

Vocal Music of *La Belle Époque*:  
Freudian Reflections Through Poetry

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When surveying the ambit of elements that contribute to the expressive properties of a given musical work, music scholars frequently consider the influences that contemporary musical trends, literature, the visual arts, and personal or collective societal experiences have on the work's composer. Oftentimes, creative movements occur within a composer's country that manifest through changing paradigms in approaching his/her art. However, musical history has witnessed many points in which the events in another country have impacted the musical creations of a given countries' composers, events such as technological breakthroughs and outbreaks of war. Occasionally, advances in the scientific field have even resulted in musical and artistic reactions from the international public. A notably influential advance within the scientific field arose through the work of Sigmund Freud. Freud's developments in the psychological sphere prompted innovation on two remarkably broad scales: that of diverse areas of study, including psychology, medicine, philosophy, literature, visual arts, and (of course) music, and that of the international following, including Germany, Great Britain, the United States, and France. Yet France had a rather peculiar relationship with Freud's output, to the point of which Freud's effects on French musical styles of his day is seldom discussed. This paper proposes how Freud's psychological theories on the duality and function of the unconscious, accumulation of fragments, female sexuality, and the relationship between suffering and subjectivity were reflected in vocal music composed during *La Belle Époque* (1890-1914) with assistance from contemporary poetry that, too, indicated similar reactions.

German art music showed strong signs of reception of Freud's publications in discussing psychology. Musicologists and psychologists alike have connected themes of sadomasochism and other sexually derived power dynamics to composing, performing, and listening to the music

of Robert Schumann and Karlheinz Stockhausen as well as other Serialist and New Complexist composers.<sup>1</sup> The United States also appeared to well receive and exhibit Freudian psychology in music, but such receipt occurred much later in the Twentieth Century. Composer Ned Rorem, for instance, chose to literally incorporate Sigmund Freud's published texts into his large-scale work *The poets' Requiem*, composed between 1954 and 1955.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, analyzing musical creation and performance trends in 1980s Indie Rock has led musicologists to find numerous portrayals of Freudian theories regarding masculinity and sexually sourced demonstrations of power; likewise is the case with Great Britain.<sup>3</sup> France, however, experienced particular difficulty in accepting Freud's beliefs and incorporating them into medical practice and literature, despite how much Freud himself adored French culture and how he spent time studying under Jean-Martin Charcot in Paris.<sup>4</sup> Historian Jan Goldstein even remarks how "the French generally met Freud's theories with indifference or hostility."<sup>5</sup> Goldstein further isolates France from other nations, including Germany, Great Britain, and the United States, by mentioning the establishment of psychoanalytic societies, incorporation of psychoanalysis into therapeutic practices, and hosting collegiate lectures for Freud himself to advocate his work, respectively.<sup>6</sup> Such a disparity in acceptance between the scientific fields of France and the aforementioned countries arguably induced different manifestations in the artistic realm.

Although traces of Freudian psychology in French art culture may require a more thorough search, "the early 1900s saw profound changes in attitudes" largely due to Freud's

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<sup>1</sup> Friedl, "Sadomasochistic Aspects," 29-30.

<sup>2</sup> Rios, "Poets' Requiem: Text and Melody".

<sup>3</sup> Bannister, *Masculinities and 1980s Rock*.

<sup>4</sup> Library of Congress, "Chronology of Freud".

<sup>5</sup> Goldstein, "Neutralizing Freud," 42.

<sup>6</sup> Goldstein, "Neutralizing Freud," 40-41.

discoveries, according to author and French literary scholar John Phillips.<sup>7</sup> Phillips specifically targets the art form of poetry, as he describes how a “generation of young writers” reacted to such contemporary psychological findings through their output.<sup>8</sup> French artists’ ease with including Freudian paradigms into their approaches towards their work may have resulted from the enduring concept of *méditatifs intérieurs*, or *inner thoughts* brought forth by French philosophers Michel de Montaigne, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Maine de Biran.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, increasing interest in philology and its relation to cognitive processes at the time provides reason for psychological impressions to emerge in *La Belle Époque* poetry in particular.<sup>10</sup>

Freud published his treatise *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* in 1901. This book presented his theories of *Bewusstsein* or consciousness, the latent unconscious, the repressed unconscious, and the relationships between the three. Studying these relationships brought forth Freud’s more significant discovery: repression. Philosophical scholar James Di Filippo explains:

The ego (das Ich), representing the coherent structure of mental functions, adjoins consciousness, controls behavior in the external world, censors dreams and creates repressions. The psychical id (das Es) represents the unconscious through which the repressed is able to communicate with the ego. In contrast to the ego, where reason and common sense reside, the id bears the passions. The super-ego or ego ideal (das Uber-ich) reacts against the choices of the id. With regard to the ego, the reactions of the super-ego may be permissive or prohibitive, manifesting in the form of conscience or as unconscious sense of guilt.<sup>11</sup>

French contemporary poets employed the idea of repression into the characters of their poems and creative prose. Expressivist poet Marcel Proust, for instance, reveals traces of repression within the social interactions between characters and the overarching aesthetic themes of his

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<sup>7</sup> Phillips, “Old Wine in New Bottles,” 131.

<sup>8</sup> Phillips, “Old Wine in New Bottles,” 131.

<sup>9</sup> Goldstein, “Neutralizing Freud,” 42.

<sup>10</sup> Kronengold, “Freud’s Uncriticality,” 244.

<sup>11</sup> Di Filippo, “Psychological Belle Époque,” 3-4.

works. Author and French poetry scholar Johnnie Gratton, in his exposition titled *Expressivism: The Vicissitudes of a Theory in the Writing of Proust and Barthes*, comments on how “dissimulation remains a central theme in Proust’s portrayals of the theatricality of social life. The identity we present to the world is a disguise, as epitomized in ‘la person rencontrée dehors’, who is not a person but a persona ... Social identity is designed to mask rather than express *moi profond*.”<sup>12</sup> By incorporating such theories into his writing style, Proust contributed to the progression of how to artistically capture the human condition, as he developed an affinity for characterizing his work with both “a poetic and and analytical nature.”<sup>13</sup> One of his coevals Anna de Noailles also implemented this newfound approach in her own poetic output. In her poem “Violons dans le soir” (Violins in the Evening) from *Les Éblouissements*, de Noailles portrays a character (the speaker) narrating the sound of violins and the effects it has on an individual.

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<sup>12</sup> Gratton, *Expressivism*, 45.

<sup>13</sup> Gratton, *Expressivism*, 42.

Quand le soir est venu, que tout est calme  
enfin  
Dans la chaude nature,  
Voici que naît sous l'arbre et sous le ciel divin  
La plus vive torture.

When evening has come and all is finally calm  
In warm Nature,  
There stirs beneath the trees and beneath the  
divine sky  
The keenest torment.

Sur les graviers d'argent, dans les bois apaisés,  
Des violons s'exaltent.  
Ce sont des jets de cris, de sanglots, de  
baisers,  
Sans contrainte et sans halte.

On the silver gravel, in the tranquil woods,  
There is a flourish of violins:  
It is a stream of cries, of sobs, of kisses,  
Without restraint and without cease.

Il semble que l'archet se cabre, qu'il se tord  
Sur les luisantes cordes,  
Tant ce sont des appels de plaisir et de mort  
Et de miséricorde.

It seems as if the violin bow is twisting  
Over the gleaming strings,  
For these are true calls of pleasure and of  
death  
-- And of mercy.

Et le brûlant archet enroulé de langueur  
Gémit, souffre, caresse,  
Poignard voluptueux qui pénètre le coeur  
D'une épuisante ivresse.

And the burning bow reels in lassitude,  
Groaning, suffering and caressing -  
A voluptuous dagger that pierces the heart  
With exhausting euphoria.

Archets, soyez maudits pour vos brûlants  
accords,  
Pour votre âme explosive,  
Fers rouges qui dans l'ombre arrachez à nos  
corps  
Des lambeaux de chair vive!

Bows, be cursed for your burning chords,  
For your explosive soul:  
Red-hot brands that in the shadows tear from  
our bodies  
Scraps of living flesh!

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Such a narration may not appear analytical on de Noailles' part at first, but one may take quick notice of the emotional contrast between the first and final stanzas. The speaker reveals to the reader a rather disquietingly intense disposition in his/her evolving reactions towards the violins' music.

Taking advantage of the "analytical nature" of "Violons dans le soir," in 1907 composer Camille Saint-Saens set this poem to music in the form of a *mélodie*. The musical atmosphere of

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<sup>14</sup> Ezust, "Violons Translation".

this piece is evidently text-driven, as Saint-Saens chose to feature a violin in a duet with the poem's speaker to express a literal account of a violin in the evening. In fact, Saint-Saens' decision to incorporate a violin into a piece in which the text displays one's reactions to the sound of a violin in the evening further promotes for the audience a real-time (or stream-of-consciousness) aesthetic in the work's performance. Beginning with a lulling, melancholy melody, Saint-Saens alternates the voice and violin. The music's urgency propels and subsides intermittently across both melodic instruments until Saint-Saens completes the atmospheric shift (with brilliant high notes from the violin) to a segment of newfound intensity. By this point in the work (mm. 38), the voice and violin sound together, despite their considerably different melodies, for the next 14 measures across which a more serene and sentimental tone usurps the previous intensity. Quite suddenly, the violin and piano then usher in a leisurely relaxed (yet dance-like) tune at measure 67 and explore it only briefly before resigning to a much more subdued vocal entrance. With the exception of (and presumably due to) the dramatic and rather abrupt appearance of musical agitation in measures 78-82 when the voice cries "pour votre âme explosive," the mood for the remainder of the piece conveys a morbid, though moderately romantic, sense of exhaustion in which the voice and violin briefly join in unison. "Violons dans le soir" evidently covers a fairly diverse emotional palette. However, a listener may recognize a degree of misalignment between the formal progression and the different stanzas in Noailles' text, as depicted by the modified figure below.

When evening has come and all is finally calm  
 In warm Nature,  
 1 There stirs beneath the trees and beneath the divine sky  
 The keenest torment.

On the silver gravel, in the tranquil woods,  
 There is a fourth of violins:  
 It is a stream of cries, of sobs, of kisses,  
 Without restraint and without cease.

2 It seems as if the violin bow is twisting  
 Over the gleaming strings,  
 For these are true calls of pleasure and of death  
 – And of mercy.

3 And the burning bow has a fit instructive,  
 Guarding, suffering and caressing –  
 A voluptuous dagger that pierces the heart  
 With exhausting euphoria.

4 Howls, be cursed for your burning chords,  
 5 For your explosive sent:  
 Red-hot brands that in the shadows tear from our bodies  
 6 scraps of living flesh!

In Freudian terms, the text's speaker and the song's solo voice represent the conscious mind or ego, observable in behavior and able to articulate precise thoughts through language, while the music as a whole represents the latent unconscious or id, tentative in its disclosure but its presence known and relatively accessible. This second connection may very well signify that Saint-Saens is merely aligning himself with traditional approaches towards *mélodie* composition: using the music to provide an atmosphere germane to the song's text. However, the relationship between the music and the text imply the repressed unconscious, unbeknownst to the voice or accompaniment but discoverable through analysis, as Freud would have maintained. The text and music reveal a discrepancy in their progression that gives reason as to why the narrative material takes such a macabre turn. In other words, the fact that the stanzas (which in poetry are divided with intention) and the various musical "moods" do not correspond temporally signal to the analyst that a certain shard of information is not present, a repression of some sort. Moreover, the

textual and formal progression seem to align more convincingly towards the song's conclusion, the point by which the most gruesome and socially unusual thoughts emerge. As the repressed unconscious, according to Freud, is unable to surface, the reason why the speaker has such an emphatic reaction to the violins never surfaces as well; the increasing parallelism between the text and music only agrees with Freud's notion that the repressed unconscious exists.

Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* also exhibited the claim that an individual's perception of life is composed of *eine Häufung von Beispielen* or "an accumulation of examples." Freud proposes that these "examples" combine to provide people with a sense of collective experience from which they interpret knowledge, opinions, and ultimately reactions to their own lives.<sup>15</sup> Composer Erik Satie exemplifies this idea in his brief song cycle *Trois poèmes d'amour* (1914), a composition for which Satie himself authored the texts. The cycle (to no surprise) consists of three quite transient songs elapsing approximately two minutes in total. Even those who share performances and recordings of the *Trois poèmes* on the online broadcasting platform YouTube describe the cycle as "three lyrical miniatures ... or instantaneous sonic pictures, which contrast with the works of the same period." Although musicians often extract selections from various song cycles to populate their recital programs, performance practice (in concert with the size of each song) mandates that the *Trois poèmes* are always performed as a unit. A given performance of the work therefore provides an audience a brief collection of musical fragments in immediate succession so that each listener may assemble and consequently interpret the "experience" in its entirety.

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<sup>15</sup> Kronengold, "Freud's Uncriticality," 241.

Shortly after publishing *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud released *A Case of Hysteria* and *Three Contributions to the Sexual Theory* in 1905. Though a scientific milestone in his work, these treatises materialized from research Freud had been conducting from at least a decade earlier (when he had co-published *Studies in Hysteria* with Josef Breuer in 1895).<sup>16</sup> In studying sexuality with respect to psychology, Freud popularized a topic long overlooked: female sexuality. Phillips concurs that “Freud’s investigations of human sexuality showed that women are just as sexual as men.”<sup>17</sup> France had a tradition of being quite candid relative to other countries. However, the dramatic properties associated with hysteria and female sexuality in particular were indeed appealing to the contemporary French art scene, so with the clout these psychological developments amassed came newfound mentalities towards portraying women as sexual subjects rather than sexual objects.

Satie’s work in the musical realm reflected a very similar stance. His cabaret piece “La Diva de L’Empire” (1904), set from a text by Dominique Bonnaud and Numa Blès, describes the typical affairs of a woman (the *Diva*) in Leicester Square, London. This *Diva*, however, is arguably the apex of female sexuality at the time: a prostitute. Akin to Freud’s claim, the two writers do not characterize the *Diva* with reproach, nor do they render her as the (sexual) object in the story. Instead, the *Diva* is depicted as clever and crafty in attracting customers.

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<sup>16</sup> Library of Congress, “Chronology of Freud”.

<sup>17</sup> Phillips, “Old Wine in New Bottles,” 139.

Little girl aux yeux veloutés,  
C'est la Diva de l'Empire.  
C'est la rein' dont s'éprennent  
Les gentlemen  
Et tous les dandys  
De Piccadilly.

Little girl with eyes velvety  
This is the diva of "The Empire"  
This is the queen who has taken  
The gentlemen  
And all the dandys  
Of the Piccadilly.

Dans un seul "yes" elle mettant de douceur  
Que tous les snobs en gilet à coeur

With a single yes she puts on sweetness  
That all the snobs in vests take to heart

...

...

Sur la scène lançant des gerbes de fleurs,  
Sans remarquer le rire narquois  
De son joli minois.

On the stage tossing the wreaths of flowers,  
Without noticing the mocking laugh  
On her lips.

Elle danse presque automatiquement  
Et soulève, oh très pudiquement,  
Ses jolis dessous de fanfreluches,  
De ses jambes montrant le frétillement.  
C'est à la fois très très innocent  
Et très très excitant.

She dances almost automatically  
And lifts, aoh! Very modestly  
Her underskirt of furbelows;  
Of her legs showing their quivering.  
It is all so very innocent  
And very very exciting.

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In the underlined portions of the translated excerpts above, a reader can easily gauge that the *Diva* is evidently aware of her appeal as well as how to modify her appearance and mannerisms to best fit the tastes of prospective customers. Being accustomed to her sexuality such that she can (literally) employ it to her pecuniary advantage only further emphasizes the fact that her sexuality actually exists. Like Bonnaud and Blès, Satie does not pass judgement on the *Diva* in his music. On the contrary, the unapologetically upbeat atmosphere created by the music in addition to Satie's choice to have the song sung by a woman (specifically Paulette Darty for the work's premiere) only accents how the story ridicules the (English) men who continue to fall gullibly for the *Diva*'s cunning tactics.<sup>19</sup> Although the piece anticipates Freud's publication by approximately one year, it nevertheless captured the zeitgeist of Freud's work, and (again)

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<sup>18</sup> Ritter Bernardini, "Classical Cabaret," 168.

<sup>19</sup> Ritter Bernardini, "Classical Cabaret," 168.

Freud's studies on female sexuality had predated the publication of his *Three Contributions* tenfold.

Satie, being so famously involved with Le Chat Noir and the socially avante-garde cabaret idiom, may have had more opportunities to depict contemporary views on sexuality and its psychologically subjective undertones, including those of Freud, relative to other *Belle Époque* composers. In 1905, he composed yet another song in collaboration with actor and poet Vincent Hyspa. As poet, translator, and literary critic Justin Vicari comments that “in so much modern art ... subjectivity is represented as a series of damaged goods” in reference to artistic manifestations of Freud's psychological theories, Satie and Hyspa's “Chez le docteur” portrays a “series of damaged goods” quite precisely.<sup>20</sup> The song's text narrates an old man's visit to his doctor on the initial grounds that his stomach is not agreeing with him. The doctor suggests “open[ing] up [his] abdomen” to which the old man politely refuses by saying he suddenly feels fine, but the doctor insists that he stays. Throughout the remainder of the visit, the doctor dissects the man and insults him repeatedly in the process via sarcastic commentary on the respective conditions of his various organs, as shown in the excerpts below:

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<sup>20</sup> Vicari, *Mad Muses*, 6.

Jusqu'ici vous n'avez pas de chance  
De maladie de foie, mais quant à la phtisie,  
C'est couru, galopé d'avance.

...

Vos poumons semblent respirer  
Autre chose que la sainteté!

...

Ah! voici le cœur, dame, il n'est pas très  
grand,  
Je pourrais le mettre dans ma poche.

...

Vous devez être fort, mon garçon,  
Mais là très fort... sur la boisson!

...

Entre nous, je n'ai jamais vu  
Un intérieur plus mal tenu.

...

Ah! les sales boyaux! Mais quelle belle  
occasion  
Pour vous, et vraiment peu loisible,  
De dire bonjour à votre vieux côlon,

...

Mais attendez donc! grands dieux! qu'est-ce  
que j'y vois?  
Une, deux, trois, quatre, cinq, six, sept fèves!  
Petit cachottier, vous pouviez être roi!  
Mais plus modestes sont vos rêves.

Up till now you've had no chance  
Of liver disease, but as far as consumption is  
concerned,

It's a sure thing; it's already galloped.

...

Your lungs seem to be breathing  
Something other than saintliness!

...

Oh! here's the heart! Goodness, it isn't very  
big;  
I could put it in my pocket.

...

You must be strong, my boy,  
Really, very strong ... hitting the bottle!

...

Between you and me, I've never seen  
A more poorly-maintained interior.

...

Oh! what filthy entrails! But what a fine  
opportunity  
For you, and so uncommon,  
To say hello to your old colon

...

Now, wait a minute! Good Lord! What am I  
seeing here?  
One, two, three, four, five, six, seven beans!  
So secretive -- you could have been king on  
Twelfth Night!  
But your dreams are more modest than that.

21

Upon the song's conclusion the doctor requests the old man return the next day to have his skull examined, as "there might be something in there." Satie's playful and simple corresponding music, while indicating traces of sadism in conjunction with the doctor's lighthearted demeanor, establishes a unique relationship with the text such that any individual audience member is subject to his/her own interpretation. A listener may interpret the song's mood empathizing with the doctor: clever, cheeky, and overall humorous. A listener may equally perceive the mood

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<sup>21</sup> Nagle, "Chez le docteur Translation".

through empathizing with the old man's experience: humiliating, insensitive to realistic issues (alcoholism, for instance), and quite sinister. Whether the music parallels or clashes with the text is merely a matter of discourse.

Presenting the ways by which Sigmund Freud's psychological findings have manifested in only two composers may welcome a degree of uncertainty from some regarding how much weight Freud's theories actually carried. However, the magnitude of Freudian concepts recognizable in the music, including the dimension of the affairs between the conscious and unconscious, the impact of assembled fragments, the sexuality in women, and the power of pain in generating subjectivity, exhibits the strength of their impact on French society, despite meeting indifference in the scientific field. Furthermore, the chronological disparity between Saint-Saens and Satie (approximately 30 years going by birth) indicates breadth as well as strength. Further research in this distinct scope may also cause additional compositions to emerge with similar qualities but created by different composers, as the discussion is now certainly open. Music scholars, performers, and composers alike can continue to better understand the agents that influence their own craft and consequently apply such mediums to their analytical and creative toolkits, as they gain more insight on the density in manners through which music can develop.

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