

*Quatre Petites Mélodies* (1920), Erik Satie  
as orchestrated by Thomas DeLio

In 2010 I published a book length study of *Amores*, a four-movement quartet for percussion ensemble and prepared piano dating from 1943 by John Cage.<sup>1</sup> In this study I placed Cage's work at a nexus of what some have labeled Modernism and Postmodernism, but which I have always considered two branches of Modernism itself. At one point in this book I make the provocative statement that with regard to a history of early Modernism in music: "Only a naïve or biased examination of music would ignore Satie when considering Schoenberg (or vice-versa); just as one would never ignore either Gertrude Stein or T. S. Eliot when considering early Modern poetry."<sup>2</sup> In an attempt to flesh out the implications of this statement, I prepared a paper on a song by Satie entitled *Daphénéo* (1916) in which I demonstrated, through a close examination of his score, the numerous ways in which Satie embodies the central elements of what has become known today as Postmodernism.

Over the course of preparing this paper, and in an attempt to get into Satie's musical style in a more hands-on way, I decided to orchestrate one of his late compositions, a set of four songs entitled *Quatre Petites Mélodies* (1920). In a sense, this orchestration is an extended footnote to that paper. I believe that my orchestration reflects Satie's own approach to orchestration, which - contrary to general opinion - I find both subtle and original, as well as some of Stravinsky's innovations from the same period as heard in such early works as the *Trois poésies de la lyrique Japonaise* (1913) and *Pulcinella* (1920) -though I hope I may be forgiven a hint of Mahler at the end of the fourth song: I hope Satie would see the humor?

I was struck by the brevity of the *Quatre Petites Mélodies*, as well as the simplicity of texture and rhythm (repetitive rhythm), extended tonality, and, of course, the eclectic mixture of popular styles which they exhibit throughout. These are, of course, all typical of Satie's music. They are also hallmarks of what, in music at least, has become known in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century jingoism as Postmodernism. Thus, these songs, as so many other works by Satie and some of his colleagues in the earliest decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, give lie to the very notion that there is a historical evolution from the qualities of Modernism

to anything *post*-Modern. These compositions embody one strand of musical evolution that has been present since the dawn of the Modern era. There is no historical “post.” Modernism is comprised of multiple, often contradictory, strands of oppositional tendencies that seem to complete one another. Together they underscore the essentially pluralist nature of all Modernism.

All of this is a very round about way of saying that, despite their brevity and lack of surface complexity (indeed, *because of* these characteristics) these little songs represent a very important branch in the evolution of music that did not emerge at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but was clearly present from its inception.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas DeLio, *The Amores of John Cage*, (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> <sup>i</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.