



## Asperger's and musical creativity: The case of Erik Satie

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### ABSTRACT

The link between psychopathology and creativity was investigated in the study of one individual: the French composer Erik Satie. The current literature puts much emphasis on the connection between creativity and the psychoses – such as schizophrenia and the affective disorders – but there is relatively little concerning other psychological disorders. Nevertheless, there has been a recent upswing in the study of autism and associated disorders (such as Asperger's syndrome), and their association with creativity. The literature reviewed here included a number of biographies, books about the autism spectrum disorders, and articles detailing the psychopathology-creativity link. The aim was not to diagnose Satie with a psychological disorder, but to illustrate that he, who was highly creative, innovative and influential in the development of 20th century music, displayed many of the personality traits typical of Asperger's syndrome. These include perfectionism, perseverance, hatred of conventions, and heightened sensitivity; these combined enabled Satie to devise his own original musical idiom. This case study alone does not – and was not intended to – answer the overall question regarding the existence of a psychopathology-creativity link; but it does support the idea in the context of current literature.

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### 1. Introduction

The French composer Erik Satie illustrates well a link between exceptional talent and personality traits associated with psychopathology. In reading biographies and memoirs capturing Satie's life and behaviour, it was apparent that Satie expressed the characteristics and traits typical of Asperger's syndrome (AS). Work began on the present study before the publication of the same conclusion in James' (2006) book, *Asperger's Syndrome and High Achievement*, providing further support for the idea that Satie may indeed have suffered Asperger's syndrome.

Satie is remembered for his music, which is deliberately modest and insignificant, and for his eccentric personality. Although Satie's music has not achieved a firm place in the repertory (Machlis, 1961), he expressed harmonic innovation in his works, which represented a stark contrast to musical techniques of his immediate past. From the beginning, Satie dismissed the pretensions underlying the Austro-German style and Wagnerian music that was then the mainstream. Furthermore, Satie's music facilitated the emergence of twentieth century avant-gardism, influencing the music of Debussy (arguably), Ravel, Poulenc and Cage (Gowers, 1980). Satie also became involved with various artistic movements including Cubism, Dadaism, and Surrealism. He was an important pioneering figure in film music, and the inventor of what is known today as Muzak. He has often been described as an original musician who was ahead of his time and of great genius (Gowers, 1980).

### 2. Psychopathology and creativity

*'Nullum magnum ingenium sine mixtura dementiae.'*

(No great imaginative power without a dash of madness.)

– Seneca

Since ancient times, there has been a general interest in the link between creativity and psychopathology. Today, this link is well-established and reflected in the current literature. In their book, *Sounds from the Bell Jar*, Claridge, Pryor, and Watkins (1990) explore the lives and works of 10 authors, including Sylvia Plath, who showed both exceptional originality of thought and serious mental illness in the form of the psychoses: schizophrenia and the affective psychoses (including bipolar disorder). Jamison's (1993) extensive biographical studies focus on the link between creativity and the affective psychoses. The types of creativity that have been heavily documented are the Arts, mostly writing and painting, but also music. Jamison (1993) links composers Tchaikovsky, Elgar, Handel and Schumann with probable affective disorder; and more recently, Wills (2003) has linked jazz musicians with mood and psychotic disorders.

Although the emphasis has been on the more serious (psychotic) mental illnesses, links between creativity and other disorders have also been investigated. For example, Post (1994) reported that 40.4% of his sample population of composers displayed DSM anxious type personality traits. Most recently, creativity has been linked to autism and the arguably milder form of this, Asperger's syndrome, where the link with writing and art has been reported for individuals such as Lewis Carroll (Fitzgerald, 2004) and Vincent van Gogh (James, 2006). James (2006) also explores

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the link with music in the pianist Glenn Gould and composer Béla Bartók, who may have had Asperger's syndrome.

### 2.1. Asperger's syndrome and creativity

Asperger's syndrome (AS) is generally viewed as a particular form of autism, which is a developmental disorder where behavioural manifestations vary with age. The core features of autism are impairments in socialisation, communication, and imagination. Individuals with AS can be seen as distinct from those with autism in that they are better at communicating, and so are less handicapped in gaining successful adaptation (Frith, 1991). Disorders on the autism spectrum, including AS, have genetic roots; at least one-third of parents with AS will give birth to children with several related symptoms (James, 2006).

Hans Asperger, a Viennese paediatrician, believed that autistic traits could be crucial for success in arts and sciences for highly intelligent people. In 1944, he was amongst the first to recognise AS and its symptoms: a particular style of communication, impairment in social adaptation including lack of empathy, poverty of expression and gesture, eccentricity, lack of humour, sensitivity, and idiosyncratic interests. Other typical AS traits include perseverance, drive for perfection, good concrete intelligence, ability to disregard social conventions, and unconcern about others' opinions (James, 2006). The expression of perseverance is extreme: individuals have an incredible ability to focus on a single topic for long periods, not giving up in the face of obstacles. They also appear child-like in nature and exhibit immature personalities (Fitzgerald, 2004).

Adults with AS may find entry into, and maintenance of, two-way personal relationships difficult. Moreover, such individuals tend to be absorbed with a particular interest, which is enthusiastically pursued. Their 'special interests' are self-selected leisure activities that are narrow in nature, and are pursued without regard to social implications. They often involve repetition, such as routines and collecting, or the more elaborate production of stereotyped drawings (Tantam, 1991). Special interests can also be manifested in philosophy or religion, and are obsessive in nature (Frith, 1991).

The possession of this particular combination of traits may be an asset for creativity. It makes sense that not all individuals with AS will display exceptional creativity since each individual will express the 'typical' traits to a different extent. Specifically, traits of perseverance, drive for perfection, disregard of social conventions and others' opinions have been highlighted as prerequisite for specific variants of new thinking and creativity (Gillberg, 2002). This is consistent with Asperger's description of his autistic patients as 'imaginative' or 'creative' where they were independent of cultural rules and conventions (Happé, 1991). It should not be forgotten, however, that other variables, such as intelligence, opportunity, and additional personality and environmental factors may also affect the manifestation of exceptional creativity in these individuals.

Those familiar with the autism literature will recognise an inconsistency here since it has been claimed that children with autism and AS are less creative and imaginative (e.g. Craig & Baron-Cohen, 1999). However, this may be a result of testing different aspects of creativity. Creativity is often measured via tasks, such as the Torrance test battery, which measure divergent forms of thinking (Guilford, 1967). However Guilford recognised that creativity is a complex process and it is generally recognised that convergent thinking (the counterpart of divergent thinking) – requiring a highly focused cognitive style – is an important feature of certain forms of creative activity. It is most probably this that accounts for the autistic's 'imaginativeness'.

The idea of divergent and convergent production has parallels with Murray's idea of polytropism and monotropism (Murray, Lesser, & Lawson, 2005). Monotropism is proposed to be central to autism and related disorders; it refers to the allocation of attention to a few highly aroused interests (defined as interests charged with feeling), and involves good performance of a task, accompanied by a loss of awareness for information relevant to all other tasks. This highly focused allocation of attention is similar to the highly focused cognitive style which defines convergent production. Polytropism refers to the allocation of attention to many less highly aroused interests (Murray et al., 2005); this more broad and open cognitive style is aligned with divergent production.

Identifying different aspects of creativity, whether it is divergent/convergent production or polytropism/monotropism, suggests it is possible that tests of creativity have focused on assessing a more flexible and broad thinking style – i.e. the more obvious indicators of creativity – rather than the highly focused cognitive style required for certain other forms of creativity. The recognition of different aspects of creativity is therefore a possible explanation for the inconsistency in the literature regarding the imaginativeness of individuals with autism and related disorders.

### 3. Erik Alfred Leslie Satie (1866–1925): biography

Erik Alfred Leslie Satie was born in Honfleur 17th May 1866. He was the eldest son of Alfred Satie, a French shipbroker and Jane Leslie Anton, who was born in London to Scottish parents. He had three siblings: Louise Olga Jeanne, Conrad, and Diane. Satie's mother and youngest sister Diane died just weeks apart when he was six years old in 1872 (Volta, 1989). As a result, Alfred went on an extended European tour, and Erik and Conrad were sent to live with their paternal grandparents. In spring 1874 Erik's grandfather placed him in the charge of a local organist, Vinot, who most probably taught him music and plainchant (Whiting, 1999). In the same year, Satie's grandmother died and his father married Eugénie Bartnetche, a pianist and Romantic composer, who encouraged Satie to join the Paris Conservatoire in 1879.

Satie wrote his three *Sarabandes* in 1887, his *Gymnopédies* in 1888, and his *Gnossienes* in 1890 (Gowers, 1980). When Satie was about 21 years old, relations with his family grew strained resulting in his moving out of the family home to Montmartre, where he frequented the cafés and bars with a good friend, Contamine de Latour. Satie wrote the 'hieratic and aloof' *Le fils des étoiles* (1891) and he also met Debussy around this time (Gowers, 1980).

In the early 1890s, Satie had the only love affair he was known to have experienced in his entire life: with Suzanne Valadon. He also founded his own church: the 'Eglise Métropolitaine d'Art de Jésus Conducteur'. And, in 1895, he bought his seven famous identical velvet suits, leading him to be dubbed, the 'Velvet Gentleman' (Volta, 1989).

In 1898, Satie moved to his last home in Arcueil-Cachan, a southern suburb of Paris, where he spent the last 27 years of his life (Volta, 1989). In the period 1890–1903 Satie wrote his *Trois Morceaux en forme de poire*, and in 1905, Satie returned to studying at the Schola Cantorum (Gowers, 1980).

Satie rapidly rose to fame in 1911 as a result of Ravel's promotion of him as the 'precursor' in the performance of the *Sarabandes* at a concert of the Société Musicale Indépendante. Debussy also conducted his orchestrations of two of Satie's *Gymnopédies*, to great acclaim. Further public exposure followed, including Roland Manuel's orchestration of the *Préludes de la porte héroïque du ciel* and Ravel's orchestration of an excerpt from *Le fils des étoiles*. There was a subsequent demand for Satie's music; some of his old pieces were published and he wrote a series of 'humorous' works for piano, for which he gave eccentric titles and performance instructions.

Another important promoter of Satie was Jean Cocteau, who wrote and lectured about him; a highly significant literary piece was *Le Coq et l'Arlequin*, written in 1918 (Gowers, 1980).

Satie's varied musical output included cabaret music, piano works, and his Rose + Croix music. This extended to ballet music; 1917 saw the collaboration of Satie with Cocteau, Massin, Picasso and Diaghilev in the ballet *Parade*. The opening performance caused a scandal, leading to a lawsuit being drawn up against Satie. In early 1917, probably at the same time as working on *Parade*, Satie started work on the symphonic drama, *Socrate*. In the 1920s, he devised and experimented with *musique d'ameublement* (furnishing music), and his most significant works of this time were two ballet scores: *Mercur* (1923) and *Relâche* (1924). After the opening night of *Relâche*, Satie fell ill and his health declined rapidly. At age 59, Satie had been drinking solidly for nearly 40 years in Montmartre bars (Harding, 1975). He died on 1st July 1925.

#### 4. Satie: the Asperger connection

##### 4.1. Special interest

'The practice of an art bids us live in a state of the most complete renunciation... Music demands much of those who wish to serve it... A true musician must be obedient to his art, he must place it above all human wretchedness, he must draw his courage from within himself and himself alone.'

– Satie (cited in Harding, 1975)

This quote illustrates Satie as a man of many ideals, which can be seen as the special interests typical of individuals with AS. Satie's special interests were perfectionism and order; renunciation and reductionism; religion; standing alone (against convention musically and socially). Satie pursued these ideals to the extreme; they were manifest not only in his music, but also in his life.

##### 4.1.1. Perfectionism and order

The trait of perfectionism is seen in Satie's writing; after music, letter writing was his favourite form of communication (Volta, 1989). According to Jean Wiéner, Satie took 20 min to write a pneumatique six lines long, due to his determination to form letters that were perfect in every way, i.e. the joins, and the up- and down-strokes (Wiéner, 1945; cited in Orledge, 1995). It has also been claimed that his handwriting, which is on a par with calligraphy, reflected a mania for order (Guérin, 1993; cited in Orledge, 1995). Here order can perhaps be seen as a variant of the special interest in routines and repetition that are often expressed in individuals with AS.

##### 4.1.2. Renunciation

Satie's music reflects the ideal of renunciation, in that he strived to create austere simplicity, bareness, and sparseness. This was the opposite of what was then the mainstream: Wagnerian and Austro-German music. Satie expressed a particular aversion to unnecessary additions and ornamentations, which featured heavily in conventional music, especially that of his immediate past. The manifestation of Satie's ideal of renunciation in his music will be discussed again later.

Satie also lived the renunciation ideal; it shaped his whole lifestyle which was one of privation and austerity. He viewed money simply: it was to be spent and the sooner the better (Gillmor, 1988). An illustration of this is his purchase of his seven, famous, grey, corduroy suits in 1895 (Orledge, 1995) with a legacy of 7000F. It is exemplified by the dreadful bareness and unbelievable poverty in the house he occupied for 27 years – discovered by Milhau, Satie's brother, Conrad and others after his death. The house contained just a bed, a chair, a table, a half empty cupboard with

the velvet suits, and an unused piano (James, 2006). Interestingly, the philosopher Wittgenstein – considered by Fitzgerald (2004) to show characteristically AS traits – also pursued this reduction of life to a minimum: he too, like Satie, rapidly spent any money he had.

Satie spent his money on other things: alcohol and his collections of shirt collars, umbrellas, and handkerchiefs (Gillmor, 1988). On one occasion towards the end of his life, when a good friend, Madeleine Milhau, collected his laundry for him, Satie was said to have exploded with rage because there were only 98 handkerchiefs, as opposed to the 99 or 100 that he had sent to the launderette (Milhau, 1987/93; cited in Orledge, 1995). Such hoarding of useless objects is a typical AS characteristic, and can be categorised as a special interest, as previously defined.

Satie's paternal uncle, Adrien (known as 'Sea-Bird'), displayed mild eccentricities and also pursued two special interests: horses and boats. He would sit for hours and watch his boat *The Wave*, which he rarely took out, for fear of damaging it. Similarly, Adrien owned a magnificent carriage that nobody dared to enter in case they spoiled it (Harding, 1975). He withdrew from everyday life to pursue these interests; thus displaying typical AS traits of perfectionism, perseverance, disregard for social conventions (i.e. living everyday life), and indifference to others' opinions. Satie is known to have spent a fair amount of time with this uncle during his childhood, in the absence of both parents (Whiting, 1999). This documentation of typical AS traits in Satie's uncle is consistent with the idea that AS has strong genetic roots (James, 2006). But an environmental explanation is also plausible – Satie's Asperger-like traits may have been acquired via modeling rather than inherited from his uncle.

##### 4.1.3. Religion

As mentioned, AS individuals sometimes manifest a special interest in religion. It is argued that Satie 'submitted to the Gothic charm by the age of 10 years' (Harding, 1975), probably as a result of being in the charge of Vinot, a local organist. A mystical mood enveloped Satie in Montmartre, where he read extensively about Gregorian chant. His talk of religion and his air of great humility earned him the nickname, 'Monsieur le Pauvre' (Gillmor, 1988). According to Latour, Satie 'adored the Middle Ages and their fervour, the paintings of the Primitives, Gothic churches and their tombstones, and the lives of the saints and Christian legends.' (Latour, 1925; cited in Orledge, 1995).

This interest in mystical religion inspired Satie to join Joséphin Péladan's Rose + Croix sect, for which he composed music. The appeal of this sect to Satie would have been its aims to promote 'religious sensibility through art', and to avoid the 'vulgar egalitarianism' that was currently pervading society. This is supported by Orledge's observation that, 'Satie's fascination with the medieval past, for an ideal lost world of chivalric orders, fairy tales and Gothic castles, blended perfectly with his attraction towards the occult.' (Whiting, 1999). The Rose + Croix represented a stand against conventions; which is consistent with his ideal to achieve simplicity and bareness in his music, i.e. not submitting to the Wagnerian influence. The music Satie wrote during this period (1891–5) was predominantly for the sect; for example his *Le Fils des étoiles*. This work consisted of unresolved 7th and 9th chords that would earn him the title of 'precursor Satie' 20 years later (Whiting, 1999), referring to the role of Satie's music in influencing the subsequent musical development of the 20th century.

Although quite soon afterwards (in 1892) Satie dissociated himself from Péladan, mystical religion and its associated ideas would always influence his music: the features of diatonic medieval melody, and the simplicity and serenity of plainchant would always be inherent in Satie's work (Gillmor, 1988). Satie's religious interest was also manifest in his life through the founding of his own

church, the 'Eglise Métropolitaine d'Art de Jésus Conducteur' of which he appointed himself 'parcier' and *maitre de chapelle*. He was also the only member. The aims of the church were similar to those of the Rose + Croix sect: to purify the Faith and Arts and to combat society (Volta, 1989), thus illustrating Satie's pursuit to stand alone against convention in both his life and music.

#### 4.1.4. Standing alone against convention

In 1898, Montmartre was changing and Satie moved to Arcueil. Latour claimed that his mystical mood, which was highly contemplative, drove him to seek solitude. Thus, he shut himself away in Arcueil and never admitted anyone in the 27 years he remained a resident there (Orledge, 1995). None of Satie's acquaintances saw his Arcueil home except those who helped him to move in and those who entered after his death (Volta, 1989). Satie lived a lonely life, and this also reflects his ideal to 'draw courage from within himself and himself alone'. Satie deliberately withdrew into this isolation and loneliness in order to pursue ideals that he believed to be important (Myers, 1973). Such social withdrawal is characteristic of individuals with AS.

This loneliness was manifest in many ways; he was known to have had only one love affair in his lifetime, with Suzanne Valadon. He was also adamant to stand alone as a musician:

'THERE IS NO SCHOOL OF SATIE. Satieism could never exist. I would oppose it... there must be no slavery in art. I have always tried to throw followers off the scent by both the form and content of each new work. It's the only way, for an artist, to avoid becoming the head of a "school" – that is to say a pundit.'  
– Satie (1920; cited in Wilkins, 1980)

Satie's invention of a new musical idiom as a stand against the dominant Romanticism of the time was unique and original (Harding, 1975). The most remarkable feature of this idiom is that an individual of limited musical training created it: Satie's musical education was incomplete. Satie created a method equipped with just the things he knew. Quoting Latour, Satie 'was in the position of a man who knows only 13 letters of the alphabet and decides to create a new literature using only these, rather than admit his own insufficiency... he made it a point of honour to succeed with his system.' (Latour, 1925; cited in Orledge, 1995). At the same time, Satie saw conventional musical technique as an impediment to musical expression. This illustrates Satie's pride and determination, and his dislike of (musical) conventions, a perfectionist personality to achieve his ideals, and unwillingness to accept current states of the world.

Satie's stand against musical convention can also be observed in his use of number schemes to arrange durations for the composition of some of his pieces. This use of rhythm for composition is against the harmonic idiom adopted by conventional music at the time. The former technique was popular during the Middle Ages, which perhaps explains Satie's use of it, in light of his special interest in Gothic religion. Although the idea of Satie employing a rhythmic method of composition is disputed, it was clearly the basis for his score for *Entr'acte*, a short film interlude between the two acts of the ballet, *Relâche*. Time frames are used here, where eight measures are chosen as the unit that matches most closely the average length of the film; each of these units is filled with one stereotyped phrase repeated eight times (Nyman, 1999). This method is popular today, but Satie was the first to approach film music in this way; thus explaining the claim that he was a pioneering figure in film music (Harding, 1975). Furthermore, the method imposed an order or structure on his music, consistent with Satie's special interest in perfectionism and order.

As mentioned, order is perhaps a variant of an individual's special interest in routines and repetition. Repetition features often in

Satie's music, where it is used *not* as ostinato or for effect. This has had considerable influence on subsequent experimental music, which adopts multi-repetition and the idea of endlessness. Satie's *Vieux Séquins et Vieilles Cuirasses* ends with an eight-beat passage that has to be repeated 380 times. Dick Higgins has identified this as an 'anti-entertainment' effect; again, Satie's music is standing against the convention of music, where the ultimate aim is to entertain (Nyman, 1999). Another manifestation is Satie's *musique d'ameublement* (furnishing music): music that is not to be listened to, known today as Muzak, which will be further discussed. Importantly, Satie's interest in boredom would later feature in the work of John Cage (Nyman, 1999).

Asperger's syndrome tends to be expressed in professions where high mathematical ability is required, such as science. Consistent with this, Satie viewed himself as a scientist, as observed in his literary work, *Mémoires d'un Amnésique*. From *Ce que je suis (What I Am)*:

'Everyone will tell you that I am not a musician. That is correct. From the beginning of my career I classed myself as a phonometrographer. My work is completely phonometrical. Take my *Fils des étoiles*, or my *Morceaux en forme de poire*, my *En habit de cheval* or my *Sarabandes* – it is evident that musical ideas played no part whatsoever in their composition. Science is the dominating factor. Besides I enjoy measuring a sound much more than hearing it.'  
– Satie (1912; cited in Wilkins, 1980)

Writing music as a science, as opposed to harmonic technique, is again a manifestation of Satie's stand against musical convention.

It seems that Satie possessed a combination of personality traits that triggered a variant of creativity, consistent with Gillberg (2002). His dislike for musical conventions (of the immediate past) triggered him to search for an alternative; his determination and perseverance prompted him to adopt a new idiom despite his decidedly limited musical ability; and his perfectionism drove him to pursue his ideal music to the extreme. Satie always maintained that an artist should give up everything for the sake of his art; his life of renunciation was fruitful in that his ideal music was achieved, the most poignant example being his masterpiece, *Socrate*. The musical idiom he created was truly his own in that he can only be imitated superficially – an indication of achievement (Harding, 1975). As a composer he stood, and still stands, completely alone.

#### 4.2. Sensitivity and aggression

'He even used to use extremely rude expressions... there were times when he could show himself violent and hot-tempered for all his surface gentleness.'  
– Guérin (1993; cited in Orledge, 1995)

Some individuals with AS will display violence, aggression (Fitzgerald, 2004), and even malicious or spiteful behaviour (Frith, 1991). They are also ultra-sensitive, in particular to criticism (Fitzgerald, 2004). There has been much documentation of Satie's explosive temperament (Orledge, 1995), and his short temper and sensitivity (Harding, 1975). He would flare up into violent rages and argue with all of his best friends, always without the slightest justification (James, 2006); the exception was Darius Milhaud (Volta, 1989). On one occasion, Satie asked Madeleine Milhaud to pack his bag for him. She knew that he would rage inexplicably if things were not placed exactly where he wanted them to be; thus she asked a friend to stand between herself and Satie so that he could not see how she was packing his bag (Volta, 1989). This episode also illustrates another characteristic typical of AS: perfectionism and the desire for order and structure.

Satie's 'aggressiveness' was expressed primarily through language. Indeed, Satie was capable of expressing himself with strong and violent language if he judged anything to be unfair or insulting (Hugo, 1958; cited in Orledge, 1995). His most violent language was directed at his primary hate in life: critics. This is perhaps linked to sensitivity to criticism that is often expressed by individuals with AS. Throughout most of his life, Satie maintained a constant barrage of attack, or perhaps defence, against critics, using ironic wit and sarcasm as his chief weapons (Harding, 1975). Later in his life, Satie wrote an amusing text entitled *Eloge des Critiques* (In Praise of Critics) which was read publicly in 1918. It starts thus:

'Last year, I gave several lectures on "Intelligence and Musicality among Animals" . . . today I'm going to speak to you about "Intelligence and Musicality among Critics" . . . the subject is much the same, with some modifications of course.'

– Satie (1918; cited in Volta, 1989)

Two particular critics who received the full impact of Satie's hatred were Henri Gauthier-Villars (known as Willy), and Jean Poueigh. Willy was a conceited critic of important newspapers and magazines, whose success appeared to be reliant on a group of collaborators, who worked together to meet his deadlines for him. He was musically illiterate and yet he wrote extensively about music, especially in the promotion of Wagner, who was the embodiment of what was then the 'mainstream' music to which Satie was opposed. Such a character would have been of great irritation to Satie, particularly because Willy dismissed Satie as 'a trashy composer and inconsequential buffoon'. A volley of diatribes followed, and the conflict culminated on 10th April 1904 at an orchestral performance, where Satie confronted Willy about the unjust treatment he was receiving from him in the press. When Willy tried to dismiss Satie with an offhand comment, Satie 'set upon him with fists' and was dragged away to the police station (Gillmor, 1988).

Jean Poueigh was a Parisian music critic, who like many other critics of the time published harsh reviews about Satie's ballet, *Parade*, in 1917. What particularly angered Satie was that Poueigh congratulated him after the performance and then subsequently attacked him. In response to such behaviour, Satie sent Poueigh an array of postcards, expressing violent language. For example:

' . . . What I know is that you are an ass-hole – and, if I dare say so – an unmusical "ass-hole". Above all, never again offer me your dirty hand . . . '

(Postcard from Satie to Jean Poueigh 30 May 1917; cited in Volta, 1989)

In return, Poueigh started a lawsuit for slander. This was unwelcome attention for Satie; he was sentenced to one week in prison, a 100F fine and 1000F damages to Poueigh. It was a tense period, as this meant that Poueigh had the right to seize everything Satie owned, including his manuscripts. However, nearly a year later, in March 1918, the Minister of the Interior suspended the sentence on the grounds of 'good conduct and not receiving any prison sentence during the next five years.'

Despite Satie's apparent aggressiveness or sensitivity, those who knew him loved him:

'He was a most lovable person, but sometimes rather unpredictable, which had a certain charm.'

(Milhaud, 1987; cited in Orledge, 1995)

#### 4.3. Satie's humour

'Satie is one of those contemporaries of ours who have handled humour in a way that reaches simultaneous extremes of the curious, the caustic and the poetic . . . One has only to read the titles of his compositions, and especially the indications scat-

tered on them which confirm the kind of expression he is looking for . . . : "I want a solid mahogany hat."

– Ribemont-Dessaignes (1958; cited in Orledge, 1995)

Although AS is traditionally characterised by lack of humour in individuals (James, 2006), it is proposed here that Satie used humour to hide a deep-seated insecurity manifested in his expression of ultra-sensitivity, which is a feature of AS (Fitzgerald, 2004). In his life and music, Satie concealed his deepest feelings with a mask of humour and jokes (Harding, 1975).

##### 4.3.1. Humour and Satie's life

Satie's insecurity can be observed in his relationships with other people. Debussy was one of Satie's greatest friends and, according to Contamine de Latour, Debussy was conscious of Satie's underlying seriousness and sensitivity beneath his mask of humour. They were mutual friends: Debussy gave Satie invaluable musical guidance and Satie provided Debussy with innovations, which, combined with Debussy's musical prowess, culminated in works such as *Pelléas et Mélisande*. However, Debussy was also aware of his superiority over Satie in terms of musical technique and social standing and readily made this felt (Orledge, 1995). When Satie dined with Debussy, Debussy drank finer wines and served Satie the more mediocre ones (Harding, 1975). Satie subsequently 'became the jester to hide his humiliation' (Gowers, 1980).

Satie's relationships and views concerning women also illustrate his insecurity and sensitivity. Satie himself said, 'I am a man whom women do not understand.' He stated that he never married for fear of being cuckolded; he feared commitment, betrayal, and revealing himself as defenceless. In short, he was haunted by a terrible insecurity that led to explosive rages over mere trifles (Harding, 1975); this is consistent with documentation of Satie's aggressive language, which can perhaps be attributed to an underlying insecurity coupled with a sensitivity to criticism. His ironic wit was his defence and would not have been judged a criterion for popularity amongst women (Harding, 1975).

In Satie's life, humour served another purpose: mockery of the conventions he scorned, and an outlet for the resentment he harboured against these and academia. Satie's clothing may have been a manifestation of it; from 1906 to the end of his life in 1925, Satie sported every day a bowler hat, an umbrella, and a dark suit: the literal embodiment of the conventions he despised was Satie's ultimate joke (Harding, 1975).

Satie's position against conventional or mainstream music of the time has been discussed already. His stand against academia goes back to his years of study at the Paris Conservatoire. Satie appeared to enjoy music, but his stepmother Eugénie Bartnetche's encouragement resulted in his aversion to formal musical study. Satie hated his stepmother, so he relished every opportunity to rebel against her (Harding, 1975). His time at the Conservatoire was not happy or successful; records show him to be chronically lazy with poor attendance. He also endured harsh judgement and criticism from his tutors. Both Taudou, his tutor in composition, and Mathias, his piano tutor, were unwilling to accept him as a student. According to Gillmor (1988), Mathias noted about Satie: 'Worthless. Three months just to learn the piece. Cannot sight-read properly.'

Satie's amusing writings in *Mémoires d'un Amnésique* can be interpreted as an expression of resentment and mockery for the routines of academia:

'An artist must organize his life. Here is the exact timetable of my daily activities: Get up: 7.18 am; be inspired: 10.23–11.47 am. I take lunch at 12.11 pm and leave the table at 12.14 pm. Healthy horse-riding, out in my grounds: 1.19–2.53 pm. More inspiration: 3.12–4.07 pm. Various activities

(fencing, reflection, immobility, visits, contemplation, swimming, etc...): 4.21–6.47 pm. Dinner is served at 7.16 and ends at 7.20 pm. Then come symphonic readings, out loud: 8.09–9.59 pm. I go to bed regularly at 10.37 pm. Once a week (on Tuesdays) I wake up with a start at 3.19 am.'

– Satie (1913; cited in Wilkins, 1980)

Satie's mockery of the academia that he hated was extended to his experiments with *musique d'ameublement* (furnishing music). Ambroise Thomas held the position of director of the Conservatoire whilst Satie studied there. Satie's creation of furnishing music had the purpose of background music: music not to be listened to. Fragments of an opera, *Mignon*, written by Thomas, featured prominently in Satie's first experiment with furniture music. This instance of humour can be seen as an example of malicious behaviour, which was observed in children when Asperger originally characterised the syndrome (Frith, 1991). However, in view of Satie's other manifestations of humour, it is more likely that this jibe is an expression of resentment against academia through humour rather than malice.

Satie's combination of personality traits, which are typical of AS – pride, determination, perfectionism, and a hatred of convention that resulted in an aversion to formal study and academia – drove him to evolve his own idiom. It is claimed that formal musical study at a younger age might have inhibited the expression of Satie's musical genius (Harding, 1975).

#### 4.3.2. Humour and Satie's music

Composers of the 20th century gravitated increasingly towards satire, irony, and humour; this movement was supported by the humorous effects of dissonant harmony. It is claimed that Satie was the pioneer in this field, via his relentless parodies of Impressionist music (Machlis, 1961). He emphasised the shortcomings and 'stupidities' of an out-dated tradition and responded with a new idiom involving musical techniques of parody and satire that were a contrast to Romanticism (Harding, 1975).

Satie associated himself with the Montmartre cabarets for about 20 years and this equipped him with a variety of satirical techniques. *Hyspa*, a fellow frequenter of Montmartre was one chansonnier who specialised in the parody of airs from opera to military, folk, and children's songs. In 1912, Satie applied this technique of parodic distortion to piano music, resulting in a series of humorous works for piano, for which he gave striking performance directions, prose introductions, and bizarre titles; for example, 'Genuine Flaccid Preludes' (Whiting, 1999).

Satie was famous for these eccentric titles; others include *Trois Croqueux en forme de poire* (Three Pieces in the shape of a pear) and *Croquis et agaceries d'un bonhomme de bois* (Sketches and annoyances of a Wooden Man). In *Le Coq et l'Arlequin, Cocteau* (1918; cited in Myers, 1926) claimed that these titles were meant as a jibe or piece of ill-humour against the titles of Impressionist works, such as *Lunes descendant sur le temple qui fut* (Moons Descending on the Temple that Was) and *Cathédrales englouties* (Sunken Cathedrals). Examples of Satie's nonsensical and whimsical performance directions include, 'Like a nightingale with toothache... sheepishly and coldly... light as an egg... with tenderness and fatality...' Nonsensical humour is often observed in those with AS or high-functioning autism; it was observed in Wittgenstein who, as noted, may have had AS (Fitzgerald, 2004).

A significant performance direction which features in one of Satie's piano works, named *Vexations*, is one that states: '...if one wishes to play the piece 840 times in succession, it would be advisable to prepare oneself in advance, in the most profound silence, by a period of serious immobility,' (Gillmor, 1988). The question has often been asked whether this was Satie's idea of a joke; the performance instruction is not a demand, but merely implies the 840

times repetition. Nonetheless, John Cage completed a performance of *Vexations* in 1963 lasting 18 h and 40 min. The knowledge of such a performance would probably have been a source of great satisfaction and amusement for the eccentric composer. Whatever the intent behind this work, it has greatly influenced contemporary experimental music, in particular the minimalist movement (Gillmor, 1988).

Rollo Myers, a biographer of Satie has offered an alternative explanation for Satie's odd titles and performance instructions. He proposes that they reflect 'the bitterness of an essentially lonely man who is obliged to camouflage all his serious work in order to forestall the criticism he secretly fears.' (Myers: cited in Machlis, 1961). Such an explanation is aligned with the idea of using humour to mask an underlying insecurity, supported by Satie's ultra-sensitivity. This insecurity was exacerbated by the knowledge that his musical technique was severely limited. These qualities are evident in his letters to his brother Conrad; according to Austin (1966), Satie wrote:

'In 1905 I set to work with d'Indy. I was tired of being reproached with an ignorance that I supposed I had, because competent persons pointed it out in my works.'

Here, Satie refers to formal musical tuition at the *Schola Cantorum* where he studied counterpoint, fugue, and orchestration under Roussel and d'Indy. The extent of Satie's insecurity and lack of confidence is apparent in the following statement from Roussel (1905; cited in Harding, 1975):

'Satie knew his craft. The works he'd already published proved to me that he had nothing to learn. I couldn't see the advantages he hoped to get from theoretical and scholastic studies. However, he was obstinate... He was tremendously musical.'

Despite such comments, the true value of Satie's work was not appreciated for a long time (Myers, 1973), perhaps due to the deceiving and bizarre titles he gave his works, and his reputation as a jester. However, it is evident from his masterpiece, *Socrate*, and his piano *Nocturnes* that he was not just a practical joker but a musician who favoured a different approach with each new piece (Harding, 1975). This view is consistent with Satie's opposition to 'Satieism'. Satie's humour masked his heightened sensitivity and deep-seated insecurity: it is these traits combined with his pride, determination, perfectionism, and hatred of convention that drove Satie to create a new original idiom and his own intricate techniques. Today, Satie's mask of humour is seen to have concealed 'a personality of an immensely sincere, courageous and profoundly original artist.' The importance of Satie's work to music of subsequent times is now widely acknowledged (Myers, 1973).

It may be argued that there is an inconsistency between the recognised symptoms of AS – which include a lack of humour – and the proposition here that Satie used humour in his life and music to mask his sensitivity and insecurity. One possible explanation for this is that AS individuals tend to express themselves less, which means that they show less humour than average in all ways but especially in words (Rawlings, personal communication). It is noted that poverty of expression and gesture is a recognised symptom of AS. In his personal communication, Rawlings also draws a comparison between AS individuals and introverts whereby both groups do not tend to joke openly and tell funny stories; the result is that they may be seen as less humorous and having a less developed 'sense of humour'.

There is some indirect evidence supporting this alignment of AS and introversion. Previous studies have linked autism with the negative (i.e. the asocial and interpersonal) aspects of schizophrenia (Konstantareas & Hewitt, 2001). This is further emphasised by the finding of a correlation between the Autism Spectrum Quotient

and the negative schizotypy scale, Introverted Anhedonia, which represents the physical and social anhedonia and introverted withdrawal inherent in schizotypic personalities (Rawlings, 2008; see also Claridge & McDonald, this special issue). Moreover, in his study Rawlings found that individuals with high Introverted Anhedonia scores appear to have a weak sense of humour, particularly where real-life situations are involved.

Another possible explanation for the inconsistency is that the humour that AS individuals show (when they do show humour) is idiosyncratic in nature. The humour can be interpreted by others as not being funny, and such individuals seen as less humorous and having a less developed 'sense of humour.' (Rawlings, personal communication). This is consistent with the type of humour that Satie expressed and which he was most famous for. In short, it may be said that Satie and AS individuals show not a lack of humour; they merely appreciate different types of humour and express it in unusual ways.

#### 4.4. Purity

'I'm scared of failing with this work, which I want to be white and pure like the Antique.'

– Satie in conversation with Valentine Gross (cited in Volta, 1989)

Satie had a preference for purity, whiteness and associated elements, such as simplicity, youth and bareness. This 'puerile obsession' can be seen as a special interest linked to Satie's ideal of renunciation; the characteristic was manifested in both Satie's life and music.

##### 4.4.1. The colour white

Purity is associated with the colour white, which was Satie's favourite colour (Orledge, 1995). Satie's *Mémoires d'un Amnésique* illustrates the manifestation of this special interest in his lifestyle:

'I eat only white foodstuffs: eggs, sugar, scraped bones; fat from dead animals; veal, salt, coconuts, chicken coked in white water; mouldy fruit, rice, turnips; camphorated sausage, things like spaghetti, cheese (white), cotton salad and certain fish (minus their skins).'

– Satie (1913; cited in Wilkins, 1980)

According to Volta (1989), a preference for white is further implied in a letter Satie wrote to M. Gaultier Garguille in which he refers to the Virgin as the third person in the Holy Trinity. This of course contradicts the conventional Catholic view, where the Holy Trinity consists of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. It has been suggested that Satie is referring to the religion of Ancient Egypt: Osiris, Horus and Isis (Volta, 1989). Many heretical sects have often associated Isis with the Virgin, and Isis' colour is white.

##### 4.4.2. Youth and immaturity

Satie's interest in purity extended to a preference for the company of children and young people. Satie himself had a child-like nature and so he related well with boys and girls. In Arcueil, he initiated a 'Patronage laïque', a club for young people. He gave to them small gifts and money that he could not afford, and organised concerts and trips at reduced prices. Towards the end of his life two groups of youths formed around Satie: 'Les Six' emerged from the success of Parade and its subsequent lawsuit; and École d'Arcueil, which included the composers Roger Désormière and Henri Sauguet. Satie always championed youth (Myers, 1973) and encouraged the forward development of his art through them.

Satie's own manifestation of purity was his immaturity. It is observed that he never grew up in many ways; he had the mentality

of a child despite being the eldest of three siblings (Harding, 1975). Satie retained a vision of childhood throughout adulthood; he said:

'When I was young, people used to say to me: Wait until you're 50, you'll see. I am 50. I haven't seen anything.'

– Satie (1920; cited in Wilkins, 1980)

Many of Satie's acquaintances documented this child-like nature: Robert Caby said: 'His was a unique personality. He was something else: a child of genius, with the candour and purity one finds in a child. Because there was a spiritual side of him that was quite extraordinary.' (Caby, 1986; cited in Orledge, 1995). A child-like nature and immature personalities are often seen in individuals with AS (Fitzgerald, 2004); this further supports the idea that Satie expressed traits associated with AS.

##### 4.4.3. Satie's *musique d'ameublement*

Satie's special interest in purity and associated simplicity and renunciation was also manifested in his musical works. In fact, it was Satie's primary aim to achieve simplicity of expression and 'dépouillement' or the stripping down of music to bare essentials; he also expressed a desire for whiteness in many of his works (Volta, 1989). This was his ideal and resulted in the creation of *musique d'ameublement*. His first experiment consisted of fragments from Thomas's *Mignon* and Saint-Saëns's *Danse macabre* set against Satie's own simple themes; these are repeated stereotypically, similar to the patterns of a carpet or wallpaper.

Furniture music was intended as background music that was not to be listened to. This notion counters that of conventional works, such as that of Wagner, which commands the full attention of the audience. Furniture music is therefore consistent with Satie's ideal of renunciation to create a music that was bare, simple and sparse; and consistent with his hatred of conventional music. Satie claimed that furniture music would fill a demand (Harding, 1975):

'There's a need to create furnishing music, in other words music that would be a part of the surrounding noises and would take them into account. I imagine it to be melodious; softening the clatter of knives and forks without dominating them, without imposing itself. It would fill up the awkward silence that occasionally descends on guests... At the same time it would neutralise the street noises...'

The principle underlying furniture music was applied to Satie's score for *Entr'acte*. The shared principle here (found also in good film music) is that the music does not draw attention to itself; it is purely functional in that its goal is to emphasise the visual aspects of a film without the awareness of the audience. In writing the score for *Entr'acte*, Satie found the perfect application for furniture music (Harding, 1975).

Today, furniture music is widely recognised as Muzak. Satie's initial experiments did not work but this does not matter. As Darius Milhaud, who collaborated with Satie on the project, said:

'In any case, the future was to prove that Satie was right: nowadays, children and housewives fill their homes with unheeded music, reading and working to the sound of the wireless. And in all public places, large stores and restaurants, the customers are drenched in an unending flood of music. Is this not "musique d'ameublement", heard, but not listened to?'

– (Milhaud, 1952; cited in Orledge, 1995).

Satie's idea came to fruition and his ideal of a background unattended music has been eventually achieved.

##### 4.4.4. Satie's *masterpiece of purity*

*Socrate* (finished in 1918), dubbed as Satie's masterpiece, is the ultimate manifestation of his ideal music of purity, whiteness,

simplicity, bareness, and renunciation. *Socrate* is a symphonic drama in three parts with voice, scored for an orchestra consisting of a flute, oboe, English horn, clarinet, bassoon, horn, trumpet, harp, timpani, and strings; it is set to Victor Cousin's translation of Plato's *Dialogues*.

*Socrate* is considered a landmark in the neoclassical movement (Gillmor, 1988). Satie described *Socrate* as 'a return to classical simplicity with a modern sensibility' (Volta, 1989). This, and *Sonatine Bureaucratique* (1917) include the two basic features associated with neoclassicism of the 1920s: ironic treatment of past clichés (of any era), and a reinstatement of classical virtues of order, restraint, and sobriety (Whiting, 1999). *Socrate* is based on the 19th century Greek revival style (Danuser, 2004). These works are also examples of Satie's anticipation of characteristic features of neoclassicism, for example the use of small ad hoc groups of solo instruments rather than the usual large Romantic orchestra. Arthur Berger, an American composer recognised this in *Socrate*, and dubbed it as 'scrubbed clean of Romantic unctuousness and growth and of impressionistic whipped cream.' (Berger, 1970; cited in Gillmor, 1988). However, what is not recognised is the achievement of this ideal music as early as 1888 via his *Gymnopédies*, which are also based on Ancient Greek modal scales (Whiting, 1999). *Socrate* was a creation in which Satie's restricted means came into perfect focus and balance (Gowers, 1980). It was not only a masterpiece and a summation of Satie's musical genius; it embodied Satie's ideals, and his important influence on subsequent musical movements, particularly neoclassicism.

Satie's work also influenced contemporary music, such as Virgil Thomson and John Cage. These composers were active in keeping the Satie spirit alive after his death in 1925. For Cage, Satie's musical career attempted to not only break down the barriers of tradition and convention, but all those that separate art from life:

"When life is lived, there is nothing in it but the present, the "now-moment."... Art when it is art as Satie lived it and made it is not separate from life... Satie... never lived in an ivory tower, nor does an artist of his quality ever need to: for there is nothing in life from which he separates himself."

– John Cage (1951; cited in Gillmor, 1988)

It has often been observed that Satie was a born iconoclast, suggesting that Satie's music was an expression of his personality. This has been illustrated for the personality traits of pride and determination, hatred of convention, insecurity and heightened sensitivity, perfectionism and perseverance – and his special interests of religion and purity (including renunciation). These traits combined were (most probably) crucial to the development of his musical creativity. The idea of lowering the boundaries between art and life is consistent with the observation that individuals with AS appear to 'merge' with their work (Fitzgerald, 2004). Satie, it seemed, 'merged' with his work.

"We should cherish an affectionate sympathy for Erik Satie, mystic or Bohemian, for what he brought that was new to music: a clear judgement, a horror of hackneyed ways, love of discovery and of risk, the relief of good humour and systematic rejection of all that was heavy and tiresome. It was a stone of small dimensions which was his contribution to the edifice, but one of very pure whiteness and brilliance."

– Durey (1930; cited in Orledge, 1995)

## 5. Conclusions

'Pathologising genius and diagnosing historical figures has become an obsession with us.'

– Oliver Sacks (2001)

It is stressed that this paper does not aim to diagnose Satie with Asperger's syndrome. It merely illustrates that Satie expressed many of the symptoms, characteristics, and personality traits associated with AS; which, coupled with good opportunities enabled him to express his genius through the devising of his own, original musical idiom. This case study alone, which focuses on a single form of creativity and one specific disorder, is insufficient in answering the general search for a link between psychopathology and creativity. But placed in the context of the existing literature, it supports the idea of this link. Studies of biographies in this field are often criticised for their unreliability. However, the present study documented evidence and profiles provided by Satie's acquaintances, friends, and biographers, as well as his own writings, which all draw a fairly consistent portrait of his personality and character.

The series of disorders that exist on the autistic spectrum include 'classic' autism or low-functioning autism, which is associated with severe learning impairments, limitations of social interactions, and an intelligence that is below average levels. Individuals with low-functioning autism are not capable of the types of creativity that have been discussed here (Fitzgerald, 2004). In this respect, such individuals are distinct from those with high-functioning autism and AS.

This leads to the question of generality: do all individuals with AS exhibit high levels of creativity? The answer is negative. The diagnosis of AS does not mean the manifestation of high levels of creativity. Other factors such as high intelligence are important, although this alone is also insufficient for the expression of creativity (e.g. Andreasen, 1987). As Guilford recognised, creativity is complex and not a single characteristic. In addition, the opportunity to exhibit such creativity needs to be present. It has been observed that, realistically, at most one or two individuals in 200 within the Autistic Spectrum Disorder diagnosis can be seen as displaying genuine talent (Hermelin, 2001): the coincidence of a disorder on the autistic spectrum and creativity is therefore a rare occurrence.

It can be inferred here that healthy individuals of high ability, i.e. those not diagnosed with AS, may nevertheless show its personality characteristics, albeit in a milder form. This makes sense in view of the current proposal that creativity is linked with personality traits associated with psychopathology, rather than necessarily with psychopathology itself. Pursuing this idea further with respect to Asperger personality traits would be a profitable extension of current research on individual differences in creativity and would also support the proposed link between the two.

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