

Les Pantins dansent

Satie was always willing to try out new theatrical ideas and when he was approached by the Futurist poetess, Valentine de Saint-Point, in 1913 he proved eager to participate in her Metachoric Festival with a 'poème dansé' entitled *Les Pantins dansent*. As Valentine explained: 'In my *Métachorie*, music and dance are equal partners, both uniquely and similarly dependent on the Idea, that is to say the idea evoked in the poem or drama.' Both the composer and the dancer were to be separately inspired by a common poem with their creations combined on stage, which was, in theory, an advance on the free choreographic improvisations to well-known pieces by contemporary celebrities such as Isadora Duncan, Maud Allan and Loïe Fuller.

However, what Satie was presented with was a rather maudlin, negative, self-indulgent and repetitive poem, which Mlle Saint-Point later published as the second of her *Poèmes ironiques* at the time of her first Metachoric Festival in America in April 1917. Its six verses run as follows (and I am grateful to Ornella Volta to supplying me with this text):

'Je mourrai, un jour de fête,
Alors que les pantins dansent.
Je n'entre pas dans leur danse,
Je ne fête pas leurs fêtes.
Je mourrai, un jour de fête,
Alors que les pantins dansent.

Alors qu'ils crient et qu'ils hurlent
Tous, une gaieté prescrite,
Rien je ne crie ni ne hurle,
Même une vertu prescrite.

Et leur vacarme est si faux
Que je ne puis m'écouter.
Dans un factice, si faux,
Vie ne se peut écouter.

Mon silence, mort au bruit,
Silence pour quoi je vis,
Cela seul par quoi je vis,
Mon silence, mort au bruit.

Ma solitude est si lourde,
Amertume inguérissable;
Solitude riche et lourde,
Solitude inguérissable!

Je mourrai.... Les pantins dansent.' [repeat of verse 1]

[Prose translation: 'I shall die during a fête when the puppets are dancing. I do not join in their dance, I do not celebrate their festivities. When they all shout and scream with prescribed gaiety, I say nothing, not even a banished virtue. Their uproar is so false I cannot listen. In so false and artificial a situation, life cannot hear itself. My silence, dead to the noise, the silence that is my goal, the only thing I seek. My solitude is so oppressive, an incurable bitterness; a precious and burdensome solitude, an incurable loneliness! I shall die during a fête when the puppets are dancing.']

Satie's first version may well have been a joke at Valentine's expense. After all, she was diverging somewhat from her Metachoric ideals in writing the poem as well as dancing its interpretation. What resulted in November 1913 was a strikingly dissonant introduction followed by a jaunty little piece somewhat reminiscent of 'Cherry Ripe'. And it was far too short for the poem, which was to be read by the portentous actor Edouard de Max at the premiere in the Salle Léon-Poirier in Paris on 18 December 1913. However, Satie even drafted the orchestration of this version, featuring his only known harp solo, and either he thought better of making a travesty of the festival, or Valentine cheated again, looked at it, and told him it would have to be rewritten.

Whatever the reason, Satie (probably to keep his commission) then composed the strange, disembodied piece we know as *Les Pantins dansent*, which was subsequently conducted by Maurice Droeghmans at the Festival de la Métachorie. But it was no longer than the first and had a similar vanishing ending, so Satie must have had a definite plan in mind, even if he was notorious in his early career for creating ballets like "uspuđ" whose music was utterly divorced from the stage spectacles they were meant to accompany. As there is no surviving review that tells us exactly what happened on that auspicious evening, it must be assumed that de Max read the poem separately, as Satie's music only lasts about 90 seconds. Whichever way you look at it, it cannot have been quite the artistic triumph that Valentine originally envisaged.

However, an extract from the orchestral score appeared in the Futurist journal *Montjoie!* at the time of the premiere, and the complete piano version appeared in the next edition in January-February 1914. These sources have been consulted in the present edition and some inconsistencies in articulation have been tacitly corrected. The first version is taken from Satie's sketchbook in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF MS 9604, pp. 18-23) and the dynamics have been added editorially (the only ones by Satie coming in bar 32).

Robert Orledge