

**The “Satie Sound”**  
**The Piano Works of Erik Satie**  
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What is the “Satie Sound” and how does Erik Satie achieve it in his solo piano pieces? The “Satie Sound” is tonally ambiguous and the melody seems to float above the accompaniment. The tonal edges within the piece are blurred much like the edges of images in impressionistic watercolor paintings. Key features of classical period music are absent or obscured: functional chord progressions that end in a dominant-to-tonic resolution and a melody that clearly resides in the home key. In place of this, Satie uses non-traditional sonorities, non-functional chord progressions, denial of dominant-to-tonic resolution and referential collections. His melodies use rotations of referential collections or scales that do not coincide with the accompaniment. This paper endeavors to show how these characteristics create tonal ambiguity and, at the same time, a sense of continuity between the accompaniment and melody in many of Erik Satie’s solo piano works and how these characteristics create the “Satie Sound”.

There are three pieces that are excellent examples of these characteristics in Satie’s solo piano works: *First Gymnopedie* (track 1), *First Gnossienne* (track 2), and *Nocturne No. 3* (track 3 at 04:36 minutes). The *First Gymnopedie* is from a collection of *Three Gymnopedies* published in 1888 . The *First Gnossienne* is from a collection of *Six Gnossiennes* published in 1890. *Nocturne No. 3* is from a collection of *Five Nocturnes* published in 1919. These particular pieces are from different collections and different periods of Erik Satie works for solo piano. They demonstrate a consistent set of characteristics that define the “Satie Sound” in Erik Satie’s solo piano works.

The first characteristic one notices in many of Satie's solo piano works is his use of non-traditional sonorities. In the *First Gymnopedie*, Satie extends the harmony of the traditional triad by adding a seventh to almost every chord. For example, measures 1 and 2 introduce a G major seventh that resolves to a D major seventh (pitch wheels 1 and 2). This ostinato figure lasts until measure 17. The seventh is consistently present in both chords; therefore, both the G major seventh and D major seventh chords sound like they are unresolved. Neither chord seems to be at rest. This makes it unclear to the listener which chord is tonic and introduces an element of tonal ambiguity at the very beginning of the piece. The use of added notes in almost every measure of the piece, primarily sevenths, creates tonal ambiguity among the sonorities and makes it difficult to find a chord that sounds like tonic in *First Gymnopedie*.

If we look at only the accompaniment, the sonorities in *First Gnossienne* are more conventional than *First Gymnopedie* (note: Satie wrote this piece without measure lines, measure lines are added for easy reference). The key of *First Gnossienne* is F minor and all of the accompaniment sonorities fit this key (pitch wheel 1). In measures 1 through 8, the accompaniment is mainly root position F minor chords, followed by a root position C minor dominant chord that resolves to tonic at the beginning of measures 8.

However, if we consider the melody (pitch wheel 2) and accompaniment together (pitch wheel 3), the vocabulary of measures 1 through 8 is primarily from referential collection Oct. 2 (refer to pitch wheel number 3, page 1). And the vocabulary of measures 27 through 37 is primarily from acoustic collection AC-2 (pitch wheel 6). In measures 1 through 8, the combination of the melody and accompaniment creates sonorities that do not fit Roman numeral analysis or traditional chord progressions. For

instance, beat three of measure 1 is a D half-diminished seventh chord. This sonority does not frequently occur in the key of F minor. Measure 2, beat one is an F minor chord with a raised fourth. This sonority does not often occur in the key of F minor. Measures 27 through 37 reveal a similar treatment of the sonorities from referential collection AC-2; therefore, the combination of notes from the melody and the accompaniment fit into referential collections. These collections give the piece continuity, while the sonorities built within the referential collections break free from the key of F minor and create tonal ambiguity.

The sonorities in *Nocturne No. 3* are quite non-traditional and introduce ambiguity to the piece from the very first measure. Measure 1 contains sonorities built on dyads instead of triads that are a major second and perfect fourth apart. Satie uses these sonorities consistently throughout this piece. For example, ignoring register, measure 2 contains dyads that are a second apart. Measure 3 contains dyads that are a perfect fourth apart. Satie alternates between sonorities built on fourths and seconds throughout this piece; therefore, it is difficult to give the sonorities in this piece any kind of traditional chord label. These non-traditional sonorities blur the tonality of this piece.

Measure 3 in *Nocturne No. 3* reveals how this piece can contain non-traditional sonorities and yet maintain a sense of continuity. The key signature of this piece is D major and measures 1 through 5 contain notes from that key (specifically DIA+2, pitch wheel 1), but in measure 3 beat three, note G has been tonally adjusted to G# to avoid a tri-tone harmony and make this dyad conform to perfect fourth harmonization established in measure 1. This happens consistently in *Nocturne No. 3*. Measure 3 reveals that this piece generally stays within diatonic collections, but makes adjustments where necessary

to conform to the second and perfect fourth harmonic vocabulary established in the opening measures. This use of non-traditional sonorities such as seconds and perfect fourths creates tonal ambiguity, but since this piece stays within diatonic collections with only a few adjustments there is still a sense of continuity.

The final chord in *Nocturne No. 3* encapsulates the sonorities Satie uses throughout this piece (pitch wheel 3). The last chord is an incomplete D major chord (no third) with an incomplete A dominant seventh chord (no third) separated by a major second. The major second between these two chords echoes the sonorities built on seconds throughout this piece. There are several perfect fourth intervals in the final chord: A to D, D to G, and E to A. These intervals echo the harmonies built on perfect fourths throughout this piece. The final chord sums up the sonorities in this piece because it is not a triad and it does not respond well to Roman numeral analysis; therefore, it is tonally ambiguous, yet maintains continuity because all of the notes in the final chord fit into most of the referential collections in this piece.

Satie uses non-functional chord progressions and denial of dominant-to-tonic resolution to introduce tonal ambiguity to these three works. For example, in *First Gymnopedie* there are no dominant-to-tonic resolutions in this piece. The only progression that comes close to a traditional tonic, pre-dominant, dominant, tonic confirmation of the key is measures 33 through 36. If we ignore the seventh added to the tonic D major chord, the progression is a tonic D chord, pre-dominant B minor six chord with an added seventh, A dominant chord in first inversion that resolves deceptively to an F# minor seventh in measure 36. This is the only phrase that comes close to confirming the key with a traditional chord progression and it resolves deceptively.

Since the dominant-to-tonic resolution is denied in measure 36 and the A major dominant chord is absent throughout the rest of this piece, the dominant is clearly denied and the tonality is obscured through non-traditional chord progressions. The only dominant-to-tonic resolution occurs in the last measure of the piece and confirms the key of D minor. This confirmation of the key of D minor is preceded by pedal tones that suggest a traditional chord progression: tonic D (measures 62-70), pre-dominant E (measures 71-76), dominant A (measure 77), and tonic D (measure 78), but the chords above these pedal tones obscure the progression entirely and they do not conform to any kind of functional chord progression in the key of D minor. Satie's use of non-traditional chord progressions, denial of dominant-to-tonic resolution, and the fact that this piece ends in the parallel key of D minor contribute to the dissolution of tonality in *First Gymnopedie*.

*First Gnossienne* approaches non-functional chord progressions from a different angle than *First Gymnopedie*. This piece is in the key of F minor. In fact, the entire piece is simply a prolongation of tonic. There is no traditional chord progression. Yet it contains a very clear minor dominant chord that resolves to tonic in measure 8, but this is simply a neighboring chord prolongation of tonic. Measures 19-20 are made up of Bb subdominant and G half-diminished seventh chords. These chords are common tone prolongations of the tonic. They do not precede a dominant-to-tonic resolution or confirm the key of F minor. Although this piece is clearly in the key of F minor because of the key signature and the repetition of the F pedal tone, this piece never moves away from tonic. It is simply a prolongation of tonic in the key of F minor. This means that the chord progressions in this piece are non-functional and only serve to prolong tonic.

*Nocturne No. 3* is in the key of D major according to the key signature, but it is difficult to find any chord progressions that confirm the key of D major. This is primarily due to the fact that this piece is based on non-traditional sonorities such as major second and perfect fourth dyads, but there is evidence of dominant-to-tonic resolution in the key of D major at important measures that mark the return of previous material or the beginning of new material.

In measure 12, there is an A dominant seventh chord in the right hand that resolves to a D note in measure 13, but this dominant-to-tonic resolution in the key of D major is obscured by accompaniment in the left hand that does not fit the right hand harmonies. The clearest example of a traditional chord progression occurs at the end of the piece in measures 36-38. The first 5 beats of measure 36 are a B minor seventh chord, the last half of measure 36 to the end of measure 37 is an A dominant seventh chord that resolves to a D tonic at the beginning of measure 38. All of these chords are missing the third, which obscures the quality of each chord. And in the last six beats of measure 37 the dominant seventh chord (minus the third) in the left hand is harmonized with perfect fourths in the right hand. The perfect fourths obscure the dominant-to-tonic resolution in measure 38.

It is clear that *Nocturne No. 3* primarily contains non-functional chord progressions. At important points in the piece it is possible to find evidence of traditional pre-dominant, dominant seventh to tonic progressions, but they only occur in one hand and the opposing hand harmonizes the progression with sonorities that create tonal ambiguity.

How does Satie bring continuity to these pieces if there is consistent use of non-traditional sonorities, non-functional chord progressions, and denial of dominant-to-tonic resolution? And how does he create a melody that seems to float above the accompaniment? Satie uses referential collections that organize sections of these pieces into pitch collections so that all the sonorities and melodies come from the same referential collection. This creates continuity. Then Satie places the melody and accompaniment in opposing rotations of the referential collection. This is how Satie creates a melody that seems to float above the accompaniment.

In *First Gymnopedie*, all of the notes in measures 1 through 20 are in referential collection DIA+2 (pitch wheel 3). The melody, which starts on beat two of measure 5, is in the mixolydian rotation of DIA+2. If the melody is played separately from the accompaniment, note A seems to be the root. This is because A is the highest and lowest note in the melody that starts in measure 5 and ends in measure 8. More importantly, this melody that is repeated in measure 13 through 16 avoids note D. The melody in measures 5 through 8 does contain note D on beat 3 of measures 7 and 15, but note D occurs on a metrically weak beat and the melody immediately leaps down to note A. Additionally, 5 of the 9 notes in this melody belong to a dominant seventh chord in the key of D major. The accompaniment contains notes D and F# in every measure until measure 17 (pitch wheels 1 and 2). This means that the accompaniment is in the Ionian mode of DIA+2, while the melody is in the mixolydian mode of DIA+2.

In measure 22 of *First Gymnopedie*, there is a transposition of the referential collection to DIA0 that is highlighted by a dynamic indication of piano (pitch wheel 4). The accompaniment is in the Ionian mode again because there is a pedal tone D in the left

hand that starts in measure 23 and lasts until measure 31. The melody is in the mixolydian rotation of DIA0 because notes A, C, and E occur on metrically strong beats in measures 22, 23, 27, 28, and 29. This means that the melody is primarily in the mixolydian mode while the accompaniment is in the Ionian mode. This creates a melody that floats above the accompaniment.

In *First Gnossienne*, the notes in measures 1 through 18 are from referential collection Oct. 2 with the exception of note G (pitch wheel 3). The fact that these notes can be grouped in a single referential collection creates continuity. On the other hand, if the accompaniment and the melody are analyzed separately, it becomes clear that the accompaniment is a prolongation of tonic F minor, while the melody notes (excluding the grace notes) are in the dominant key of C minor with a raised seventh (pitch wheels 1 and 2). This creates a melody that resides at the dominant and seems to float above the accompaniment part that resides at the tonic.

In *First Gnossienne*, The notes in measures 27 through 37 belong to a referential collection with IPF [1212213]. With the exception of note B, all of these notes belong to referential collection AC-2 (pitch wheel 6). These notes have continuity because they fit into a single referential collection, but if we look at both hands separately, it is clear that the melody is in the key of C major and the accompaniment is a prolongation of tonic F minor (pitch wheels 4 and 5). This is similar to what occurs in the opening measure, except this time the melody is in the major mode of the key of C instead of C minor. Measure 27 is a striking example of the “Satie Sound”. Here the melody is clearly in a different key than the accompaniment. It sounds as though the melody will float away entirely before it touches down again in measure 31.



*Nocturne No. 3* uses notes from DIA+2 in measures 1 through 5 (pitch wheel 1). Again, if we examine the melody of the right hand separately from the left hand accompaniment, it is clear that the right hand is in the mixolydian rotation of DIA+2 (pitch wheel 2). In measures 1 through 5, the melody avoids note D except for the end of measure 3, but it occurs in a metrically weak position. On the other hand, note A occurs on beat one of measure 3 and in metrically strong positions throughout measures 2 through 5. This means that the melody resides in mixolydian rotation of DIA+2, while the accompaniment is in the Ionian rotation of DIA+2. This treatment of the melody and accompaniment occurs in several places in *Nocturne No. 3*

*First Gymnopedie, First Gnossienne, and Nocturne No. 3* are excellent examples of how Erik Satie creates tonal ambiguity and dissolution of tonality in his solo piano works. He uses referential collections to create continuity between the melody and accompaniment. The melody is in a different rotation of the referential collection or a different scale than the accompaniment. This creates a melody that seems floats above the accompaniment. Globally, the tonality of the entire piece floats because of characteristics such as: denial of dominant-to-tonic resolution, non-functional chord progressions, and non-traditional sonorities that create tonal ambiguity. All of these characteristics in the piano works by Erik Satie work together to create the “Satie Sound”. It is a sound that blurs the lines of tonality and creates a melody that floats over the accompaniment like the images on the pages of impressionistic watercolor paintings.

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