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Adding Lyrics, Tessa Souter Does a Bit To Jazz Up the Work of a Distinctive French Composer, Erik Satie

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Tessa Souter with Billy Drummond. Tracey Yarad



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Tessa Souter

'Shadows and Silence: The Erik Satie Project'

Noanara

One of the more evocative, lyrical lines from a new album, "Shadows and Silence: The Erik Satie Project," by a U.K.-born singer and songwriter, Tessa Souter, runs:

“Beauty surrounds us
Within and without us
Resounding to music
That is played in the spheres
And sounded in the soul.”

Essentially, she takes the works of a distinctive French composer, Erik Satie, and reimagines them for a jazz quartet with vocalist. The most radical thing she does is to add lyrics. Otherwise, a goodly number of the most essential compositions of Satie — his various *Gnossiennes* and all three of his *Gymnopédies* — are already jazz-worthy.

In fact the “Gymnopedie No. 1” as played “straight” sounds similar enough to some of the more famously classical-styled works of say, Bill Evans, in particular “Piece Peace,” which was more directly inspired by a song by Leonard Bernstein, another composer who stood at the nexus of various musical genres.

Working with pianist Luis Perdomo, Ms. Souter has come to the realization that you don’t need to do much to jazz up these tunes. This isn’t “swinging the classics” big band style, though I still confess to a certain fondness for Bach’s “Little Fugue” as regifted for jitterbugs by Jan Savitt and his Top-Hatters. Nor is it Art Tatum’s technique-heavy but fairly astonishing adaptations of Massenet’s “Elegie” or Dvorak’s “Humoresque.”

Rather, there’s a certain understated coolness in Satie’s approach. Mr. Perdomo, along with bassist Yasushi Nakamura, frequently playing *arco*, and drummer Billy Drummond, is playing many of these works more or less as written, or at least in the same languorous tempo. You don’t have to force them to be something they’re not.

Some tunes become jazzier than others: “A Song For You” is more rhythmic and staccato than its source, “Gnossienne No.1”; I wouldn’t have necessarily recognized it. But “Gymnopedie No. 1,” which Ms. Souter has adapted into what she has titled “Rayga’s Song,” captures the exact vibe of Satie’s original. Here, the bass and drummer enhance rather than compromise the classical mood. So too does a guest star, the exceptional saxophonist Steve Wilson, playing with the exceptionally vocalized tone of the soprano instrument.

As Ms. Souter showed when she launched the album recently at Joe’s Pub — on the day of the 100th anniversary of Satie’s death at the age of 59 — the lyrics are a crucial piece of this puzzle. As was the case with the late Abbey Lincoln, Ms. Souter’s wordsmithery concerns big, even existential topics, such as we readily see in the lines quoted above, the nature of beauty and the essence of existence. Like the music itself, the images in the words are more abstract than concrete; in “Peace” (based on “Gnossienne No. 2”) she sings, “Floating in the turquoise up above me / Lonely drifter can you see me?” In case you haven’t noticed, jazz lyrics have come a long way from “Goin’ to Chicago / Sorry, but I can’t take you.”

At Joe’s, Ms. Souter made the additional point that though the melodies and the general moods are mostly Satie’s, the texts are not based on the composer’s life but rather on the singer’s own emotions and experiences. Perhaps the one piece directly intended to represent the composer’s inner life is “Vexations (I Kiss Your Heart),” which is performed by a guest artist, Pascal Borderies, who reads aloud the only surviving letter from Satie to the great love of his life, accompanied by another guest, trumpeter Nadjé Noordhuis.

The overall format is somewhat reminiscent of Herbie Hancock's 1998 "Gershwin's World," in that it's not strictly a Satie "songbook." Two famous works here are by French singer-songwriters of the 1960s in a vaguely Satie-ian vein, Jaques Brel's "Ne Me Quitte Pas," which she sings in the original language, as well as Rod McKuen's adaptation, "If You Go Away"

Other selections derive from the modal and minimalist music in the orbit of Miles Davis's 1960s quintet, specifically two numbers from the album "E.S.P.," namely the title song by Wayne Shorter and "Mood" by Davis and Ron Carter. "E.S.P.," which utilizes the lyrics of Cassandra Wilson, titled "Never Broken" from her now-classic "Travelin' Miles" album of 1999, is one of the pieces here that's more firmly in an uptempo-ish, swinging groove.

Perhaps it was the title of that classic LP that inspired Ms. Souter's own, though Davis and company meant that acronym to stand for "Extra Sensory Perception," and she uses those same initials to indicate "Erik Satie Project."

The *homage* to Satie reveals one ironic point: the man himself described his compositions as "furniture music," and others have crowned him "the father of ambient music." They might have even meant that as a compliment, though it's hard for me to see how. As far Ms. Souter's album is concerned, this music is moving, engaging, and highly emotional — "ambience" be darned, this is something I actually want to listen to.
