

Recomposing Satie's Gnossienne 2 (1890)

The piano solo piece Gnossienne 2 of Eric Satie consists of 5 sentences. The first and second sentence (A and B) are (partly) repeated in reverse order. The third sentence C is the central part of this piece. The form can thus be described as: A-B-C-B-A', where A' is the partly repetition of A. Each sentence can be subdivided into two phrases, mostly of different length.

1. A = phrase a1 + phrase a2 (m. 1-4 + 5-8)
2. B = phrase b1 + phrase b2 (m. 9-10 + 11-14)
3. C = phrase c1 + phrase c2 (m. 15-17 + 18-22)
4. B = phrase b1 + phrase b2 (m. 23-24 + 25-28)
5. A' = phrase a1 (m. 29-32)

Technically spoken, each sentence consists of three more or less melodic layers:

Layer 1: an elaborated upper voice as a melody, which rhythm is defined by triplets

Layer 2: accompanying middle voices (three-part), with a short-long figure or the syncopation as a rhythmical motiv.

Layer 3: a lowest voice consisting of long notes, irregularly changing (after one, two or three bars), using only a few pitches, thus defining a slow pace rhythmically and melodically.

To illustrate, below the measures 18-22 (phrase c2):

The image shows a musical score for measures 18-22 of Gnossienne 2, illustrating three distinct layers. The score is written in 4/4 time and consists of three staves. Layer 1 (top staff, Treble clef) features a melodic line with several triplet markings (indicated by a '3' and a slur) over measures 18, 19, 20, 21, and 22. Layer 2 (middle staff, Bass clef) provides accompaniment with chords and single notes, often in a syncopated or short-long rhythmic pattern. Layer 3 (bottom staff, Bass clef) consists of long, sustained notes that change infrequently, defining a slow pace. The key signature has one sharp (F#).

In this text, I'll try to show you that the whole piece is a two part composition of Layer 2 and Layer 3. Layer 1 is in fact result of a ingenious heterophonic* play with Layer 2. In other words: Layer 1 is a diminution or elaboration of Layer 2.

* www.bestmusicteacher.com/music-history/mindmap-terms/mindmap-heterophony.html

First, I explain four basic compositional principles of Gnossienne 2 by the recomposing of sentence C. Then, I'll recompose the other sentences and conclude with a recipe for composing a piece like Gnossienne 2.

Part 1: recomposing sentence C (m. 15-22)

Principle 1: a two-part interval progression in parallel motion as basic structure of phrase c2 (m. 18-22)

18

Layer2

Layer3

This two part progression of perfect fifth intervals can be changed into triads in parallel motion by adding a third (over the lowest voice).

18

Layer2

Layer3

Principle 2: heterophony as basis of melodic invention (m. 18-22)

The main tones of Layer 1 can be derived from Layer 2.

18

Layer1

Layer2

Layer3

These main tones of Layer 1 can be easily elaborated by neighbour and passing tones and tone repetition, using triplets as rhythmical figure. In fact, this is heterophony.

Layer1

Layer2

Layer3

Note that tone F# in measure 18 is a neighbour tone of main tone E. F# in turn is diminished by neighbour G#.

Principle 3: rhythmical activity to liven things up (m. 18-22)

In order to make this result more lively, we can add some rhythmical activity to Layer 2 by the syncopation.

Layer1

Layer2

Layer3

Looking at the version of Satie there are only a few changes to add: see x (shorter third A), y (inversion third into sixth) and z (no syncopation but a short-long rhythm and a elaboration of the last interval by neighbour tones).

Layer1

Layer2

Layer3

When we double the tone of Layer 3 into Layer 2 (in order to achieve a more rich sound) we get the version of Satie with the three-part Layer 2.

Musical score for Layer 1, 2, and 3, measures 18-22. Layer 1 (treble clef) contains a melodic line with triplets and slurs. Layer 2 (bass clef) contains a bass line with triplets and slurs. Layer 3 (bass clef) contains a single bass line with a whole note in each measure.

Principle 4: expanded repetition defines Phrase c1 and c2 (m. 15-22)

Phrase c1 (m. 15-17) is a repetition of the first three measures of phrase c2.

Musical score for Layer 1, 2, and 3, measures 15-17 and 18-22. The score is divided into two systems. The first system covers measures 15-17, and the second system covers measures 18-22. Layer 1 (treble clef) contains a melodic line with triplets and slurs. Layer 2 (bass clef) contains a bass line with triplets and slurs. Layer 3 (bass clef) contains a single bass line with a whole note in each measure.

Of course, musically spoken it is better to say that Phrase c2 is an expanded repetition of Phrase c1. This appears to be a formal principle, applied in sentence C and B.

Part 2: recomposing sentence B (m. 9-14)

In a few annotated steps, I'll recompose sentence B.

Step 1: a two-part interval progression in parallel motion of sentence B (m. 9-14)

9

Layer2

Layer3

Phrase b1

Phrase b2

Again a two part progression of not only perfect fifth intervals. The lowering of tone A into a flat A results in a diminished fifth interval, that contrasts with the perfect fifth. A colourful play!

Step 2: modification of Layer 2 by harmony and rhythm (m. 9-14)

9

Layer2

Layer3

This shows the same elaboration procedure as in sentence C: making triads by adding a third, doubling the lowest voice into Layer 2, syncopation as rhythmical figure.

Step 3: Layer 1 as diminution of Layer 2 (m. 9-14)

The image displays a musical score for three layers (Layer 1, Layer 2, and Layer 3) in 4/4 time, covering measures 9 through 14. Layer 1 is written in treble clef and features a melodic line with eighth-note triplets and quarter notes. Layer 2 is written in bass clef and consists of block chords, some of which are embellished with triplets. Layer 3 is written in bass clef and contains whole notes. The score is divided into two systems: the first system covers measures 9-10, and the second system covers measures 11-14. Measure numbers 9 and 11 are indicated at the start of their respective systems.

Again the same ideas: embellishing the main tones of Layer 2 and varied tone repetition. In short: heterophony!

Part 3: recomposing sentence A (m. 1-8)

I'll now recompose sentence A (phrase a1 followed by phrase a2), mainly without any comment: Satie applies the same ideas.

Step 1a: a two-part interval progression in parallel motion of Phrase a1 (m. 1-4)

Step 1a shows two layers in 4/4 time. Layer 2 (bass clef) contains whole notes with fingerings 2, 4, 4, and 5. Layer 3 (bass clef) contains whole notes with fingering 5. The notes in Layer 2 are G2, B1, D2, and E2. The notes in Layer 3 are G1, B1, D2, and E2.

Step 1b: a two-part embellished interval progression in parallel motion of Phrase a1 (m. 1-4)

Step 1b shows two layers in 4/4 time. Layer 2 (bass clef) contains quarter notes with fingerings 2, 4, 4, and 5. Layer 3 (bass clef) contains whole notes with fingerings 5. The notes in Layer 2 are G2, B1, D2, and E2. The notes in Layer 3 are G1, B1, D2, and E2.

Step 2: harmonizing Layer 2 of Phrase a1 (m. 1-4)

Step 2 shows two layers in 4/4 time. Layer 2 (bass clef) contains chords with fingerings 2 and 4. Layer 3 (bass clef) contains whole notes with fingerings 5. The notes in Layer 2 are G2, B1, D2, and E2. The notes in Layer 3 are G1, B1, D2, and E2.

Step 3a: melodic Layer 1 based on Layer 2 of Phrase a1 (m. 1-4)

Step 3a shows three layers in 4/4 time. Layer 1 (treble clef) contains quarter notes with fingerings 2 and 4. Layer 2 (bass clef) contains chords with fingerings 2 and 4. Layer 3 (bass clef) contains whole notes with fingerings 5. The notes in Layer 1 are G2, B1, D2, and E2. The notes in Layer 2 are G2, B1, D2, and E2. The notes in Layer 3 are G1, B1, D2, and E2.

Step 3b: elaboration of melodic Layer 1 of Phrase a1 (m. 1-4)

What Satie now does, is really amazing: the main tones of the voice of Layer 1 are transformed into embellishing, appoggiatura-like tones (see x)!

Step 3c: Satie's Layer 1 of Phrase a1 (m. 1-4) more lively

Step 4: making Layer 2 of Phrase a1 (m. 1-4) more lively

Investigating the melodic features of all layers leads to the conclusion that Satie uses only the small intervals of second and third.

Step 5: phrase a2 (5-8) = varied repetition or modification of phrase a1 (m. 1-4)

The measures 5-6 are a repetition of measures 1-2. Layer 2 and layer 3 of the measures 7-8 is a transposition of the measures 7-8 (a second interval lower) with a small modification (Ab instead of A). Layer 1 in measure 7 consists of the tones Ab and F which are - as in measure 3 - the lowest tones of Layer 2. There are no changes in rhythmical design.

Step 5: Phrase a2 (m. 5-8)

5

Layer1

Layer2

Layer3

The following shows Sentence A.

Step 6: Sentence A

5

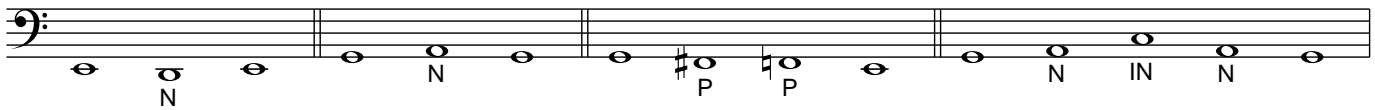
5

Part 4: the lowest voice as compositional start

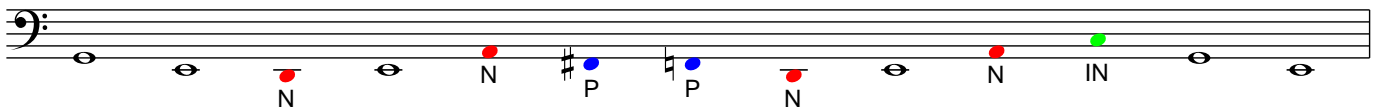
As already noticed, the lowest voice consists of long notes, irregularly changing (after one, two or three bars), using only a few pitches, thus defining a slow pace rhythmically and melodically. In fact, the lowest voice can be seen as a pentatonic scale but better as an expansion of the third E-G with:

- tone D as a neighbour tone of tone E (N)
- tone A as a neighbour tone of tone G (N)
- tone F# and F as passing tones between G and E (P)
- tone C as an incomplete neighbour tone of neighbour tone A (IN)

Layer 3: embellishing techniques applied to tone E and G



Layer 3: reduced form of the lowest voice



The following example shows the complete lowest voice with the phrase structure:

Layer 3: Satie's version with phrase structure

A musical staff in bass clef showing a sequence of notes with labels above and below them. The labels are: a1 (m. 1), a2 (m. 5), b1 (m. 9), b2 (m. 11), c1 (m. 15), c2 (m. 18), b1 (m. 22), b2 (m. 25), a1 (m. 29). The notes are: E (N), D (N), G (N), F# (P), F (P), E (N), C (IN), G (N).

So, if we have a lowest voice (Layer 3) with a phrase structure (note Satie's irregular phrase structure!), then we should be able to compose a piece like Satie's Gnossienne 2 based on the following recipe:

- add the main tones of Layer 2: based on the interval fifth, in parallel motion
- harmonize these main tones of Layer 2: based on a triad structure
- derive the main tones of the upper voice (Layer 1) from Layer 2
- elaborate the upper voice with neighbour and passing tones and tone repetition (use triplets as motivic idea)
- make Layer 2 more lively by adding a rhythmical pattern (as syncopation or short-long figure)

And the finishing touch (dynamics, performance remarks etc.) should not be forgotten!

Below Satie's complete Gnossienne 2.

Gnessienne 2 (1890)

Erik Satie (1866-1925)

avec étonnement
3

1 2 3 4

ne sortez pas
3

5 6 7 8

9 10

dans une grande bonte
3

11 12 13 14

plus intimement
3

15 16 17 18

Musical score for measures 18-22. The piece is in 7/8 time. Measure 18 starts with a treble clef and a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The melody features a triplet of eighth notes. The bass line consists of chords. Measures 19-22 continue the melodic and harmonic development with various triplet and eighth-note patterns.

avec une legere intimité

Musical score for measures 23-24. The melody continues with triplet patterns. The bass line features a prominent bass note in measure 23, which is sustained through measure 24. The dynamics are marked as *avec une legere intimité*.

sans orgueil

Musical score for measures 25-28. The melody continues with triplet patterns. The bass line features a prominent bass note in measure 25, which is sustained through measure 28. The dynamics are marked as *sans orgueil*.

Musical score for measures 29-32. The melody continues with triplet patterns. The bass line features a prominent bass note in measure 29, which is sustained through measure 32. The dynamics are marked as *pp* (pianissimo) in measure 32.

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The free and open source music notation program MC Musiceditor (Windows/Linux) can be downloaded at www.mcmusiceditor.com