

La Diva de "l'Empire"

Erik Satie

Satie

Erik Satie was an eccentric French composer and pianist. He was born in Honfleur (Lower Normandy) in 1866. Satie studied at the Paris Conservatoire, though not very diligently; he was expelled in his third year, and a second attempt some years later was hardly more successful. In 1888 some of his compositions were published by his father. Satie began attending *Le Chat Noir*, a cabaret in Montmartre that was a meeting place for the artistic community of Paris. Public and official recognition generally eluded him, though, and in 1898 he moved to the working class suburb of Arcueil-Cachan, living mostly in poverty for the next 15 years, while continuing to work as a cabaret pianist in Montmartre.

Satie resumed his musical studies at the Schola Cantorum from 1905 to 1908. His compositions gradually began to attract wider attention, being admired by the younger generation of French composers such as Ravel and Les Six. An association with the French writer Jean Cocteau led to larger-scale projects such as the ballets, and to fame and success in the years after the First World War. He also collaborated with cubist, Dadaist and surrealist painters. Satie died in Paris in 1925, at the age of 59.

Satie's musical style

His earliest compositions were in the French Romantic style, but he soon rejected romanticism and wrote in a style that foreshadowed 20th-century musical developments, using modal harmonies, unresolved dissonances and minimalistic repetition. Many of his piano compositions contained cryptic or witty titles and annotations.

Satie's compositions

Satie's compositions for voice include:

- choral music, including *Messe des pauvres*.
- a dramatic cantata, *Socrate*.
- songs, including several collections of *Mémoires* and *3 poèmes d'amour*.
- cabaret songs.

His other major works include:

- five ballets (the best known being *Parade*).
- three sets of *musique d'ameublement* (furniture music) for small orchestra or ensemble.
- many piano pieces, including *Gymnopédies*, *Gnossiennes*, *Sarabandes*, *Nocturnes*, *Sports et divertissements* and *Sonatine bureaucratique*.

Satie's contemporaries

- Ernest Chausson (French, 1855-1899).
- Giacomo Puccini (Italian, 1858-1924).
- Hugo Wolf (Austrian, 1860-1903).
- Claude Debussy (French, 1862-1918).
- Frederick Delius (English, 1862-1934).
- Richard Strauss (German, 1864-1949).
- Carl Nielsen (Danish, 1865-1931).
- Jean Sibelius (Finnish, 1865-1957).

- Paul Dukas (French, 1865-1935).
- Albert Roussel (French, 1869-1937).
- Aleksandr Skryabin (Russian, 1872-1915).
- Charles Ives (American, 1874-1954).
- Maurice Ravel (French, 1875-1937).

La Diva de “l’Empire”

La Diva de “l’Empire” is one of Satie’s cabaret or “café-concert” songs, written around 1900. The text, by Dominique Bonnaud and Numa Blès, describes a singer at The Empire Theatre in Leicester Square, a popular music hall venue in the 1880s and 1890s. Her performance is a combination of innocence, coquettishness and cynicism.

The song is set in the style of a *cakewalk* - a strutting dance with syncopated ragtime rhythms, originally performed by Negro slaves as a parody of formal European dances. As the cakewalk evolved into a more respectable style, it often took the form of a dancing contest, the prize for which was a large cake. The cakewalk was popular in minstrel shows in the 1880s and 1890s, first in the US and then in Europe. The melody is often syncopated, with frequent use of a ♩♩♩ rhythmic figure, while the accompaniment remains in a regular “oom-pa” march style. Debussy, who also used to frequent *Le Chat Noir*, used the cakewalk style several years later in ‘Golliwog’s Cakewalk’ and some of the *Préludes* (‘Minstrels’ and “General Lavine” - eccentric’).

La Diva de “l’Empire” is in G major, in song form, with an introduction, refrain, two verses and a coda. It has a jaunty, humorous character. The music sets the overall mood of the text, but, unlike an art song, there is very little specific word painting. It is up to the performer to convey the nuances of the text through tone colour, rubato and facial expression.

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| b.1-4 | Introduction, Part I, G major . The rhythm suggests a jaunty march, and the characteristic cakewalk rhythm, ♩♩♩, can be heard in bars 1 and 3. The harmony is entirely triadic, using root position chords (I, ii, IV and V). There is a small amount of chromatic movement at the end of b.3, but the remainder is entirely diatonic. |
| 5-8 | Introduction, continuing in G major, in “vamp” style, mostly repeating the tonic chord with an added 6th (G-B-D-E), but moving to the dominant at the end of bars 6 and 8. |
| 9-24 | Chorus, all in G major, consisting of four 4-bar phrases. The melody has a playful character, with a mixture of steps and leaps. The rhythm is mostly unsyncopated.
The first phrase begins and ends on the dominant note. The harmony consists mostly of tonic and dominant chords, with added 6ths or 7ths for colour. The chords are connected by stepwise voice leading in the lower treble notes of the piano part (G-F♯-E-D).
The melody reaches its highest pitch in b.13, then quickly descends, like laughter. A half-diminished 7th chord (ii ^{ø7}) in b.14 leads to a V-I cadence in b.15-16, with the melody ending on the dominant note.
The third phrase (b.17-20) is similar to the first. The melody ends on the tonic note in b.20, harmonised as chord ii ⁷ .
The final phrase begins with repetition in the melody and some chromatic movement in the accompaniment (a passing diminished chord in b.21). Syncopation (the ♩♩♩ motif) returns in b.22. The rate of harmonic change is quicker in these bars, leading to a V ⁷ -I cadence in b.23-24. |
| 25-40 | Verse 1, D major , also consisting of four 4-bar phrases. The rhythm is more syncopated now, often using ♩♩ or ♩♩♩ motifs.
The first and third phrases are identical, beginning and ending on the tonic chord, with the melody coming to rest on the 3rd of the chord in bars 28 and 36. |

The volume suddenly increases in b.29-30, and the accompaniment is mostly in unison with the melody, as the text satirises the rich audience members who adore the diva (snobs in vests). Their frenetic hurrahs are depicted through staccato articulation and a rising 5th in b.31-32.

There is a movement towards A major (the dominant key) in b.31-32, without actually settling there; the harmony moves in a circle of 5ths back to the tonic chord of D major in b.31-33 (indicated by the bass line: B-E-A-D).

The final phrase (b.37-40) reflects on the diva's combination of cynicism and coquettish innocence, ending with a V^7-I cadence in b.39-40.

41-44 Interlude, **G major**, the same as Part II of the Introduction.

45-60 Chorus, G major, as before.

61-76 Verse 2, **D major**, the same as Verse 1.

77-80 Interlude, **G major**, as before.

81-96 Chorus, G major, as before.

97-100 Coda, G major, the same as Part I of the Introduction.

Tempo de marche means at the speed of a march.

léger means lightly.

Stylistic characteristics of this cabaret song include:

- jaunty, humorous character.
- syncopated rhythms.
- very regular 4-bar phrase structure.
- strophic (verse-repeating) form.
- predominantly diatonic harmonies.
- some use of 7th and added 6th chords for colour.