves, the characters have the same conversations, and they always remain in the same place, seemingly without the ability to progress or move. Potter writes that the extreme repetition in Satie's music is what creates this stasis.<sup>452</sup> For Albright, the way in which Satie wrote his music without forward progression and direction is what he calls 'a barrier against expression'.<sup>453</sup> Therefore, if the piece is performed in the way as described above, it might seem that what follows is a sense of detachment. However, listeners and performers who have spoken and written about their experiences largely describe an opposite effect, whereby for various reasons they become incredibly focused and in tune with the piece. This is to be explored in more detail later. It is enough to say for now that the seemingly unending repetition that seems to have been Satie's intention has its connection to absurdity in its unceasing cycles – to what extent these cycles can be compared to Sisyphus' eternal journey will be discussed in due course.

One interesting individual point that could be read as a connection to Sisyphus for now is the slurred note at the end of the piece. The last crotchet note of the motif is slurred to a quaver, followed by a quaver rest, which ends the motif. This pause, before the motif is played again, is striking because of its correspondence to Camus' writing about Sisyphus. Camus describes the struggle of the man to reach the top of the mountain with his rock, 'the whole effort of the body straining to raise the huge stone',<sup>454</sup> and as it falls, Sisyphus watches it, and returns back down to push it up again. Camus continues, 'it is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me'.<sup>455</sup> It is the break in which Sisyphus returns back to the foot of the mountain, conscious of his fate and therefore 'superior' to it, that is analogous to this pause of a quaver's length before the performer must continue their repetition once more; the performer is allowed this space to think, to make a conscious decision and continue to play. This pause, however coincidental, is something that can be seen as another significant factor within a reading of absurdity in *Vexations*.

We have seen the influence of painting on Satie's oeuvre in discussions of *Socrate*, and how it caused him to create these static, repetitive, furniture-music pieces. The absence of a 'gravitational pull' in *Vexations* as well as in *Socrate* has been compared to Puvis' painting techniques; in her article, which discusses *Vexations*, Grace Wai Kwan Gates speaks of Puvis' eradication of gravity and weight from his painted figures. She cites it as the cause

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<sup>452</sup> Potter, *Erik Satie*, 143.

<sup>453</sup> Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent*, 191.

<sup>454</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 116

<sup>455</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

of Satie's composition of a piece such as *Vexations*: he uses repetition to develop musical ideas, rather than allowing the harmonic direction (the gravitational pull) to be determined by the tonic and dominant.<sup>456</sup> However, I shall explore a stimulus cited by Whiting that highlights more correlations between Satie's repetition and another creative art form: poetry.

Whiting speaks in particular of the holorhyme, one of the many verbal games enjoyed by Satie's cabaret social circle: the Hydropathes and those at the Chat Noir.<sup>457</sup> The verbally virtuosic holorhyme is a structure that is perhaps more easily accessible in French, due to the language's homonymic variety. Whiting compares *Vexations* structurally to a sonnet of Goudezki's, 'J'attends samedi', which is essentially an invitation to a picnic.<sup>458</sup> It is likely that Satie would have read this sonnet, as it was circulated widely.<sup>459</sup> Within each quatrain of the Goudezki sonnet, each line rhymes with another: lines 1 and 4, lines 2 and 3, and then lines 5 and 7, and lines 6 and 8, for example. Whilst the words are spelt differently and mean different things, the syllables sound the same. The first verse of the poem and its English translation are below.

*Je t'attends samedi, car, Alphonse Allais, car  
A l'ombre, à Vaux, l'on gèle. Arrive. Oh! la campagne!  
Allons – bravo! – longer la rive au lac, en pagne,  
Jette, à temps, ça me dit, carafons à l'écart.*

I await thee Saturday, for, Alphonse Allais, for  
one freezes in the shade at Vaux. Arrive. Oh, the countryside!  
Let's go (bravo) walk along the lakeshore in loincloths,  
throw back little carafes in private.<sup>460</sup>

Whiting likens this to the four 'lines' of *Vexations*, where the bass theme is lines 1 and 3, the first harmonisation is line 2 and its inverted counterpart – the same as the first harmonisation but 'spelt' differently – is line 4. Further spelling discrepancies can be seen in the use of enharmonic equivalents; Whiting argues that enharmonic equivalents are analogous to words that are spelled differently but sound the same, in keeping with the

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<sup>456</sup> Gates, 'Satie's Rose-Croix Piano Works', 57.

<sup>457</sup> Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian*, 179.

<sup>458</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>459</sup> Whiting, 'Serious Immobilities', 316.

<sup>460</sup> *Ibid.*

techniques of the holorhyme.<sup>461</sup> Satie rounds off his holorhymic pattern by repeating it 840 times.

Satie's limited and therefore repetitive use of musical language, resulting in a soundworld that Nyman calls 'barren' and 'undernourished' in the case of *Vexations*,<sup>462</sup> is most often attributed to his lack of musical education. However, this does not mean that Satie's compositional process was random; as Satie's friend, the poet Contamine de Latour put it, he was a man 'who knows only thirteen letters of the alphabet and decides to create a new literature using only these'. He is praising Satie for his 'sheer bravado'<sup>463</sup> and his great accomplishment in achieving so much with such limited material.

Orledge has discovered a significant amount of evidence to suggest that Satie constructed this piece in a highly meticulous fashion, without any indication of musical illiteracy. He explores the construction of the piece in great detail in the article 'Understanding Satie's *Vexations*'. Taking only a few relevant points from his painstaking analysis, we can see that the piece is not just a series of unresolved and incomplete diminished seventh chords, excepting the two augmented fifth triads in first inversion.<sup>464</sup> The progression of these chords is not as random as they sound, as Orledge reveals in tables that show the compositional logic behind the theme and its vertical and horizontal harmonic construction. He shows the tonalities behind the bass 'theme', which include pivot modulation phrases, and notes that the odd note spellings in the theme may not be to obscure any tonality as usually presumed, but instead are a result of all the chromatic notes below B spelt as flats, and all those above C as sharps, excepting the penultimate C flat.<sup>465</sup> These odd, seemingly random enharmonic spellings are often noted as increasing the difficulty level for the performer, and in analysis. Orledge notes that every chord must be different to those immediately surrounding it, and makes an interesting observation about mirror reflections and a numerical correlation between aspects of *Vexations* and the Lucas summation series.<sup>466</sup> It also could be the first experiment in serialism, if the theme contained an A flat; Orledge calls it an 'embryonic version of serialism'.<sup>467</sup>

It is important to note, as Whittington does, that Satie's construction 'removes all association' from the harmonies; the lack of logic and displacement of familiarity – taking familiar chords but placing them in unfamiliar contexts – is the summary of the harmonic

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<sup>461</sup> Ibid.

<sup>462</sup> Nyman, 'Cage and Satie', 1229.

<sup>463</sup> Orledge, 'Satie & Les Six', 225.

<sup>464</sup> Orledge, 'Understanding Satie's *Vexations*', 387.

<sup>465</sup> Ibid., 388.

<sup>466</sup> Ibid., 393.

<sup>467</sup> Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, 258.



idea behind the whole piece, the piece in essence consisting of merely these chords.<sup>468</sup> The chords are detached from their environment, much like Camus' description of detachment in absurdity as the separation between an actor and their setting. Furthermore, the odd note spellings as mentioned above enhance and augment this effect, as they render notes that have just been played unfamiliar both visually and physically. This will be further discussed in due course; for now it is enough to mention it as contributing to a reading of absurdity as it further detaches the music from its environment. Speaking of the 'idea' brings us back to Satie's compositional aesthetic statement, in which he writes that 'Great Masters are brilliant through their ideas, their craft is a simple means to an end, nothing more. It is their ideas which endure'; Satie's idea here, of 840 repetitions of a bewildering cycle of chords, is what endures more so than the actual music written, his means to his end.<sup>469</sup>

I have compared this repetition to Sisyphus' task of rolling his rock up his mountain unceasingly – or in this case 840 times. But to take this absurdity of repetition further, the performer, just like Sisyphus, undertakes these cycles in full knowledge of this repetition. I have mentioned that an exact comparison to Sisyphus may not be straightforward, and is different to what one might expect; for my comparison does not consider the struggling Sisyphus, but instead the Sisyphus *after* this struggle. This is the Sisyphus who acknowledges his difficulties, and yet revels in his endless journey, the Sisyphus whom Camus 'imagines happy', after whom Camus nearly named his essay 'Happiness in Hell'. This will be explored in more detail in the following section.

Coming back to repetition, the intensity of repetition is increased when one considers the repetition within each cycle, from the more minute details of articulation and dynamics, to the bass theme repeated four times within each cycle, the unchanging notes of the two harmonisations, and the lack of direction caused by the fixed harmonies of tritones creating unresolved diminished sevenths. The lack of direction and progression is typical of all of Satie's music, but seen particularly in this piece are, as Albright notes, 'sonorities [which] exist for their own sake'; there is no pushing towards a final, external goal – there is only music, sounding without forward progression. This effect was described earlier in *Socrate* also. Furthermore, if the piece is performed in the way as described above, and repeated 840 times, the performer's attention is increasingly focused on the music due to the concentration required to play the same motif so many times, and amplified by its slippery, unstable nature due to difficulties such as the enharmonic note spellings.

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<sup>468</sup> Whittington, 'Serious Immobilities', 2.

<sup>469</sup> Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, 265.

Returning to the plays within the category of the Theatre of the Absurd, we can see a reflection of the same pattern here, as situations can recur multiple times within one play, and cycles emerge as the end of some plays flow straight back into the beginning, as in the previously mentioned ending to Ionesco's *La Cantatrice Chauve*, which is exactly the same as the beginning, with the overall effect that the play starts all over again once it reaches the end.<sup>470</sup> As already described in my discussion of *Socrate*, to the absurd mind there is a sense of detachment that naturally follows from this feeling of pointlessness upon the realisation that life is fruitlessly cyclical, and the acceptance that closure is never granted. However, this does not seem to be the case in *Vexations* – the feeling of the performer or listener seems instead to replace detachment with a certain focus, as can be seen from those who have written about their experiences. When Satie's conception becomes interpretation and therefore performance, these elements as discussed above coalesce to create, in many ways, the opposite of detachment.

### **The Effect on the Self in Performance**

What is the result of this repetition? As Whittington points out, the repetition causes any drama to be lost.<sup>471</sup> But beyond that, one of the most significant effects as experienced in performance is what Orledge describes as the feeling of cheating time. Nyman calls this merely a 'liberated attitude towards time',<sup>472</sup> and others have described similar time-related effects as a performer, though this is something to be discussed later. It is enough to note for now that in general, the excessive repetition leads to a common sensation that the piece appears to have no sense of time, and no real beginning or end.

Perhaps this is because of its immobility, taken to the extreme in *Vexations* through such intense repetition. Orledge describes this feeling of cheating time specifically through the creation of immobility, caused by the characteristic slow tempo and successive block chords of the Rose-Croix Period.<sup>473</sup> Furthermore, the absence of tension caused by what is an aurally illogical harmonic and melodic sequence of notes causes a discontinuity which cannot allow for a narrative even within one repetition. This is despite what Orledge believes to be the tonalities of the bass theme, which he considers to be well thought out. By changing the enharmonic spellings, Orledge's opinion is that the first five notes are in E

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<sup>470</sup> Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 137.

<sup>471</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>472</sup> Nyman, 'Cage and Satie', 1229.

<sup>473</sup> Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, 143.

flat minor, the next four in C minor, with a pivotal D sharp leading into the next five in F sharp minor, and the last two notes of that tonality follow into an ending in E major,<sup>474</sup> although these seeming modulations certainly bear no resemblance to traditionally tonal modulations. This apparent progression, despite allowing Orledge to continue his analysis further, is not one that has auditory or visual logic. The seemingly endless repetition then means that there is no direction, climax or resolution, just as there is no beginning or end, causing the resulting sensation to be one of immobility. There is a similar feeling in the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd, due to their repetition, causing a comparable dissolution of the passing of time; without a dramatic story, climax or journey towards resolution – no clear beginning, middle and end. As Bennett shows, through the medium of a parable there is a deliberate absence of resolution or conclusion, merely the portrayal of a dilemma. Consequentially, the sense of time is not only disoriented but suspended, just as in the immobility of *Vexations*.

From Whittington's perspective, the only narrative is the journey of the consciousness and how it changes over time.<sup>475</sup> There are various other scholars who also make several observations about the spirituality of the work that seems to be a significant by-product of the repetition of *Vexations*. Satie was a deeply spiritual person, fascinated by and involved in esoteric religions – mainly the Rosicrucian church, but he also created and became leader of his own 'church' (which seemed more like a cult) in the same year as the composition of *Vexations*, named 'The Metropolitan Church of Art of Jesus the Conductor'. He had great hopes and grand plans for his 'church', which unfortunately he was never able to carry out, being unable to persuade anyone else to join. *Vexations* has been placed in the Rosicrucian period because of various stylistic elements, but comparisons have been made to other religions and time periods. Perhaps this is to do with the piece sounding like a 'deformed chorale' or a 'grotesque', 'broken-down hymn tune', as described by Potter.<sup>476</sup> This is perhaps what causes Ornella Volta to describe the piece as a 'sort of self-flagellation reminiscent of the medieval monk's penances'.<sup>477</sup> However, the principal association is with Eastern thought, especially in connection to Cage's own Eastern influences via Zen philosophy.

Matthew Mendez speaks of the concept of blandness, which in Eastern thought (unlike in the Western consciousness) is perceived as excess rather than deficiency, and is

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<sup>474</sup> Orledge, 'Understanding Satie's *Vexations*', 387.

<sup>475</sup> Whittington, 'Serious Immobilities', 5.

<sup>476</sup> Potter, *Erik Satie*, 141.

<sup>477</sup> Quoted in Mendez, 'History, Homeopathy and the Spiritual Impulse', 223.

therefore held in much esteem.<sup>478</sup> Blandness is a key characteristic of furniture music, enabling it to fulfil its purpose of blending into and becoming the background, and whilst *Vexations* may not be or sound like furniture music, in this case of comparison it is certainly similar in that it is repetitive and constructed with little and unvarying material. This also applies to minimalism, with which *Vexations* is unsurprisingly compared; it is a genre which was similarly largely inspired by Eastern music and therefore has its just comparisons. However, Satie's performance directions are most commonly compared to Zen Buddhism, and its effects within this spiritual realm are viewed by Cage as an experience equal to any other religious work.<sup>479</sup> Cage's input into the history of thought on *Vexations* is not to be underestimated, as the person who aided its rise to fame – or notoriety – and as a prominent musician who took such great inspiration from Satie. His Zen thinking has permeated descriptions of *Vexations*, with Gillmor summarising most performers' and audiences' experiences as having 'some form of expanded consciousness akin to the spirit of Zen',<sup>480</sup> and Whittington repeating Cage's view that the text is 'in the spirit' of Zen Buddhism, allowing the piece to act as a mantra to be repeated.<sup>481</sup> Bryars' notes during his performance of *Vexations* show that it reminded him of Indian music, in its similar evocation of a state of mind that allows one to become 'susceptible to divine influence'. He also quotes Christian Wolff as speaking of the 'beautiful state of suspension of self' which he felt as he played and listened to the piece. So there may be no drama involved, but the spiritual consciousness certainly seems to be active; as Potter points out, there is a 'stoic, prayer-like attitude' that the performer must adopt in order to play this work in the usually interpreted way.<sup>482</sup> However, one thing that the spiritual consciousness might be expected to find is something that is often defined as boredom.

In his book *Silence*, Cage states that one of his Zen mantras is that 'if something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, try it for eight, sixteen, thirty-two, and so on. Eventually one discovers that it's not boring at all but very interesting'.<sup>483</sup> This stance seems to have been influenced not only by Zen, but also by Satie, and specifically his ability to take boredom and turn it into a 'legitimate aesthetic emotion' in this particular piece.<sup>484</sup> Orledge states that what appealed to Cage was the way in which Satie's music exists and behaves in time, and the effects of 'cellular repetition, duration, and deliberately induced

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<sup>478</sup> Ibid.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>480</sup> Gillmor, *Erik Satie*, 103.

<sup>481</sup> Whittington, 'Serious Immobilities', 4.

<sup>482</sup> Potter, *Erik Satie*, 141.

<sup>483</sup> Quoted in Mendez, 'History, Homeopathy and the Spiritual Impulse', 223.

<sup>484</sup> Whiting, 'Serious Immobilities', 317.

boredom'.<sup>485</sup> And it is through Cage's activism that *Vexations* became, as Mendez describes, 'music's best-known study in boredom'.<sup>486</sup> The tedium of the repetition that causes this boredom is something that can be seen in the Theatre of the Absurd; Esslin points out how characters are reduced to inconclusive, elliptical, futile conversation just to pass the time. For example, Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* spends quite a while talking about his preference for carrots over radishes or turnips. Furthermore, Esslin reveals the plays to present the realism of the human condition. However, boredom has been spoken of in regard to *Vexations* largely in theory; it seems a reasonable hypothesis to make that a piece repeated such an excessive amount of times would be extremely boring. In actuality, as Cage and others argue, the piece seems to be far from boring.

Nyman's seemingly theoretical explanation for this boredom is the lack of direction due to a lack of progression, and a repetition that does not allow for climaxes; 'boredom began when climaxes disappeared and they lost most of their signposts'.<sup>487</sup> But what does boredom mean? Mendez quotes the philosopher Lars Svendsen on boredom, who says that 'boredom involves a loss of meaning ... a meaning withdrawal.' However, Svendsen argues, this is not to say that it is boredom caused by the lack of climaxes and drama, or extreme repetition, which makes a work meaningless. Instead, it is the lack of meaning that causes the boredom.<sup>488</sup> Satie writes about the chorale of *Sports et divertissements*, composed a few years after *Vexations*, that he had put into it all he knows about boredom: 'I dedicate it to those who don't like me'.<sup>489</sup> About *Vexations* he says no such thing, only advising the performer to take some time to prepare mentally. Nyman calls boredom a 'double-edged sword';<sup>490</sup> it is something which either fascinates or repels, and it is easy to see this in the reactions to Satie's work, both to *Vexations* and as a whole.

Dick Higgins, a pupil of Cage and one of the pianists in Cage's performance of *Vexations*, realised the potential of using boredom as a technique during this performance of the work.<sup>491</sup> During Cage's famous full performance at the Pocket Theatre, an interesting method was employed, challenging people to cope with their boredom by charging them \$5 for admission and then refunding them 5 cents for each 20 minutes they remained in the concert. A reward of 20 cents was given to anyone who stayed for the entire performance. Furthermore, Cage describes the experience of listening to *Vexations* as being 'subjected to

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<sup>485</sup> Orledge, 'Satie & America', 78.

<sup>486</sup> Mendez, 'History, Homeopathy and the Spiritual Impulse', 209.

<sup>487</sup> Nyman, 'Cage and Satie', 1229.

<sup>488</sup> Mendez, 'History, Homeopathy and the Spiritual Impulse', 224.

<sup>489</sup> Quoted in Whittington, 'Serious Immobilities', 1.

<sup>490</sup> Nyman, 'Cage and Satie', 1229.

<sup>491</sup> Mendez, 'History, Homeopathy and the Spiritual Impulse', 185.

this activity, which eventually one finds interesting'.<sup>492</sup> As Mendez points out, the use of the word 'subjected' is not to be overlooked; the audience in this performance were not passively receiving the music but actively choosing to acclimatise and stay.<sup>493</sup> There is an interesting comparison to absurdity here. As observed earlier, the effect of the repetition appears to render the work pointless, followed by a striving to find meaning, and this has been compared to Sisyphus' endeavour. Whilst there is no ultimate meaning or 'point' to be discerned, the listener or performer has their own motivation to continue, much like Sisyphus.

As I have mentioned, this continuing is not a struggle, but is in fact what occurs after the struggle and subsequent acceptance of one's fate. This is clearly shown by Higgins, as he states that 'after that the mind slowly becomes incapable of taking further offence, and a very strange euphoric acceptance and enjoyment begin to set in... Is it boring? Only at first. ... By the time the piece is over, the silence is absolutely numbing, so much of an environment has the piece become.'<sup>494</sup> Prior to this, he does describe the music as becoming 'so familiar that it seems extremely offensive and objectionable' – an intrusion into the mind of the listener? – but his later reaction can be compared to other performers' experiences also. There is a spiritual experience which is not joyful but does create a powerfully positive feeling of acceptance. This is the state at which Sisyphus too accepts his fate and 'concludes that all is well'.<sup>495</sup>

According to Brill, this causes the 'affecting and altering' of the 'self-perception of the recipient'. She quotes Ina Blom's essay on 'Boredom and Oblivion', which states that 'the work will disappear into the surroundings, and the spectator will disappear into the work', because of this immersion of the audience, an experience described by Nam June Paik as 'absolute void' – his own experience of a Cage concert.<sup>496</sup> Someone told Bryars that as he was listening the music seemed to grow louder and louder. This only applied when he was concentrating on the piece, and not when he was relaxing, but I wish to focus on the experiences of those who were actively engaged with the work.<sup>497</sup> For those active listeners or performers, the piece finds a way to become a functioning part of the environment, so that it is silence which becomes strange: much in the same way that if a sofa on which you were comfortably reclining or another piece of furniture were to disappear, there would be

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<sup>492</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 221.

<sup>493</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>494</sup> Quoted in Dorothee Brill, *Shock and the Senseless in Dada and Fluxus* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2010), 147.

<sup>495</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 119.

<sup>496</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>497</sup> Bryars, 'Vexations and its Performers', 9.

a similar sense of loss, surprise, and instability. For example, describing the ending of the piece, Reynolds maintains that ‘the moment at which the sound stopped invoked a unique sensation of loss, a kind of grief’.<sup>498</sup> The listener or performer is overwhelmed yet absorbed into the work.

The manipulation of time and the immersion of the audience into the environment of the music have distinct correlations with absurdity. The immobility of the work relates back to the repetition and detachment of which I have already spoken. The effect of this is what causes *Vexations* to be thought of by some as a precursor to furniture music, as it becomes part of the background environment of the audience. The spectator is subsumed into the environment, disappearing into the work – reminiscent of the characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd, which removes individuality and replaces it with patterns of behaviour and character such as in Ionesco’s *Jacques*. So many listeners seem to have had a spiritual reaction to the work, commenting on how it seems to awaken the consciousness and create alertness. Instead of the repetition dulling the mind of the performer and listener, they have a heightened experience. This is the opposite effect of boredom, as those who write about it describe a spiritual focus and experience. Whilst scholars such as Nyman write about boredom, this does not filter through to the experience of performers and listeners who write about the work that has been interpreted as requiring 840 repetitions of one motif.

It is interesting, therefore, that the focus required for the work still cannot enable memorisation. It is a common observation that even after having played or listened to the piece 840 times, the listener is not able to remember how it sounds, and the performer is not able to play it without the music. Satie has constructed *Vexations* in such a ‘self-effacing’ way that remembrance of any detail is rendered impossible; this connection between the repetition and the inability to remember the music is significant in *Vexations*.<sup>499</sup> As previously mentioned, this is perhaps in large part due to the difficulty in fingering because of the oddly placed enharmonics, or the ‘deliberate notational obfuscation’, as Whittington describes it. Davis notes that these enharmonic note spellings, along with the atonal harmonies and irregular phrase structure, are what inhibits a performer from attempting to commit the short piece to memory.<sup>500</sup> Thom Holmes calls it ‘most perplexing’, as it ‘defies a

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<sup>498</sup> Roger Reynolds, ‘Ideals and Realities: A Composer in America’, *American Music* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 35.

<sup>499</sup> Whittington, ‘Serious Immobilities’, 2.

<sup>500</sup> Davis, *Erik Satie*, 58.

performer's normal instincts. It is not easy to play even once, let alone 840 times'.<sup>501</sup> Richard Toop, who has completed two solo performances of *Vexations*, was not able to play more than a 'tiny fraction' of the piece without music.<sup>502</sup> In their notes during performance, Christopher Hobbs revealed to Gavin Bryars that he found it difficult to use the same fingering for the enharmonically equivalent chords or even notes; it was difficult to convince himself that differently spelt notes would sound the same, regardless of repetition.<sup>503</sup>

The visual confusion seems to contribute to the inhibition of memory, in addition to the other element of the work, the auditory factor. The consequence of the aural illogicality of the harmonic progressions (however organised the compositional system may be) is that one cannot remember enough to 'whistle the tune' after the performance, as Whittington puts it, for there is no tune or coherent harmony at all.<sup>504</sup> Christopher Hobbs, who performed *Vexations* with Gavin Bryars, found the music 'unnerving' in his inability to familiarise himself with the music: 'the unexpected keeps happening'.<sup>505</sup> Bryars' main worry, as he wrote to Hobbs during their performance, was that if he did not have the music he would not remember enough of it to perform a full cycle.<sup>506</sup> Whittington believes that it is the odd note spellings which forces the performer 'to confront the piece anew with each repetition';<sup>507</sup> as Gillmor observes, the notation and sounds 'bear little relation' to each other.<sup>508</sup> Even listening as a performer, Hobbs wrote, can cause varying hearings of the same notes. Hobbs found himself hearing each repetition differently – occasionally he would be struck by the 'general downward movement by semitones of the bass', and sometimes he would be able to understand the 'key-feel' of the first few chords in the two harmonisations, only for it to 'all blur again'.<sup>509</sup>

The overarching issue is that the performers and listeners cannot connect to the work, in these various ways. The elements that are involved in playing – the notes seen on the page, played through the fingers and heard as a result – culminate in a set of disparate sensory results that cannot match up. This is a significant contributing factor in forgetting what the notes are, what the piece sounds like and how to play it. This idea of memory has an interesting connection to plays of the Theatre of the Absurd, especially in *Waiting for*

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<sup>501</sup> Quoted in Mendez, 'History, Homeopathy and the Spiritual Impulse', 214-5.

<sup>502</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>503</sup> Bryars, 'Vexations and its Performers', 9.

<sup>504</sup> Whittington, 'Serious Immobilities', 2.

<sup>505</sup> Bryars, 'Vexations and its Performers', 9.

<sup>506</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>507</sup> Whittington, 'Serious Immobilities', 2.

<sup>508</sup> Gillmor, *Erik Satie*, 102.

<sup>509</sup> Bryars, 'Vexations and its Performers', 10.



*Godot*, where characters have no recollection of the daily events which repeat themselves, experiencing these events as if for the first time each day,<sup>510</sup> such as Estragon who has to be reminded that he is waiting for Godot. This bears a striking resemblance to the self-effacing nature of *Vexations*, and the way in which it insists on being forgotten, thus forcing the performer and listener to experience each repetition as if it had not just happened. Another factor is the unusual harmonies; there is no logical progression, similar to *Socrate*, and it lacks an exposition-conflict-resolution pattern even within one repetition. These repeated unusual harmonies, the lack of tune and absence of direction or progression seem to have a significant effect on the consciousness of various performers and listeners. The immobility inspires a spirituality and focus that is described in various ways, and seems to culminate in a sense of imposition at any interruption, and a sense of loss at the end of the work. A third factor could be the subtle variations involved in each repetition, due to the way in which more than one pianist or even the same pianist cannot repeat something exactly; a human performer inherently cannot do this in the same way that a machine can.

### **Repetition in Performance**

In terms of absurdity, this could reflect the characteristic of the Theatre of the Absurd as observed by Esslin in which the same situation is shown from various angles rather than following a narrative, in order to inspect one situation closely; Bennett would argue that this is in order to present the dilemma that is not solved by the playwrights so that the audience might resolve it for themselves. Similarly, the same notes (the same situation) are revealed here in subtly varying ways. Again the idea of the work of art as a descriptive image rather than an explanatory piece of rhetoric presents itself. However, the repetition has a different effect in *Vexations* than in *Socrate*, perhaps due to its higher intensity. This particular phenomenon of hearing each repetition differently, though related to memory, deserves a discussion of its own. The question of whether there is such a thing as true repetition is one that is most significant to Cage.

Can there be such a thing as repetition in human performance? For Cage at least, there didn't seem to be; 'each act is virgin, even the repeated one', because of the unintentional but natural variation in human performers, who do not have the ability to repeat something exactly.<sup>511</sup> This is perhaps the reason for his use of several pianists in

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<sup>510</sup> Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 50-51.

<sup>511</sup> Mendez, 'History, Homeopathy and the Spiritual Impulse', 215.

performance, for as Nyman observes, Cage was not inclined towards pure repetition,<sup>512</sup> and having various individuals performing the same piece enhances these subtle variations. Potter notes that the best performance of *Vexations* as implied by Satie's instructions would be played by a machine, which could perform it in exactly the same way 840 times.<sup>513</sup> However, as Potter has shown and I have explored in the previous chapter on *Socrate*, Satie was not interested in having his pieces performed mechanically (or he would simply have composed for machine). In *Vexations*, it is clear that he welcomes the resultant unintended and unpredictable variations. As Mendez says, asking a human performer to play something for so long, even with a period of contemplation prior to performance, means that they would naturally struggle to maintain their levels of concentration, enabling slight variations that do not even require planned composition.<sup>514</sup>

It is not just the performer to whom these variations apply. It has been documented (if subjectively) in the case of *Vexations* that the listener, listening to the same short melody repeatedly, is drawn to any subtle nuances and differences. Cage speaks of repetition as usually thought of as reducing any alertness to differences, but his observation is that it has the opposite effect, instead enhancing our perceptive abilities to distinguish any small variation.<sup>515</sup> He states that after a simple motif is repeated at length, there is a 'subtle falling away of the norm, a constant flux with regard to such things such as speed and accent ... The most subtle things become evident'.<sup>516</sup> Hobbs and Bryars write about similar experiences as a listener in the notes during their performance, with Bryars becoming so acclimatised to the sound of the music that he even found the noises of the coat collar on his neck startling. Hobbs in particular reacts very strongly to any variation, describing it as 'terrifying',<sup>517</sup> a sentiment echoed by Reynolds, at least in relation to expectation: 'one would be gripped by an almost paralyzing fear that the next chord would be incorrect, or that it would not occur at all'.<sup>518</sup> Another potential cause of anxiety for the listener seems to be unintentional sounds, not just in performance mistakes, but also generally during the performance. This is why Bryars and Hobbs found writing notes to each other during the performance very successful, as it eradicated the need to speak. Additionally, they found themselves wanting to walk across the room quietly, so that they would not make sounds other than those that Satie intended. This could begin to cross a dangerous territory, for if Satie's aim was for

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<sup>512</sup> Nyman, 'Cage and Satie', 1229.

<sup>513</sup> Potter, *Erik Satie*, 92-3.

<sup>514</sup> Mendez, 'History, Homeopathy and the Spiritual Impulse', 215.

<sup>515</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>516</sup> Quoted in Sinker, 'Shhhhhh!', 227.

<sup>517</sup> Bryars, 'Vexations and its Performers', 9.

<sup>518</sup> Reynolds, 'Ideals and Realities', 35.

furniture music, then conversation and other natural noises and actions would be welcome; but Bryars argues that whilst other sounds are expected and meant to be heard, he does not want any additional sounds to be intentional.<sup>519</sup>

It follows that *Vexations* is not exactly repeated 840 times after all. The intention to do so is certainly there in each performance, but there will be mistakes in performance and, as with every concert, audience-related sounds also. As Mendez describes, it is not a repetition of the 'unchanging same' but instead 'a font of perpetual novelty, an engine for the production of difference'. Daniel Herwitz argues that what Cage would like in a listener is amnesia: someone with the ability to 'live in the moment', someone without 'history', 'identity' or any 'concept of musical organisation'.<sup>520</sup> As I have mentioned before, Cage himself says that the point of repetition is 'to forget in the space between an object and its duplication',<sup>521</sup> for in listening to repetition in Young's work he was able to find that 'the same thing is not the same thing after all, but full of variety'.<sup>522</sup>

This turns into a question of the identity of the work; as Mendez also observes, if we consider *Vexations* to be made up of many motifs which are theoretically the same but in reality slightly dissimilar, despite the intention to play the same motif 840 times, the work cannot have a stable identity. This has some resonance with Sartre's slogan, 'existence before essence'; whilst not strictly absurd, the idea of not having a fixed essence or self (commonly thought of as a soul), instead constructing one through one's actions and behaviour, is something that Camus also believed. Satie's concept, his 'idea', is a separate thing here; the identity of the piece as heard (as the listener receives it) is never shown in its true 'essence' unless repeated exactly multiple times.

Potter brings up this question of identity in her mention of Carolyn Abbate's comparison of mechanical works and Cartesian dualism. If we are constituted of body and mind, but this mind or intellect – or faculty of memory – is removed, who are we: 'merely machines'? Potter asks if performing a piece of music 840 times makes us into machines, and questions if the difficulty of memorisation comes from our limited ability to concentrate being stretched beyond human capacity.<sup>523</sup> Satie does seem to ask the performer to become an automated, playing machine, requiring a further sense of detachment, in this case from the self; he asks for a mechanism, an instrument, rather than treating the performer playing the music as a means of expression. In his performance note, it seems that this is what Satie

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<sup>519</sup> Bryars, 'Vexations and its Performers', 10.

<sup>520</sup> Mendez, 'History, Homeopathy and the Spiritual Impulse', 219.

<sup>521</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 217.

<sup>522</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>523</sup> Potter, *Erik Satie*, 174.

requests the performer to become. It could be said that only the pause before the piece is an acknowledgement of humanity; but still the performer's intention is to play as if they are a machine, and attempt to repeat the notes exactly, even if it cannot be carried out in reality (as highlighted by the paragraph above).

It is worth noting that Hobbs commented on his 'fear that [his] playing might be getting automatic';<sup>524</sup> he needed a 'bad error' in order to re-establish his expressivity – perhaps his humanity? To quote Abbate's thinking on this: 'As spectacles that portray the clockwork we may harbor inside ourselves, they [mechanical musical works] interrogate the meaning of reproduction, asking what has been stolen by the machine. By extension, they interrogate the humanity in any human musical performance'.<sup>525</sup> From previous statements, it seems that the instruction to repeat a short phrase for such an inordinate amount of time must inevitably take its toll physically and mentally; one performer had to stop playing 'because his mind became full of evil thoughts',<sup>526</sup> and I have spoken previously of Hobbs', Bryars' and Reynolds' fear of mistakes, additional sounds, and silence following the work. One of the overarching responses to the work, aside from the spiritual effects, is the extreme anxiety and stress that something might go wrong. The work seems to exhaust the performer; subjecting them to such quasi-repetition is asking for a degree of patience – or inhumanity? – that cannot be easily given.

### **Satie's Intentions?**

This brings me onto my final question: did Satie intend for his instructions to be taken seriously? This is how every documented performance seems to have interpreted the piece, so it is certainly worth discussing it in this way, but it does make a big assumption without much real discussion of the score's ambiguities. The first such issue, noted by both Potter and Whiting, comes from the grammar of the first performance instruction which, correctly translated as a reflexive verb, actually tells the performer not to merely play the motif 840 times but to 'play the motif to oneself 840 times'.<sup>527</sup> As well as the other ambiguities of the phrase, this does not indicate a timescale, and could mean that it is not meant to be played to anyone else at all, merely in private to the performer. Whiting goes further, pointing out that its meaning is not an instruction but advice to the performer, that if they wished to play

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<sup>524</sup> Bryars, 'Vexations and its Performers', 9.

<sup>525</sup> Quoted in Potter, *Erik Satie*, 174.

<sup>526</sup> Quoted in Bryars 6

<sup>527</sup> *Ibid.*, 139-140.

the piece 840 times, then they should undertake this preparation of ‘serious immobilities’; 840 repetitions is not a necessity, merely a possibility if the player so desires and has adequately equipped themselves mentally for such a task.<sup>528</sup>

But what exactly is it which is to be repeated such an inordinate amount of times? Whiting goes on to question what constitutes the actual ‘motif’, for Satie’s sketches usually use the word ‘motif’ to describe something much smaller, not a whole four lines of music. Furthermore, he usually marked his motifs with double barlines, which is how the bass theme of *Vexations* and its two harmonisations are all separately marked in the autograph score. Whiting postulates a possible inference to be that the bass theme is repeated 840 times, with or without harmonisations.<sup>529</sup> A further ambiguity is presented in the second performance instruction, that ‘at this sign it will be of use to introduce the bass theme’ – Whiting translates this as ‘it shall be customary to take up the thème de la Basse’. The usual interpretation of this, as I have mentioned, is A, B, A, B<sup>1</sup> repeated 840 times, but Whiting suggests – whilst accepting that only subjective interpretations are possible and that the ambiguities do not allow us to know the real interpretation – that the pattern is a cinquain instead of a quatrain, A, B, A, B<sup>1</sup>, A, repeated 168 times, totalling 840 repetitions of the bass theme regardless of harmonisations above it.<sup>530</sup>

Whiting’s interpretation cannot eradicate the inherent circularity of the piece – it may in fact add to it further, as it begins how it ends, with the bass theme. The absurdity of the piece still applies. But the ambiguity of a mere few words causing so many different possibilities of performance is surely what causes one of Whiting to state that the work does not seem to have any great desire to communicate with its recipient or performer, instead ‘resist[ing] realisation in sound’ through its obstruction of understanding the writer’s intention.<sup>531</sup> Bennett’s observation of heterotopia in the Theatre of the Absurd could apply here – the score is a presentation of something which could have many interpretations and possibilities, forcing the audience to assess its meaning for themselves. Satie, consciously or not, does not allow the performer to know what he really meant.

It does not seem likely that this was of concern to Satie. Whiting believes the performance instructions to be ‘more a musing to oneself than an instruction to a pianist’, in fact being ‘Satie’s musing to himself’;<sup>532</sup> Whittington compares this to Satie’s warning in his *Heures séculaires et instantanées* (1914), in which he expressly instructs the performer not

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<sup>528</sup> Whiting, ‘Serious Immobilities’, 311.

<sup>529</sup> Ibid.

<sup>530</sup> Ibid., 312.

<sup>531</sup> Ibid., 310.

<sup>532</sup> Ibid., 310-311.

to read the instructions aloud to the audience. Whittington is in accordance with Whiting that in this case, the performance instruction is probably meant for Satie alone.<sup>533</sup> This is especially significant given the fact that the work was not published in his lifetime, and as Orledge points out, there seems to have been no intention to publish.<sup>534</sup> This seems deliberate considering Orledge's claim that he made careful decisions about which of his compositions to publish and when to do so,<sup>535</sup> which means that he had a good reason for containing *Vexations* for his own private use. This is perhaps why Whiting suggests, somewhat strongly, that if one is to feel a yearning to perform the work in its entirety, it is best to quash such an urge, even if you have to get through the 'serious immobilities' stage to do so.<sup>536</sup> For it all just seems as if it could be a massive, private joke – Gillmor describes it as 'one of Satie's grandest leg-pulls',<sup>537</sup> backed up by the opinions of people who knew Satie well. Henri Sauguet asserted that it was a joke, and that even Satie did not take it seriously, and Milhaud's sense was that Satie's 'essential modesty' would not have endorsed such an exact interpretation of the score.<sup>538</sup> It will never be known what *Vexations* was truly meant to be: the final absurdity of the piece.

## Conclusion

*Vexations* seems to hide many secrets that both scholars and performers wish to uncover. This curiosity begins at first with the title, evoking interest in Satie's personal vexations at the time, usually believed to be his difficult relationship with Valadon. This is said to be transmitted to the recipients of the work, who experience their own vexations at not being able to understand its ambiguities. This is a sentiment reflected in fictional writings by Camus and Sartre, and plays of the Theatre of the Absurd, in which the characters struggle with communication and relationships; as Garcin exclaims in Sartre's *No Exit*, 'Hell is – other people!'.<sup>539</sup> The inquisition into the hidden secrets of the piece extends to the cryptic performance instructions and the confusion as to how the piece should be played, onto the music itself and its construction, as closely examined by Orledge. The reason for its repetition and its subsequent effect on listeners, as well as an extensive documentation of its performance history (as chronicled by Bryars, though unfortunately several years ago

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<sup>533</sup> Whittington, 'Serious Immobilities', 3.

<sup>534</sup> Orledge, 'Understanding Satie's *Vexations*', 391.

<sup>535</sup> *Ibid.*, 395.

<sup>536</sup> Whiting, 'Serious Immobilities', 317.

<sup>537</sup> Gillmor, *Erik Satie*, 103.

<sup>538</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>539</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays* (New York: Vintage International Edition, 1989), 45.

now) is another exploration into the subtleties and peculiarities of the relationship between the recipient and the work. The more recent scholarly work, such as by Whiting and Potter, questions whether this was a piece of work ever meant for the public eye and/or performance, and if it was intended to be a joke.

If it was not meant for performance, then this is in concordance with Satie's aesthetic statement that 'The Idea can do without Art'. The importance is placed on the Idea; its execution becomes irrelevant. This would explain the sketch-like presentation of the work, the fact that it was unpublished, and its perplexing text, for it does not matter how the result is achieved if the Idea is still in existence, even in Satie's mind – possibly the Idea which led to the real creation of furniture music. The repetition of various features (including the whole piece itself), inspired by various art forms, is Satie's Idea in material form. This is largely what contributes to the overarching effect of furniture music, and perhaps what causes Whittington to describe it as the antecedent to furniture music. The consequence of this repetition – or at least the intention to replicate each cycle exactly – is that the work appears to be cheating time itself, through the immobility that is created, which seems often to result in a positive spiritual experience. Despite the repetition, there is an inability to retain the essence of the work in memory, through its various oddities of auditory harmony and visual spellings that result in a mismatched and sometimes anxious experience for the performer, as well as the impossibility of human performance to recreate exact repetition.

But none of these aspects of the work, however absurd, compare to its most absurd factor: the quest to understand it. The scholarly search for an objective answer, amidst the knowledge that the truth cannot be known, is the very crux of philosophical absurdity, but many do not accept this contradiction, as absurdity would require. One cannot be blamed for embarking upon this quest for comprehension – as Whittington ironically states, 'furniture music must not be interesting'<sup>540</sup> – but Satie seems to have inadvertently created one of his most interesting works through its sheer ambiguity. Camus' absurdity would dictate that there is no meaning to be found, so an attempt to understand the work is futile. Instead an acceptance must follow, an acceptance that can be seen in the experience of the positive attitude of the performer: the focus, attention, and willingness to persevere like Sisyphus upon the realisation of his absurd destiny. And this is not the only comparison, for the recipients of *Vexations*, in the form of scholars, performers and listeners, are like Sisyphus in their endless quest for an answer that can never be found, much like Sisyphus

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<sup>540</sup> Whittington, 'Serious Immobilities', 2.

forever rolling his rock up a mountain. Just as his rock is his vexation before his absurd realisation, this work is theirs.



## CONCLUSION: THE ABSURDITY IN SATIE AND BEYOND?

Throughout the course of this thesis, Satie's *Socrate* and *Vexations* have been revealed as having correlations with Camus' theory of absurdity. I have explored the absurdity of the unceasing, repetitive music without development: the connection to Sisyphus rolling his rock up his hill, repetitively and endlessly. In the theory of absurdity, Sisyphus' journey initially represents the futility and meaninglessness of life, which produces a sense of despair and a subsequent detachment from one's environment. This is followed by a realisation that this is the truth of the human condition, and that one must accept it and actively find a personal reason to continue with life. Both detachment and acceptance can be read in *Socrate* and *Vexations* respectively, and it is of note that these resultant feelings are commented on by scholars of Satie's music, albeit sometimes in different terms, but without reference to absurdity.

*Socrate*, a texted work with orchestral accompaniment and the longer of the two in score, is a contrast to the solo piano, one-page scoring of *Vexations*, which is ironically usually interpreted to be a much longer piece in duration. The correlations with absurdity I have established in Satie's work are in large part due to his characteristic use of repetition, which creates a sensation of stasis and immobility. This is symptomatic of furniture music: a music which needs to be non-conflicting and non-resolving, flat like the visual art that often inspired him. However, the types of repetition used in both works do differ. In *Socrate*, the repetition largely occurs through the use of certain motifs used in varying ways, though without development. For example, potentially the only motif that we come to recognise – the 'Socrates motif' – fails to fully develop and climax, and instead simply dissolves and disappears. As Dossena argues, Satie here takes a homogenous approach rather than progressing forwards. The three scenes that make up the work are therefore descriptive rather than narrative, both lyrically and musically, without a musical moment of climax even for the philosopher's death. This is what produces an absurd detachment, as the music goes nowhere, seemingly without purpose or meaning.

In addition to these features of *Socrate*, many scholars have commented on the timeless nature of the work. As well as its stationary lack of movement, Satie has employed and manipulated modal ideas in an ancient Greek scene, contributing to his contemporary, idiomatic sound. Arguably, this produces a sense of detachment due to its confusion of time and its conflicting setting. The blurring of a sense of identity contributes further to the detachment, produced through the distortion of the identity of the characters' gender, and

the identity of the voice of the narrator, masked through layers of translation. These are different forms of detachment: perhaps less overtly absurd, but with connections to the Theatre of the Absurd, as shown in the chapter on *Socrate*.

The main – perhaps only – musical characteristic of *Vexations* is the internal and cyclical repetition. The detachment of *Socrate* is here replaced by a spiritual focus on the work, as shown by the performers and listeners who have written about their experiences. The repetition in this piece is so stark and extreme (if interpreted in the usual way, as done by Cage), greatly aided by the incessant repetition of the cycles, the harmonies, and other musical elements within each cycle. It seems to create a certain enjoyment for the performer in the form of a total and intense immersion into the work, followed by an acceptance that they must continue to the end. Much like Sisyphus, they find themselves consumed by a desire and motivation to carry on. I would argue, however, that equally absurd is the performers' and scholars' futile search for the meaning of the work. They believe themselves to come closer to an understanding, but there can be no way of truly comprehending the significance or even meaning of the ambiguities and mysteries of the piece. The scholars' undertaking can be viewed as absurd: for much like Sisyphus, their task can be seen as irrational, repetitive, and fruitless. Perhaps they, too, find acceptance and meaning in their quest.

Absurdity is a fascinating philosophical theory, with its influence resonating throughout the twentieth century and beyond: in songs, plays, and more. This is undoubtedly because the inquiry into the reason for our existence – the search for our purpose and meaning in life – is one that is inevitably ingrained in human nature. It seems natural for humanity to question whether there is a universal moral code, and therefore its freedom to choose its own system of morality and meaning of existence. Absurdity offers one of the answers to this dilemma – though admittedly it is not necessarily a very encouraging one. Inevitably, these absurd feelings of doubt, frustration and anguish have been expressed through the medium of art, resulting in artworks which embody the absurd qualities of directionless, meaningless and repetitive tedium.

As I have demonstrated throughout my work, the two pieces that I have studied by Satie can be seen to showcase characteristics of absurdity. However, whilst *Socrate* and *Vexations* do differ from the rest of his oeuvre in some significant ways, they also contain characteristics that are shared by several of Satie's other works. For example, his three *Gymnopédies* resemble plays of the Theatre of the Absurd in the way that they seem to portray three different angles of the same image, in their similarity of melody and

accompaniment. The pieces are also extremely repetitive individually, and indistinguishable from each other in character. Moreover, they embody stillness and timelessness. The *Gnossiennes* have less of a resemblance to each other, but are clearly related to each other, and certainly repetitive (though perhaps less so than the *Gymnopédies*), with more agitated movement. Through further study, these pieces could therefore also be linked to absurdity.

However, these are not the only pieces that can be interpreted in this way; Cocteau's, Picasso's and Satie's collaboration resulting in the ballet *Parade* is often described as absurd. Whilst 'absurd' seems to be used here in accordance with the 'ridiculous' definition, the word also applies as a description of the absurd philosophy in the ballet. The 'plot' of *Parade* is an attempt to lure passers-by into a circus show, enticing them with acts that perform outside the venue. They are unsuccessful in inviting people to watch the real show, as the audience assumes that the performances outside are the real event. The ballet is in essence an anti-climactic performance, with no ultimate end or purpose, as the show never happens. It is a totally different soundworld to *Socrate* and *Vexations*; there is no calm tranquillity or lingering dissonance. Whilst it does share some characteristics with the works discussed in this thesis such as motivic repetition and ostinato figures, as Davis observes, there is a 'constant and abrupt juxtaposition of stylistically different materials'.<sup>541</sup> Further detailed analysis of this ballet could perhaps lead to the revelation of more characteristics of absurdity. These works are only a few examples, as Satie wrote many more pieces and in different forms – ballet, vocal, piano – that have these same repetitive, structurally immobile characteristics. Could it be true that Satie's work as a whole, once analysed further, may be able to be read as absurd in its entirety?

It is likely that Satie was not consciously aware of absurdity, and that he did not purposefully set out to write characteristics of the nascent theory into his music. However, he was certainly very innovative in his writing. As discussed earlier, it was at this time that Nietzsche's thinking was beginning to be popularised, so it is possible that this permeated Satie's thinking, and therefore his writing. Satie's influence was pervasive, reaching various composers of all nationalities; we have seen his profound impact on Cage, but his effect on Stravinsky and the other neoclassical composers was equally intense.<sup>542</sup> If his influence is so extensive, could it also be true that the music of these other composers – in fact, any music that exhibits the same repetition, cycles, and blandness – also expresses absurdity? The music of several twentieth-century composers certainly does not concern itself with a sense of direction or climax. One could argue that it was an era of heterotopia, with a plethora of

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<sup>541</sup> Davis, *Erik Satie*, 109.

<sup>542</sup> Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian*, 556.

types of experimentation, and many musics contained this characteristic of stasis. This includes the work of Cage himself, and notably minimalism and its successive genres with their repetition, cycles and lack of variation and progression. Going back further, these particular characteristics can also apply to some medieval and traditional non-Western musics. Satie's music has particularly absurd characteristics that go beyond mere immobility and repetition, as I have shown, but upon further exploration could it be possible that these musics, too, reflect symptoms of absurdity?

I have demonstrated the ways in which two works within one composer's oeuvre exhibit characteristics of absurdity. In these two works, the repetition, lack of direction, and circularity are the principal elements that have links to absurdity. Furthermore, there is the question of identity in *Socrate*, and analysis of *Vexations* reveals that even the scholarship surrounding the work could be seen as absurd. Although I have studied only two works, they have revealed a wholly alternative interpretation, providing a new and original perspective on these pieces that can be extended further, and applied to further research into other composers and musical works. My analysis could therefore be the first step into a potentially new field of musicological scholarship, for, as I have shown, this exploration need not stop at Satie. The rock is still rolling.

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