

# *Ensemble for the Romantic Century*

presents

## **Satie, Bohemian of Montmartre: A Cabaret**

A theatrical concert

Written by James Melo

based on the writings of Erik Satie and Alphonse Allais, and on performance pieces from turn-of-the-century cabarets.

Directed by Donald T. Sanders

Production Design by Vanessa James

**Jeff Biehl** as Erik Satie

**Michael Lewis** as Alphonse Allais

**Denise Bahous** as Yvette Guilbert

**Taylor Mead** as a cabaretist

**Eve Wolf** and **Max Barros**, Artistic Directors

**James Melo**, Musicologist in Residence

**Donald T. Sanders**, Director of Theatrical Production

*Denise Bahous*, chanteuse

*Andy Simionescu*, violin

*Ole Akahoshi*, cello

*Max Barros*, piano

*Samara*, Arabic dancer

*Maurice Chedid*, oud player

*Gamal Shafik*, tabla player

### **Special thanks to**

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Mount Holyoke College Department of Theatre Arts for loaning the costumes.

Mosaic Dance Theater Company for providing Middle Eastern musicians' costumes.

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Cover design by James Melo

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Wednesday, 14 March 2007 at 8 PM

Thursday, 15 March 2007 at 8 PM

Sunday, 18 March 2007 at 3 PM

The Kosciuszko Foundation  
15 East 65<sup>th</sup> Street

# PROGRAM

ERIK SATIE	<i>Je te veux</i>
CLAUDE DEBUSSY	<i>La plus que lente</i>
MAURICE RAVEL	Sonata for violin and piano -- Moto perpetuo
ERIK SATIE	<i>Sports et Divertissements</i> (selections) -- <i>Fishing</i> -- <i>Yachting</i> -- <i>The Octopus</i> -- <i>Swimming</i>
LÉON XANROF	<i>Le fiacre</i>
M. DE LIHUS	<i>Partie carrée</i>
CLAUDE DEBUSSY	Piano Trio in G major -- Scherzo—Intermezzo
YVETTE GUILBERT/LOUIS BYREC	<i>Je suis pocharde</i>
CLAUDE DEBUSSY	Piano Trio in G major -- Andantino con moto allegro

## INTERMISSION

ERIK SATIE	<i>Gymnopédie no. 1</i>
CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS	<i>Persons with long ears</i> ( <i>Carnaval des Animaux</i> )
SERGE GAINSBOURG	<i>Il était une oie</i>
MAURICE RAVEL	<i>Alborada del gracioso</i>
CLAUDE DEBUSSY	Piano Trio in G major -- Finale: <i>Appassionato</i>
PHILIPPE OLIVE/RALPH CARCEL	<i>Le tango stupéfiant</i>
CLAUDE DEBUSSY	Piano Trio in G major -- <i>Andante espressivo</i>
ERIK SATIE	<i>Je te veux</i>

## PROGRAM NOTES

*The smallest work by Satie is small the way a keyhole is small. Everything changes when you put your eye to it – or your ear. (Jean Cocteau)*

*Humanity, you are the body of which I am the skin... That is why I know how to sing about you. (Yvette Guilbert)*

There are very few composers as intriguing, perspicacious, and idiosyncratic as Erik Satie (1866-1925). Endowed with a personality that invariably put him at odds with the prevailing assumptions of society, Satie made it a credo to challenge every received notion about art, music, performance, pedagogy, and composition. His career evolved as a continuous series of experiments and daring acts, as he composed music that was often characterized by a strong satirical vein, made fun of the venerable traditional forms of Western music, dealt blows to the ivory towers and pedestals that supported performers and their crave for fame, and chipped away at all the bourgeois institutions. His seven-year apprenticeship at the Paris Conservatoire (1878-1885) was a disaster by all accounts. He was described as “the laziest student” by the Conservatoire’s director, and although his musical gifts were recognized by his teachers, they were unanimous in pointing out his total lack of motivation. Satie himself called his years at the Conservatoire a sojourn in “a sort of local penitentiary.” He persisted with his studies only to get away from compulsory military service. After achieving success as a pianist and composer at several Montmartre cabarets (beginning with Le Chat Noir, the father of all cabarets, founded in 1881), Satie surprised everyone by enrolling as a student at the conservative Schola Cantorum, where, according to his own term, he graduated as a “contrapuntist”. Calling himself a “contrapuntist” (and also a “gymnopédiste”) was part of Satie’s continuous jabs at the established conceptions about music and the musical profession.

Satie was never able to meet the bourgeois musical aspirations of his parents, and in 1887 he left his native city of Honfleur to further his career in Paris. Prophetically, his first lodgings were close to Le Chat Noir, where he soon became an habitué. Satie was quick to embrace the bohemian lifestyle of Montmartre, and in a very short time he created a completely new persona for himself, free from all the constraints of bourgeois decorum. At Le Chat Noir, he befriended the humorist Alphonse Allais (1854-1905), who was also born in Honfleur. Allais was a member of a group of young writers and humorists who dubbed themselves Les Hydropathes, and who formed the core around which Le Chat Noir was founded. The Hydropathes were also associated with the early development of Symbolism in France. Allais’s brand of satirical, deadpan, and absurd humor, was a major influence on Satie’s own writings. Their friendship and collaboration lasted until Allais’s death in 1905, by which time Satie had worked with several other

poets and musicians, in venues such as the Auberge du Clou, the Divan Japonais, and other cabarets and cafe-concerts throughout Paris. It was at the Auberge du Clou that Satie met Debussy, and their lifelong friendship was nurtured at that cabaret, where Debussy was a frequent guest. Debussy immediately recognized the uniqueness of Satie's musical style, describing him as "a gentle medieval musician lost in this century." Satie's oeuvre (both musical and literary) was years ahead of his time. The outrageous titles of some of his compositions (*Desiccated Embryos*, *Pieces in the Form of a Pear*, *Flabby Preludes*, etc.) as well as the whimsical performance directions scattered throughout his scores ("talking to yourself", "don't stray too far", "on the tip of your mind", and many others) point to the aesthetics of Dadaism, many of whose practitioners acknowledged Satie as their forerunner.

In spite of his irreverence, however, Satie often spoke with great seriousness about music and his own vocation as a composer. In 1924, for example, he delivered a lecture in Brussels to an audience of artists, critics, and students, on the subject of "The Musical Spirit". As usual, he first teased the audience with his jokes about critics and his outrageous pronouncements about music, and then remarked that he would, for that special occasion, relinquish his habitual irony, concluding with a summary of his artistic credo:

The exercise of an Art requires us to live in a state of complete self-denial... It was not to be funny that I spoke with you, just now, about sacrifice. Music requires a great deal from those who wish to serve her. That is what I wanted to convey to you... A true musician must be subjugated to his art; he must put himself above human misery; he must draw his courage from within himself, within himself alone. (excerpted in *A Mammal's Notebook: Collected Writings of Erik Satie*, ed. Ornella Volta, 1996)

Satie's biographer Alan Gillmor has argued that, at heart, Satie was a *fantasiste* and a *fumiste* (practical joker), belonging to a tradition of absurdist humor that can be traced back to Rabelais. No wonder his musical legacy continues to puzzle critics and scholars alike. Satie holds a strong appeal for the lay audience, particularly through his piano music, while his late ballets and avant-garde orchestral works still intrigue scholars by their sheer adventurousness. His influence can be traced in the works of many 20<sup>th</sup>-century composers, including John Cage and Philip Glass, as well as on rock musicians and popular performers of the 1960s and 1970s. Some of his works, such as the celebrated *Gymnopédies*, are ubiquitous in the imagination of many music lovers.

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of the cabaret and the cafe-concert for the development of Satie's musical style. He worked in these venues as a pianist (often accompanying the shadow theater at Le Chat Noir), orchestral conductor, and composer. As a consequence, Satie's career evolved in tandem with the transformations of the cabaret as a cultural institution, as he followed closely the newest trends, genres, and performance styles that developed in association with these performance spaces. At the cabarets, all the social strata, from intellectuals and artists to working people, mingled in an atmosphere of relaxation, creativity, and unbridled

experimentation. Much of modern music flourished at the cabarets, where the influx of popular elements brought a breath of fresh air to musical forms that were beginning to be perceived as fossilized and in great need of rejuvenation. For Satie, such milieu provided an inexhaustible source of inspiration, and a motivation for cultivating his highly distinctive persona as a die-hard, eccentric bohemian.

Indeed, in his personal life Satie was as idiosyncratic as in his profession. His lifestyle is well characterized in this quotation from *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*:

Satie needed somewhere even cheaper [than his current lodgings] and less distracting in which to live and work, and to this end he moved to the southern suburb of Arcueil at the end of 1898. Once installed, he closed his door to the world for the rest of his life, adopting his final appearance as a respectable, deferential bourgeois functionary (with bowler hat, wing collar and umbrella) in 1905. He walked the ten kilometers into Paris every day, stopping at numerous cafés en route to drink and compose, returning in the small hours either by the last train from Montparnasse or on foot. In wet weather (which he preferred) he shielded his ubiquitous umbrella beneath his coat, which also contained a hammer to repel potential assailants. The unsolved question is how he emerged from his filthy room each day in pristine condition, like an actor stepping out from the wings.

No one was ever allowed into his room, and when he died a plethora of elaborately handwritten notes, cards, and sketches were found behind the piano. The variety and scope of these writings defy any attempt to summarize them, but Satie's mordant wit runs like a thread through all these texts. In addition to his activities as a composer, he wrote dramatic works and collaborated with the Ballets Russes and with artists such as Picasso and Jean Cocteau. A measure of his forward-looking ideas can be gleaned from his piano piece *Vexations* (1893), a single musical motive of slow and totally unorthodox harmonic progressions which he instructed to be repeated 840 times. It was the first minimalist work in the history of Western music.

## THE SONGS

All the songs in tonight's program were part of the regular repertoire of the cabarets where Satie worked. With the exception of Satie's *Je te veux*, all of them were also staples of the repertoire of the legendary Yvette Guilbert (1865-1944), who entranced the audience of Le Chat Noir and, later, the Moulin Rouge, with her delivery of songs in a style that combined singing, speech, and mime. Guilbert was the greatest cabaret chanteuse of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in Paris; or the greatest *diseuse* (literally, storyteller), as she preferred to be called. Born in poverty and considered ugly by all conventional standards, Guilbert had to overcome enormous difficulties before achieving a secure position in the Parisian theatrical scene. She developed a highly

personal style, which by all accounts mesmerized her audience. She herself summarized her approach to singing (or storytelling through singing) with these words:

I am often quite bare on stage, and I offer myself unclothed of all lies... I alone create the illusion... The great battle is the search for happiness in truth... Know your fellow creatures as you know yourself and you will be an artist; love your fellow creatures as you love yourself and you will be a genius; worship God and His creation, sing its praise, and you will be immortal. (*The Art of Singing a Song*)

Yvette's real name was Emma Guilbert, but while she was at the country house of Léon Sare, the director of the Folies Bergères, a discussion ensued about her name. The writer Guy de Maupassant, who was present at the gathering, was asked to suggest an artistic name for Emma, who was becoming increasingly better known among Parisian artistic circles. Maupassant had just written a short story featuring a character named Yvette, a very pretty daughter of a high class courtesan, and suggested that Emma should adopt the artistic name of Yvette Guilbert. Thus the legend was born. Most of Yvette's career developed at the Moulin Rouge, where Toulouse-Lautrec (who had discovered her at Le Chat Noir) sketched a number of her portraits. The slim figure with the bony face and long arms bedecked in black gloves became ubiquitous among Toulouse-Lautrec's many depictions of the Parisian cabaret scene, which include portraits of the dancers La Goulue and Jane Avril, and the chanteur and reciter Aristides Bruant. The English writer Arthur Symons, who had the opportunity to hear Yvette Guilbert at the Moulin Rouge, described his impressions:

Tall, thin, a little angular, she walks to the front of the stage with a distracted air and the exquisite gaucherie of a young girl, her shoulders sagging, her arms hanging at her sides... There is nothing conventional about her; even from afar she resembles no other singer. Her voice, her face, her gestures, her mime, everything is different, everything is her very own. She is a being of contrasts, who suggests purity and perversity at the same time. She has the eyes of a child, of a pure, cloudless blue, shining with malicious cleverness, closed in extreme lassitude, open in surprise which empties them of all expression. Her ingenuousness is perfect, as perfect as that subtle, strange smile of understanding which ends her act.

Yvette herself composed many of the songs in her repertoire, but also performed works by other renowned cabaret singers. Invariably, she would announce the titles of the works and recite the song texts prior to singing them. The subjects of her songs include disquisitions on the foolishness of love, comic narratives, trivial events, onomatopoeic renditions, and a variety of quotidian subjects. In her delivery, the range of vocal inflection and the highly nuanced gestures and facial expression combined to create an organic narrative that covered all the minutiae of the texts. The four songs from Yvette Guilbert's repertoire that are performed tonight exemplify the several facets of her artistry.

Satie's *Je te veux* (ca. 1900), a *valse-chantante* composed specifically for cabaret performance, was immortalized by Paulette Darty, who was dubbed "the queen of the slow waltz". Darty performed it for the first time at a charity concert in Arcueil in 1908, with Satie himself at the piano. The work became extremely popular, and became emblematic of Satie's cabaret style, outshining several of the other 50 or so cabaret songs that he composed throughout his career. Its melody sways with a naturalness that is infectious, held aloft by a gentle harmonic rhythm that never fails to induce movement and the desire to dance.

The *Sports et Divertissements* represent Satie's most successful experiment in the genre of recitation with piano accompaniment. This collection of vignettes, each one describing a fashionable pastime, offers a wide range of performance options. The texts, some of which are as absurd as a Dada poem, are minutely supported by the music, which is marvelously descriptive in its nuances. Each vignette encompasses a little story, and it is a testimony to Satie's artistry that he managed to create a succession of vivid musico-poetic tableaux employing such minimal resources. Both in the writing and in the mode of performance, the *Sports et Divertissements* are fully anchored in the early avant-garde movements that enlivened the Parisian musical scene in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## THE INSTRUMENTAL WORKS

The instrumental pieces in the program are by composers who were closely associated with Satie: Claude Debussy (1862-1918) and Maurice Ravel (1875-1937). Debussy in particular had a profound impact on Satie's personal and professional life. Their 25-year friendship was undoubtedly the closest and most rewarding that Satie ever experienced. One of the most famous anecdotes in the history of Western music centers on a piece of advice that Debussy offered to Satie: once, trying to convey to Satie his impressions of some of Satie's compositions, Debussy remarked that, although they were very charming, they lacked a sense of form. In response, Satie composed some piano pieces that he entitled *Pieces in the Form of a Pear*. Debussy was obviously amused, but there is almost nothing of Satie's humoristic vein in Debussy's own music. In tonight's program, Debussy's *Piano Trio in G major* (the only one he ever composed), functions as a musical commentary on Satie's memories of his aforementioned love affair with Suzanne Valadon. Debussy's *Piano Trio* is a youthful work (it was composed in 1880), representing much of what he learned during his apprenticeship at the Paris Conservatoire. It is cast in the traditional four-movement layout, with each movement representing a rethinking of musical forms that were required subjects of study at the Conservatoire, as training grounds for composition. Debussy's personal style, however, is already apparent in his lyrical approach to harmony, the effacing of structural boundaries, and the subtle instrumental coloring. The work was composed in Fiesole, near Florence, where Debussy was acting as the personal pianist to Tchaikovsky's patroness Nadezhda von Meck. The trio was dedicated to Debussy's composition teacher, Emile Durand. For many decades after its composition, the work was thought to have been lost, and it was only in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century that it finally resurfaced.

*La plus que lente*, originally written for piano solo, is Debussy's response to the style of the *valse-chantante* from the cabaret repertoire. Its title (The More than Slow) mischievously suggests the underpinnings of sentimentality that could be associated with this repertoire. In its character, it belongs to the same milieu as Satie's *Je te veux*, even though it was not specifically composed for performance in a cabaret.

Satie met Ravel when the latter was still a very young composer who, like many of his peers, was an habitu   at the Montmartre cabarets. Although they became friends, their friendship never matured to the same level as that between Satie and Debussy. Satie once remarked, obviously in jest, that even though Ravel had refused the academic and conservative Prix de Rome, all his music accepted it. Satie had an ambivalent relationship with Ravel's music, which he admired but found difficult to integrate fully into his own aesthetic conceptions. Ravel's music is characterized by an element of virtuosity that is rather distinct from that of Debussy. His piano writing is indebted more to Liszt than to Chopin, and his sound palette is decidedly more dynamic and iridescent than Debussy's characteristically cloudy sonorities.

In his *Sonata for Violin and Piano*, composed at the height of his mature style, Ravel experimented with cyclical procedures inherited from Cesar Franck, and for the first time in his works included elements derived from jazz. The theme of the second movement (which is entitled *Blues*) recurs in a transformed version in the *Moto perpetuo*, a tour-de-force for the violinist.

*Alborada del gracioso* is one among several works by Ravel that were inspired by the mystique and allure of Spain. The piece is part of one of Ravel's most remarkable collections of character pieces for piano, the suite *Miroirs*. In its rhythmic vitality and sparkling glissandos (some of which are in thirds and fourths) *Alborada del gracioso* captures the energy of a jester's early morning song, as he awakens from a night of drinking and merrymaking.

Satie's *Gymnop  die* no. 1 has acquired the status of a musical signature. There is hardly a music lover who is not acquainted with this beautifully simple, contemplative work. The title, which was coined by Satie himself, is often thought to refer to slow and solemn dances from ancient Greece, dances which were in turn a pure product of Satie's imagination. He composed a set of three *Gymnop  dies*, dating from the period when he worked at Le Chat Noir. They became instantly popular. It is almost impossible not to respond to the measured, deliberate pace of the first *Gymnop  die*, probably the most successful of the three, in its combination of gentle melody, majestic rhythmic prosody, and highly transparent harmonies. Debussy was among those who fell under the spell of these pieces, and orchestrated the first and third in 1897 as a tribute to his friend.

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In 1926, the poet Maurice Donnay, who was one of the founders of Le Chat Noir, commented on the then defunct cabaret:

Le Chat Noir! Oh! I don't have pretensions to cover a subject so vast in these few pages. But to define the "spirit" of Le Chat Noir, that is easy: its purpose was to spread enjoyment to all men through all of life's situations... one sees how eclectic it was, in turn, and at once joking, ironic, tender, naturalist, idealist, realist, lyrical, cynical, hoaxing, Christian, pagan, mystic, republican, reactionary, anarchist, chauvinist... (*Autour du Chat Noir*)

A sign outside of Le Chat Noir contained a motto that could be taken as emblematic of all the other cabarets and their patrons: "Passerby, come within these walls and be modern!" In its succinctness, this injunction made clear the importance of the cabaret as one of the cradles of modernism.

James Melo  
Musicologist in Residence