NEIL TESSER’S LINERS ON TESSA SOUTER’S “SHADOWS AND SILENCE: THE ERIK SATIE PROJECT”

Like the Erik Satie compositions she inhabits here, Tessa Souter embodies artistic uniquity. Satie’s music hooks our ears by resembling nothing else; Souter’s words engage our consciousness with softly shrouded power. He confounds listeners by resisting analysis, each melody defining itself in real time. Her narratives reveal their logic obliquely, in sequences of spellbinding imagery; she grounds them with an earthy yearn and uncluttered phrasing. *Shadows and Silence* is something of a miracle—a century-spanning collaboration that arrives with the immediacy of lightning.

In the late 19th century, Satie composed the experimental piano pieces that still echo his name. Elegant and ethereal, they adhere to no previous form, such as preludes or sonatas, or harmonic system; being *sui generis,* they begged a new word to describe them. Satie settled on the apparent neologism *gnossienne.* (This word did already exist—it’s in the *Larousse Dictionary* of 1865—but more likely, Satie fashioned it from his interest in Gnosticism, an offshoot of early Christianity.)

Satie titled a few of these works *gymnopedies*—a reference to war-dance festivals of ancient Greece—and compiled several collections of *gnossiennes.* Poignant and bittersweet, they disturb and comfort at the same time; they haunt me for days after a single hearing. They seem to have arrived from a different, more introspective universe.

That this album comes to fruition in 2025, the centennial of Satie’s death, is itself something of a gnostic happenstance. You see, Souter didn’t learn of this anniversary until she had already gotten deep into creating the lyrics and arrangements for *Shadows and Silence—*and that was 20 years after her interest in Satie had first flickered.

The spark was supplied when Souter heard a middle-eastern-flavored version of “Gnossienne No. 1” on which the French vocalist Anne DuCros supplies an expansive and uninhibited wordless improvisation . “It connected to where I was emotionally at the time,” Souter recalls, and she started writing lyrics to DuCros’s scat solo. “But I couldn’t quite make the words fit.” She kept at it, continually revising, but eventually put it aside.

Still, the brooding beauty of this melody pierced her consciousness and began to smolder. Her intrigue with Satie grew. And then, cloistered during the COVID pandemic, she wrote the words to a different piece, “Gymnopedie No. 1.” (Now retitled “Rayga’s Song,” it remains probably the best-known of Satie’s works, due to its startling appearance on the eponymous 1969 album by Blood, Sweat & Tears—the first of many jazz and rock adaptations.) “And then I thought about making a whole album of Satie’s music,” she says. “The floodgates opened.”

You’ll hear the proof throughout this recording, including the song that bewitched Souter in the first place—“Gnossienne No. 1,” transmuted by the darkly luminous lyric, and by Luis Perdomo’s percussion-driven arrangement, into the indelible “A Song for You.”

Satie reigns here, but Souter remains keenly aware that his music has found correlatives among contemporary composers. The two modern *chansons,* “If You Go Away” and “Avec le Temps,” each achieve some of the circular whirl of Satie’s pieces; her clarion tone, and her breathtaking reserve, heighten the emotive impact of each. Two compositions from Miles Davis’s mid-60s orbit belong here as well. Souter’s lyrics for “Mood” emphasize the Satie-like dream state of Ron Carter’s melody; the free-flowing lilt of Wayne Shorter’s “E.S.P.” achieves a similar effect at a faster tempo. “I wanted to acknowledge the influence Satie had, even subliminally, on jazz,” she notes.

Souter transforms “Gnossienne No. 3” into “Holding on to Beauty,” a mesmerizing weld of kaleidoscopic imagery and one of Satie’s most disorienting works. “Gymnopedie No. 3,” now retitled “D’ou Venons Nous” (“Where Do We Come From”), boasts a lyric as mysterious and brilliantly concise as the original composition, complemented by the butterfly kinesis of Steve Wilson’s soprano saxophone: extraordinary. Souter’s arrangement of “I Kiss Your Heart” asks the pearl-toned trumpeter Nadja Noordhuis to repeat the short theme of Satie’s “Vexations,” underscoring the reading of a letter he wrote during a breakup with his one and only love. (Noordhuis has it easy: Satie’s manuscript directs the performer to play this theme 840 times without a break.) “Peace,” a brief reincarnation of “Gnossienne No. 2,” will simply break your heart.

Satie regarded these pieces in the same way that his contemporary Scott Joplin intended his ragtime compositions to be played: at a moderate to slow tempo, with unhurried phrasing, allowing the melodies, and perhaps the listener, to achieve a weightlessness—to float. Ragtime purists decry the jauntier tempos often used on these songs, and I imagine that some Satie scolds may have a similar reaction to the new treatments (let alone the superb full rhythm section!) on *Shadows and Silence.*

To them I say: Get over it. Souter has reconceived these gossamer cameos to suit our own time and her own wisdom. And she has somehow modernized the musical settings without sacrificing the vulnerability of the originals. Doing so, she shows us the paradox of Satie’s art: like a spider’s web, their apparent fragility masks their enduring strength. And as gifted interpreter of these songs, she reminds us of the paramount lyricist behind the evocative timbre.

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