

Cheyenne Keller

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Music History and Literature III

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Project A

In this project, I am going to be discussing Eric Satie's "Gymnopedie No. 1". It is one of three compositions written by the French composer and pianist, Eric Satie. The first one of the Gymnopedies was published in 1888.

"Gymnopedie No. 1" is a beautiful and extremely relaxing piece of music. Even if one doesn't recognize the name, the iconic melody is recognizable to most people. It finds a home on almost every single playlist using the title "relaxing" or "peaceful". Although this song is considered extremely refined and popular in today's world, it was initially written intending to undermine an established system for composers in its publication time. In true Satie-fashion, he avoided naming these pieces using any conventional terms used by composers of the time. Instead, he used a made up word: "Gymnopedies" and subsequently declared himself a "gymnopedist" which he defined as "one who writes gymnopedies". In true iconoclastic manner, Eric Satie wrote this piece defying classical harmonies and structures and consequently created a piece of music that seems to allow the mind to slip into a place of serenity and peace.

"Gymnopedie No. 1" is $\frac{3}{4}$ time and begins in the key of D major. It begins by alternating between a G major seventh chord (the dominant) and a D major seventh chord (the tonic). In both chords, the F# remains on the top. This gives a smooth, connected, and airy feeling to the

theme of the song, similar to a lullaby. After four measures of this, the melody seems to reluctantly join over the progression, starting on the weak, second beat of the measure and at a very soft dynamic. This melody dances through chords tones using sustained quarter notes, eventually coming to rest on an F# an octave below where it had started. Then, the entire progression repeats.

The piece uses part of the “Circle Progression” for chords moving sequentially with III, vi, and ii, then moving to a subdominant minor seventh chord, minor tonic chord, and then, finally, to a minor fifth. As it progresses, the bass falls on a “D” and sustains that for nine measures. This simultaneously contrasts and supports the melody like an anchor while it swells in dynamics. A new melodic idea is presented and crescendos in volume, the chords become more dissonant, and the piece cadences on the dominant minor to the tonic. This short, candential movement gives a very leading and unfinished feel to the phrase. Lastly, the beginning theme repeats in its entirety. The song remains the same until the last eight measures where an F natural in the melody gives the chords a dark, eerie feeling, and the song ends on a D minor chord.

With this seemingly simplistic piece of music, Eric Satie broke every societal rule on musicians at the time. Without the “normal” harmonic structure, storyline, and a developing melody, this piece of music would not be accepted by society for over twenty years. It was at this point that listeners finally began to realize that Satie had purposefully used a slow, rocking theme, short, sustained melodies, and unusual chord progressions and harmonies to create a listening experience that takes the audience out of their own minds and into another world entirely. Although it is filled with noise, the piece gives a sort of emptiness that allows for the mind to relax and reflect.

The ambience that Satie created with this song leaves room for much interpretation on the feelings that arise throughout the piece. Many have described sadness, depression, peace, serenity, hope, despair, and much more. When I listen to “Gymnopedie No. 1”, I feel light and airy, like I am floating in a world that is not my own. I feel an emptiness in my mind that is so calming to me, I feel like I could listen to this song for hours and never get sick of it. I chose to analyze this piece because of this reason. As a musician, I had always been able to recognize the beauty in this piece, but after analyzing it in this way, I now understand the importance and relevance of it as well.

Sheet Music from www.mfiles.co.uk

1st Gymnopédie

Eric Satie

Lente et Dououreux

major

Handwritten annotations: *pp*, *G B F#*, *D A C F#*, *p*, *with pedal*

Handwritten annotations: *p*, *me*

Handwritten annotations: *TRANSITION*, *p*, *iii*, *vi*, *ii*, *ii7*, *i*, *v*

Handwritten annotations: *ii4*, *ii2*, *i7*, *I7*, *dominant*, *i7*, *V7*, *ii4*

Handwritten annotations: *V7*, *I7*, *ii*, *iii*, *vii*, *V7*, *iii4*

Handwritten musical score for Keller 5, featuring piano and guitar notation. The score is divided into systems, with measures 37, 45, 53, 61, 68, and 73 marked. Key annotations include:

- Repeat! THEME**: A handwritten instruction above the first system.
- Deceptive melody octave**: A handwritten note on the left side of the first system.
- pp** and **p**: Dynamic markings for piano and mezzo-piano.
- THREE**: A handwritten note above the second system.
- new**: A handwritten note above the fifth system.
- ends in relative minor**: A handwritten note with an arrow pointing to the final chord of the sixth system.
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music is a different arrangement from the original

Works Cited:

How Satie's Gymnopédies Became Ubiquitous. 24 Feb. 2017,

www.yourclassical.org/story/2017/02/24/satie-gymnopedies.

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Mar. 2022, pianistmusings.com/2019/06/14/what-makes-gymnopedie-no-1-so-special.

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Wildridge, Justin. "Gymnopédie No. 1 by Erik Satie." CMUSE, 21 Nov. 2018,

www.cmuse.org/gymnopedie-no-1-erik-satie.