

Vienna Jazz Satie Style

By Gary Giddins

Erik Satie once credited Christopher Columbus as a source of his comic muse, "because the American spirit has occasionally tapped me on the shoulder and I have been delighted to feel its ironically glacial bite." He also located the widespread capacity for boredom "at the root of man's cultural advance." He would very likely approve of the Vienna Art Orchestra's *The Minimalism of Erik Satie* (hat ART 2005; available from NMDS, 500 Broadway, NYC 10012), in which the American spirit grasps him by both shoulders and—as good as says, "Look, Erik, you're very cool, truly beat, but there's such a thing as soul!" The irony of the VAO's profound but never pompous faith in jazz when all its members but one (Oregon-born Lauren Newton) are Austrian, Swiss, or German, would not have been lost on him. And though he might wince at the band's refusal to sustain boredom—excepting one of three versions of "Vexations," which advances the culture no end—he would appreciate the addition of what in his day would have been considered music hall impieties, such as blues glisses and brassy riffs.

Satie has had his American acolytes, from Varese (who got the point firsthand) to Cage (who did him the mixed favor of taking his instructions literally) to Blood, Sweat & Tears (who thought him sort of pretty). But the VAO, which never even saw America until two weeks ago, is the first ensemble to embellish the music of the onetime cabaret pianist with the colors and variational practices of jazz. Don't, however, think this is a matter of jazzing the classics—a usually disreputable practice as old as jazz itself (viz. Jelly Roll Morton's "Miserere"). The first jazz musicians adapted classical themes for the same reason they adapted other traditional songs, but from the '30s through the '80s, their descendants often adapted Europe's greatest hits because it was a cute, gimmicky, commercial thing to do. Not many such projects worked—those that did, *Nutcracker Suite* by Ellington and Strayhorn, or "Maids of Cadiz" by Davis and Evans, combined singular orchestral and improvisational skills, and were a far cry from the many albums of Bach with a rhythm section or Stravinsky with a synthesizer. None of this, however, is to be confused with the Third Stream school, which is more a mating of techniques than melodies. *The Minimalism of Eric Satie* works because the VAO's guiding light, conductor and composer Mathias Ruegg, allows his variations to rise out of the implications of Satie's music—the challenge he accepted was not to make Satie swing, but to extend his language through the processes of jazz.

Most of the pieces Ruegg chose are from early in Satie's career, and his approach was either to orchestrate the piano pieces and then open up the arrangement for improvisation, or to paraphrase the originals. Especially rewarding is his update of the *Gnossienne* cycle, which begins with an appropriately Oriental voicing of No. 2, and then proceeds more loosely through Nos. 1 and 3, employing solo variations and displacing melodic phrases and ostinatos to underscore their unity as a series. Similarly, "Meditation" concludes with an ostinato from "Idylle," which appears later on the album, although the real delight here is the swing figures accompanying Karl Fian's jocular trumpet solo. The character of "Severe Reprimande" is significantly altered by obeisance to Satie's tempo markings—which apparently suggested half the velocity most pianists have since adopted—and by transposing the severest melody to tuba; the sensible soprano sax variations by Harry Sokal extend logically from the vamp. "Gymnopedie No. 3" is a virtuosic trombone solo (without the bass figure) by Christian Radovan, who rambles around the score without meeting it head-on. A second disc is given to three versions by three soloists of "Vexations," a simple passage—stated here by Woody Shabata on vibes—voiced in ninths that Satie wanted repeated 840 times (Cage's 1963 performance took 19 hours). Jazz is rarely that boring; in fact, two of the versions are compelling—those by Lauren Newton and especially saxophonist Roman Schwaller. Wolfgang Pusching's 23 minutes worth of bass clarinet variations, however, are excessive enough for me, if not Satie or Cage.

Satie was not part of the VAO's extraordinarily vigorous program at the Public Theater October 19—the last evening in a two-week tour that started in the Southwest. On the contrary, what was most impressive in a set that adamantly refused to bore was the way it amplified orthodox big-band techniques to accommodate modernist impulses. Newton, tuning fork at the ready, harmonized with the ensemble, never overpowering it; the rhythm section was powered by a pneumatic mesh of tuba (John Sass) and electric bass (Heiri Kaenzig); and the mutable rhythms were stabilized by drummer Wolfgang Reisinger. Most of the soloists—especially saxophonists Sokal, Schwaller, and Pusching, trumpeter Herbert Joos (who doubles on Fian and Alpine horn), and trombonist Radovan—demonstrated the enlightening combination of precision, zest, and humor common among European jazz musicians who've gone beyond copying Americans. Mathias Ruegg conducted when necessary and stayed to one side when the soloists had the floor. Except for "Jelly Roll, but Mingus Rolls Better," which the band has recorded twice and which expands on Mingus's "Jelly Roll" much as the current album does on Satie, all the pieces were created by members of the VAO. They were probably just spirited and satisfying enough to annoy Satie, but Ruegg and company made me wish they'd stayed around longer. ■

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