

contact

Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

Citation

Bryars, Gavin. 1983. 'Vexations and its Performers'. *Contact*, 26. pp. 12-20. ISSN 0308-5066.

Gavin Bryars

'Vexations' and its Performers

This article was written in 1979 for a monograph on Erik Satie, edited by Ornella Volta, in the series *Les Cahiers de l'Herne*; the book was intended for publication in 1980 but has been delayed and is now expected to appear shortly. The article as it is published here is a revised version of the original English text.

In 1971 Christopher Hobbs and I performed Satie's *Vexations* at Leicester Polytechnic. I began the piece at 7 a.m. and Hobbs took over at 9.25 a.m. During the performance I noticed that while I marked my counting of the repetitions at the end of each one, Hobbs marked his at the beginning. And so, in order to prevent the possibility of our miscounting the 840 repetitions, I wrote a short note to Hobbs drawing his attention to this fact. (Since each of us was either playing or listening there was never any occasion on which we could converse during the whole of the piece.) Hobbs replied on the same sheet of paper, adding some observations on the way the performance was going, and gradually, quite fortuitously, a correspondence developed in which each performer made remarks to the other in a conversational way. Afterwards, on reading through these spontaneous notes, we decided that we should publish them in some form; written during the playing of the piece, they are curiously moving, and give an unusual insight into the kinds of mental processes that the work evokes in its performers. I decided, further, to find observations on *Vexations* by others who had performed it, or who had been intimately acquainted with it, and to publish these as an anthology. The anthology was advertised in the *Experimental Music Catalogue* in 1975 as being 'in preparation', but it has not yet appeared.

Vexations has had an enormous impact on recent music, partly because of its celebrated proportions (a sort of 'Ring des Nibelungen des pauvres'), and partly because of the effect it has had on those who have performed it. But it is clear from an examination of the details of the various performances that its executants have not all approached it in the same spirit, nor have they fixed anything like a common duration for the piece. In this respect the record of the performances provides a picture of the kinds of distortion to which Satie's work is prone, and the kinds of indulgence that its performers tend to perpetrate. By looking at the ways in which *Vexations* has been played it is possible to arrive at an assessment of what constitutes a good performance, and even to achieve some sort of insight into the nature of the piece itself.

The music and its sources

Vexations appears to have been written in 1892-3. According to Patrick Gowers, not only 'its style and humour', but also relationships with works of the Rose+Croix period 'suggest a date close to *Uspud*, that is 1892-3'.¹ The connections between *Vexations* and the Rose+Croix music are clear: it contains chains of chords of a single type—mostly diminished, as in *Fête donnée par des Chevaliers Normands* (1892); the lines move along in implacable note-against-note correspondence; and the bass and treble tend generally to go in contrary motion (see Example 1). Like the *Fête donnée par des Chevaliers Normands* and the *Messe des pauvres* (c1893-5) *Vexations* takes the 'ecclesiastical' form of a bass theme followed by a superimposed harmonisation; these are then repeated, the upper parts being inverted at the second occurrence. This is all the work consists of apart from a beautiful instruction at the head of the manuscript: 'Pour se jouer 840 fois de suite ce motif, il sera bon de se préparer au préalable, et dans le plus grand silence, par des immobilités sérieuses'. A curious feature of several American performances during the 1960s was that newspaper reviews gave the date of composition of *Vexations* as 'c1920'. This date, which seems to stem from a common (mistaken) source, could have arisen from descriptions of the piece as having an effect akin to *musique d'ameublement*, the first example of which was written in 1920; but there can be little doubt that the music is located firmly in the early 1890s.

One important aspect of *Vexations* that has not been examined to date is the manuscript itself. In all the performances that are listed below either the printed edition or a reproduction of the manuscript (or copies of either of these) served as the source. A close look at Satie's original, a privilege accorded to few people, reveals something quite striking about the work, which cannot be detected even from facsimiles. When Ornella Volta showed me the manuscript she pointed out that the main body of the music is written in a strong dark ink, whereas all the words and the 'signs', including the clefs, are in a very faint and faded ink. It appears that Satie watered down his ink after the music had been written in order to add these elements. (The manuscript has undergone restorative surgery at the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale in Florence, involving the injection of ink—necessarily of the same type as the original—into the defective areas so that the instructions, which make the piece what it is, shall not fade entirely.) The evidence provided by the ink shows that the

sequence of composition (contrary to the belief of Christian Wolff and others in the early Cage performance—see Wolff's letter quoted below) was first the music, then the title, and only afterwards the conditions under which it could be played. The ink was watered down during the writing of the word 'Vexations', after the letter 'x'.

It is worth mentioning, too, the significance of the linguistic elements. Satie calls the whole piece a 'motif', that is to say something that by nature returns time and time again. He also refers to the bass melody, which precedes each harmonisation, as a 'thème'. Using a simple Rousselian method of letter substitution, 'theme and variations' become 'theme and vexations' . . .

The manuscript of *Vexations* was formerly in the collection of Mme Claude Rostand in Geneva and is now in the collection of the Fondation Erik Satie in Paris. It was first reproduced in *Contrepoints*, vol.6 (1949), opposite p.8, in an editorial by Fred Goldbeck, who refers to 'cette pièce (qui semble poser en principe que l'infini commence immédiatement après la 840^e reprise, et peut-être même un peu avant)'. Cage has told me how, following the Satie concerts he gave at Black Mountain College in 1948, he began collecting Satie's music; 'it was through Henri Sauguet that I was able to have photostats made of *Vexations*'.² According to Peter Dickinson, it was thanks to Cage that *Contrepoints* published the score.³ The first American publication of the piece was in *Art News Annual*, vol.27 (1958), to which Cage contributed an article on Satie in the form of an imaginary dialogue.⁴ He mentions that Satie has lost the power to irritate, and goes on:

True, one could not endure a performance of *Vexations* (lasting [my estimate] twenty-four hours; 840 repetitions of a fifty-two beat piece itself involving a repetitive structure: A, A₁, A, A₂, each A thirteen measures long), but why give it a thought?⁵

The first English publication of the music was in an article by Peter Dickinson in *Music Review*, vol.28 (1967), pp.139-46; the score (reset, not a facsimile) is on p.145. This was the version that Richard Toop saw and which gave him the idea for his performance. The work was eventually published in its own right by Editions Max Eschig in 1969 as one of three pieces in a collection entitled *Pages mystiques*.

It is curious that the work had been publicly known for such a long time before it was first played in its entirety. As late as 1958 Cage seems to have been discounting the possibility of a performance. One might speculate that it was not until musical sensibilities were better attuned to extremely long performances that a climate existed in which this music could thrive.

Performers and performances

The first performance of the piece that I know of was given in 1958 by Richard David Hames when he was 13 years old. Dr Hames tells me that he performed it at his school and that there was 'an audience of at least 10 throughout the proceedings'; he adds that the recital raised £24 for charity. This was only the first of four performances that Hames seems to have attempted, but of the others, two were not undertaken in a serious spirit and were incomplete: the second was at the American Center in Paris in 1970,

Example 1 Satie, *Vexations* from *Pages mystiques* (1893-5)

NOTE DE L'AUTEUR:

Pour se jouer 840 fois de suite ce motif, il sera bon de se préparer au préalable, et dans le plus grand silence, par des immobilités sérieuses

♠ Très lent

♠ A ce signe il sera d'usage de présenter le thème de la Basse

THÈME

when, as the final item in a programme of French music, Hames repeated the piece until there was no more audience—which took '3 hours 12½ minutes'; the third version in the Hames tetralogy, which Hames refers to as an 'unscheduled happening', took place at Sevenoaks in Kent on 2 July 1971 and lasted only five hours. The fourth version was more serious in intent. In his earliest letters to me Hames stated that the first performance was the only complete one that he did, which is remarkable for a 13-year-old schoolboy. However, he never gave clear answers to a number of questions concerning the precise details of his performances—how he went about counting the repetitions, what was the total duration in each case, and so on—which makes me cautious in advancing a claim for the 1958 performance as the pioneering act it may have been; this hesitation on my part is compounded by the evidence of the later, foolish enterprises, which cast some doubt on the credibility of the earliest one.

The best-known and most influential performance of *Vexations* was that organised by John Cage at the Pocket Theater, New York, in September 1963. Cage had planned to give the piece at the Living Theater, but owing to the objections of people living nearby this proved impossible. In the end Lewis Lloyd offered the Pocket Theater. Cage used twelve pianists in all—ten officially involved and two substitutes. According to Philip Corner's list these were: John Cage, David Tudor, Christian Wolff, Philip Corner, Viola Farber, Robert Wood, MacRae Cook, John Cale, David Del Tredici, James Tenney, Howard Klein (the *New York Times* reviewer, who was asked to play in the course of the event) and Joshua Rifkin. They played for 18 hours 40 minutes. Christian Wolff writes:

The performance of *Vexations* is hard to forget. I'm often telling people about it. Two things particularly stick in my mind. The first was the effect of the music on the players. Aside from agreeing to the mechanics of sitting on stage, playing, staying on to count repetitions for the following pianist, all according to schedule, the pianists had neither rehearsal together nor had had any discussion about the playing. As the first cycle of pianists went round the playing was quite diverse, a variety—quite extreme, from the most sober and cautious to the wilfull and effusive—of personalities was revealed. Musically the effect seemed disturbing. But after another round the more expansive players began to subside, the more restrained to relax, and by the third round or so the personalities and playing techniques of the pianists had been almost completely subsumed by the music. The music simply took over. At first a kind of passive object, it became the guiding force. . . . As the night wore on we got weary, or rather just sleepy, and the beautiful state of suspension of self now became risky. Alertness had to be redoubled not to miss repetitions or notes. An element of comedy—now that solidarity and easiness were evidently there—joined us. The other thing I recall was the question of how Satie came to write this piece. . . . Had he written it, and then decided why not do it 800 odd times over, or had he thought, if a piece were to be repeated so many times, what kind of a piece should it be, and then set out to write *Vexations*? We decided on the latter, because of the extraordinary durability of the music.⁶

Cage has expressed surprise that when the performance, which he had planned and talked about for a long time, finally took place, so many people 'who understood it, and sympathised and even agreed with the idea of playing something 840 times, didn't bother to show up'. He regrets their absence because 'if you came you saw the great difference between an idea and an experience'.⁷

The next important performance took place in England at the Arts Lab, Drury Lane, London, in October 1967. Apart from the Hames case, this was the first solo performance: it was given by Richard

Toop and lasted about 24 hours. Toop played the piece again a year later, also at the Arts Lab. A long time afterwards he expressed some anxiety about the great disparity in tempo between his versions and others, especially as he had not attempted to make his performance a long one.⁸ He was eventually reassured by reading Kostelanetz's book on Cage, in which Cage gives the duration of *Vexations* as 12 hours 10 minutes.⁹

Since my performance lasted about 24 hours, it seems to me that Cage and I agree on the pulsation of the music, but differ about the number of beats gathered within this pulse.

At the first performance, in 1967, Toop avoided the problem of counting up to 840 by using 840 numbered photocopies of the music. Apart from assembling the score, his preparation for the occasion consisted of trying the piece through a few times to establish the best tempo, from which he calculated the total duration. He never played the music for more than half an hour before the performance itself and stresses that he took the utmost care not to memorise it,

so that I should always have to make the effort to read each fresh sheet as it came up (even after the performance I was unable to play more than a few beats from memory).

This observation corresponds perfectly with the effect of the music on Christopher Hobbs and myself, which is something that frequently puzzles those who have not played the work. People expect, naturally, that if someone has played a short fragment of music over and over again for a very long period the least that can be expected is that he will know the piece by the end. When music is played from memory the player memorises the relation between sounds and the placement of his fingers on the keyboard. In *Vexations*, however, there is a curious gap between the music as it is notated and read and the sounds that are produced. On the few occasions when I looked at my hands while playing, the effect was startling: having become accustomed to reading a given note in a number of different notations (A as A, A natural, and B double flat; B flat as B flat and A sharp; D as D, D natural, and E double flat, etc.), I found it hard to reconcile the position of my fingers with the notational information.¹⁰

Toop goes on:

three things stand out in my mind from the first performance. Firstly, the piano was in the outer foyer, where there was an art exhibition, so that the music became a real 'musique d'ameublement'. People walked round the piano, talked, sometimes stopped and listened. . . . Secondly, I remember a man from the 'Times' kneeling beside me as I played—it occurred to me at the time that not even Rubinstein got that sort of genuflectory treatment. The third aspect was less fortunate: after about 16 hours I asked for some kind of mild stimulant in addition to the strong coffee I had been getting (I was expecting some kind of vitamin pill); what actually materialised was another cup of coffee with (as I only discovered later) a whole phial of methedrine in it. The effect was hair-raising: my drooping eye-lids rolled up like in a Tom and Jerry cartoon (one of the newspaper reports remarked on my 'slightly glazed' appearance at the end of the performance). The trouble was that my field of vision became completely fixed: each time I got to the end of a page I had to lift my head up and realign my vision on to the beginning of the new page.

The second of Toop's performances at the Arts Lab took place in a small room adjoining the hall where he had played previously, and in a much quieter atmosphere, which he found less 'sympathetic'; it was also marred by distracting television lights, and cameramen who filmed at intervals. When the performance was over Toop played through the

piece once more for the benefit of the cameras so that he could be shown ending the piece and descending from the platform; but this take was not finally used in the film because his facial expression was considered by the BBC people to be 'insufficiently beatific'.

The period from 1967 to 1975 saw *Vexations* flourish. I take these outer dates from the performance by Richard Toop in October 1967 and that organised by Rob Worby at Bretton Hall College of Education in June 1975. The several versions given between these two range from the foolish enterprise of Hames at Sevenoaks (1971) and the equally foolish ones in Bangor, and Yankton, South Dakota (both 1969), to the very serious-minded undertakings in Leicester (1971), Stockholm (1972), and elsewhere. As the list shows, these performances varied considerably in their organisation, duration (though they fall roughly into two groups—those that lasted about 24 hours and those that lasted about 12-14), and in the different attitudes of the performers before the event. One thing is abundantly clear: those musicians who came from a broadly experimental musical background approached the work with great integrity, and those in whom this background was allied with an awareness of the fundamental importance of Satie's music as a whole found the piece a profoundly moving experience; in many cases it had far-reaching repercussions on the participants' work in other types of music.¹¹

Performances: 1958-75

This list makes no claim to completeness. Unless otherwise noted, all details have been supplied in private correspondence with the author by those involved in the performances concerned.

1958. Lewes Grammar School, Lewes, Sussex. *Pianist*: Richard Dave Hames (aged 13)

Hames tells me that he originally came into contact with *Vexations* and a number of other pieces by Satie through a visiting student teacher who was French. He remembers the teacher's name as Guy Rigault and he played the pieces from the Frenchman's handwritten copies.

September 1963. Pocket Theater, New York. *Organiser*: John Cage. *Pianists*: John Cage, David Tudor, Christian Wolff, Philip Corner, Viola Farber, Robert Wood, MacRae Cook, John Cale, David Del Tredici, James Tenney, Howard Klein (substitute), Joshua Rifkin (substitute). *Duration*: 18 hours 40 minutes

In this performance, and another organised by Cage in 1969 (see below, 21 November 1969), each performer sat on the stage for a period before he played a given number of repetitions; he then stayed to count the repetitions for the next pianist. See text for further details.

August 1966. Berlin. *Organiser*: John Cage. *Pianists*: six, including John Cage and Charlotte Moorman

During her second stint at the piano Moorman played naked from the waist upwards. It will be remembered that in the 1960s she attracted a certain notoriety as 'the topless cellist', especially in her collaborations with Nam June Paik. *The Guinness Book of Music Facts and Feats* says that Moorman performed *Vexations* in a semi-naked state because 'she loved nudity' and because Cage had bet her \$100 that she would not do it.

October 1967. Arts Lab, Drury Lane, London. *Pianist*: Richard Toop. *Duration*: c24 hours

See text for further details.

1968. Arts Lab, Drury Lane, London. *Pianist*: Richard Toop. *Duration*: c24 hours

See text for further details.

early 1969. Mount Marty College, Yankton, South Dakota. *Organiser*: Martin Berkofsky. *Pianists*: Martin Berkofsky, Carole Lambert, Florence Meier, Elizabeth Redder, Mrs Alice Hohenthauer, Sister Mary Patrick Logsdon. *Duration*: 5 hours 48 minutes

During the piece 'the performers laid a piece of plate glass on the grand piano strings and achieved a harpsichord effect . . . they did small interpretive dances as each new player interpreted the music . . . Sister Mary Patrick dramatically read excerpts from the life of Satie . . . those not playing pushed the piano around the stage forcing the current performer to keep up with it on foot: some rounds were played at breakneck speed, others were given fully-sonorous treatment.'¹²

9-10 February 1969. The shop window of Crane and Son's music shop, Bangor, Wales. *Pianists*: ten students from University College of North Wales, Bangor.¹³ *Duration*: 21 hours

The performance was given on two pianos, played alternately; each pianist played 20 repetitions, which lasted 30 minutes. The students were organised into two groups of five and operated a shift system: 4.30 p.m. to 11.30 p.m., group 1; 11.30 p.m. to 6.30 a.m., group 2; 6.30 a.m. to 10 a.m., group 1; 10 a.m. to 1.30 p.m., group 2. The first and 840th repetitions were played by Professor Reginald Smith Brindle, then professor of music at Bangor, who wore academic dress and performed 'rather individually'; the students dressed formally.

16-17 May 1969.¹⁴ Unger Lounge, George Peabody Conservatory, Baltimore. *Organiser*: Anthony Piccolo. *Pianists*: Anthony Piccolo, Ronald Roxbury, George Brown, William Bland, Ernest Ragogini, Sarah Meneely, Lois Rova, Kimberly Kabala, Jeff Connell, Patricia Sayre, Rick Minger, Jane Wanger, Fred Wanger, Paul Tardiff, Jeff Goldberg, Allan Sternfield, Uga Grants, Carolyn Smith, Juliet McComas, Lois Shapiro, David Holmes

Piccolo heard about the piece from Roxbury, and his piano teacher Dr Konrad Wolff 'had participated in a performance in Paris'. Piccolo was disturbed by what he knew of the performance in South Dakota (see above, early 1969)—Berkofsky had been a student at Peabody—and approached the work with great seriousness.

31 October 1969. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. *Pianist*: James Cuomo. *Duration*: 11 hours 7 minutes

21 November 1969. University of California at Davis. *Organiser*: John Cage. *Pianists*: twelve, including John Cage

Like the earlier performance organised by Cage in New York (see above, September 1963), this involved a strict procedure: each pianist was in the performance space for a period before he played, he then played a number of repetitions, and remained to keep count of the repetitions for the next pianist. The performance began at 6 a.m. and was preceded by 'twenty minutes of silent meditation' (the 'immobilités sérieuses' of Satie's text?).¹⁵

21-2 February 1970. Watters Gallery, Darlinghurst, Sydney. *Organiser*: David Ahern. *Pianists*: Peter Evans, Linda Wilson (substitute). *Duration*: 22 hours

Evans played continuously for 15 hours until he reached repetition 595, when he suddenly stopped; he was in a daze and left immediately. He writes: 'I would not play this piece again. I felt each repetition slowly wearing my mind away. I had to stop. If I hadn't stopped I'd be a very different person today . . . People who play it do so at their own great peril.'

Valerie Butler, a member of the audience, writes that Evans said 'he had to stop because his mind became full of evil thoughts, animals and "things" started peering out at him from the score.' Another pianist, Linda Wilson, came forward and completed the performance; she said that 'it didn't affect [her] at all and she could have kept on playing'. Valerie Butler felt that Wilson's taking over the performance was 'a travesty' and she did not stay for the last seven hours of the event. During the performance Christian Wolff's *Stones* (*Prose Collection*, 1968-9) and La Monte Young's String Trio (1958) were played with *Vexations*.¹⁶

1970. American Center, Paris. *Pianist*: Richard David Hames. *Duration*: 3 hours 12½ minutes (incomplete)

Hames writes that when he was a pupil of Nadia Boulanger in Paris he played *Vexations* as the last item in a programme of French music, having previously decided to finish when there was no audience left—'the latter had not been informed'. Clearly the piece was not completed; strictly, it was not even attempted.

Spring 1970. University of Maryland, Baltimore. *Organisers*: Professor Stewart Gordon, Professor Roy Hamlin Johnson

I have no information on the performance except the word of Patricia Friedman (who was not one of the players) that it was completed.

16 March 1971. Fletcher Hall, Leicester Polytechnic. *Event*: one of a series called 'The Invention of Problems' organised by Stroud Cornock. *Organiser*: Gavin Bryars. *Pianists*: Gavin Bryars, Christopher Hobbs. *Duration*: 14 hours 30 minutes

Only one piano was used in this performance, but the transitions between players were acoustically imperceptible. See text for further details.

June 1971. Leeds College of Music. *Event*: 1971 Leeds College of Music Festival. *Pianists*: Jeffrey Lewis, Barbara Winrow, others. *Duration*: 16 hours 30 minutes (incomplete)

Owing to regulations governing the use of the building in which the performance took place, the piece had to end at midnight, when 611 repetitions had been played. Barbara Winrow recalls 'the real sense of frustration which we felt' and the players' 'remarkable reluctance to stop' before they had reached 840 repetitions.

2 July 1971. Sevenoaks, Kent. *Event*: Sevenoaks Paeon Festival. *Pianists*: Richard David Hames, 13 other pianists who were his pupils. *Duration*: 5 hours 3 minutes (incomplete)

Hames refers to this performance as an 'unscheduled happening', and certainly the event was not in any way premeditated or clearly considered. Hames and a group of his pupils decided 'on the spur of the moment' to play the complete piano works of Satie as part of what he calls a 'multi-media afternoon'. People were free to walk in and out as they pleased (this, of course, is a feature of most performances; there have been few, if any, where the audience has been obliged to attend the whole performance, though Racine's may be an exception to this). The 14 pianists played on seven pianos in various parts of the hall continuously from 2 p.m. to 7.03 p.m., at which time the young players had to return to their boarding houses to do their prep. Hames says that *Vexations* provided an 'interesting ostinato' to the event, perhaps implying that other things happened too (the rest of Satie's piano music?), and adds that 'an estimated 450 persons passed through and experienced the music without any reported ill effect'.

June 1972. Leeds. *Pianists*: Jeffrey Lewis, Barbara Winrow, others. *Duration*: 24 hours 30 minutes

This performance was a successful attempt to play the piece by the same people whose attempt in June 1971 (see

above) had been frustrated. This time the venue was a church, 'which made a better setting, both acoustically and aesthetically'. Each pianist played for much longer periods than in the earlier performance.

13-14 October 1972. Östgöttagatan 33, Fylkingen, Stockholm. *Organiser*: Sten Hansen. *Pianists*: Ingrid Lindgren, Bengt Emil Johnson, Barbro Dahlman, Ake Erickson, László Horvath, Bengt Kulfors, Leo Nilson, Mats Persson, Katarina Ström. *Duration*: 24 hours 46 minutes

The nine pianists were divided into groups of three, each of which played for 4½ hours; every pianist played for 30 minutes and then rested for an hour, this cycle being repeated three times before the group changed. The first and last 30 minutes were broadcast live by Swedish Radio, and both the country's television channels transmitted short glimpses of the work during news bulletins. The audience totalled between 1200 and 1500 people, and there were never fewer than five in the room. Sten Hansen told me that one man stayed for 19 hours. 'He had never been to a concert before and had told his wife that he was going to look in for some minutes at nine in the evening. He stayed until his wife, very worried, came for him in the afternoon of the next day. He told me that he would have stayed for all the 25 hours, but his wife had arranged something very important.'

1974. Dartington College of Arts, Dartington, Devon. *Event*: a contemporary music seminar. *Organiser*: Richard David Hames. *Duration*: 24 hours. *Pianists*: eight, including Richard David Hames

The performance took place in the dance school at the college and Mary Fulkerson organised a group of her students to dance for the whole duration of the piece.

11-12 May 1974. Holywell Music Room, Oxford. *Organiser*: Simon Thorne. *Pianists*: John Wesley Barker, Simon Best, John Edwards, Paul Feldwich, Pete Mason, Glyn Perrin, Camilla Saunders, Alden Schwarz, Simon Thorne. *Duration*: 23 hours 56 minutes

Each pianist played 20 repetitions after having counted through the previous set of repetitions, and the group played in rotation. Each repetition had been calculated at 1 minute 44 seconds, and each set at 34 minutes 40 seconds.

22-3 May 1974. Fialat Művészek Klubja (Young Artists' Club), Budapest. *Organisers*: Új Zenei Stúdió (New Music Studio). *Pianists*: Barnabás Dukay, Zoltán Jeney, Zoltán Kocsis, Katalin Komlos, László Sáros, András Schiff, László Vidovszky, András Wilhelm. *Duration*: 23 hours

26 September 1974. Concert hall of the Fryderyk Chopin Society, Warsaw. *Event*: 1974 Warsaw Autumn. *Organiser*: Reinbert de Leeuw. *Pianists*: Reinbert de Leeuw, Jerzy Marchwinski, Krzysztof Slowinski, Jerzy Witkowski, Szabolcs Eszteny, Stephen Montague, one or two others. *Duration*: c12 hours

Stephen Montague and the other unnamed pianists joined the team after the printed programme had been issued.

1 June 1975. Bretton Hall College of Education, near Wakefield, Yorkshire. *Organiser*: Rob Worby. *Pianists*: a team of students from the college

Racine's performances: 1978-9

The Canadian musician Robert Racine has given several performances of *Vexations* and has identified himself very closely with it. Therefore, although the main body of performances dealt with here covers only the period up to 1975, I include details of

Racine's unique involvement with the work.¹⁷

Racine first came across *Vexations* at a dance performance by Martha Clark in Montreal in February 1977 (see 'Miscellany', below). Two months later he found the music in Anne Rey's book on Satie and read her account of the work. As a result of this and, more important, of his opposition to Cage's suggestion (admittedly made before he had played the piece) that 'one could not endure a performance of *Vexations* . . . but why give it a thought?', Racine resolved to perform it himself.¹⁸

4 November 1978. Gallerie Véhicule Art, Montreal.
Duration: 14 hours 8 minutes

The event was recorded on 16 colour video cassettes by Vincent Dostaler. For this performance Racine copied the score 840 times (he does not say so, but given his rigour in these matters it could well have been by hand)¹⁹ and, in addition, produced another 840 sheets each bearing the numbers 1 to 152 (the number of written notes in the score, though only 144 actually sound), which served as mural decoration. His only other preparation was to abstain from liquids from the evening before the performance in order not to have to interrupt the 840 repetitions by visiting the lavatory; he has done the same on every other occasion on which he has played the work. In the event, he was unhappy with this first performance, partly because he made 30 or so errors, each of which caused him to pause for about two seconds, and partly because applause killed the last notes of the piece.

15 December 1978. Private house, Arthabaska.
Duration: 17 hours 53 minutes (including the whole of *Pages mystiques*)²⁰

A female member of the audience at Racine's first performance, who had heard the whole of the piece, requested this performance to which she listened alone. Racine played all three works published by Editions Max Eschig as *Pages mystiques*, so the duration given above is about two or three minutes longer than that of *Vexations* itself.

13 January 1979. Music Gallery, Toronto. Duration: 19 hours

The longer duration of the work on this occasion resulted from Racine's stricter interpretation of the words 'Très lent' at the head of Satie's score. For this version he used an interesting method of counting in order to control all the aspects of the performance himself: into a small box 20 × 20 cm he stuck 21 rows of 40 needles; these were sunk half way into the box, and as he played each motif he sank one needle completely.

On 7 April 1979 Racine gave a lecture on *Vexations* at the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Montreal, which drew on an extended essay that he has worked on since 1978. In almost every respect I find his approach admirable. I would take issue with him only over his fulminations against 'team' performances; while the list given above shows that there have been some disastrous attempts at the work, it is not the use of more than one pianist that has made them so. Racine's claim that the phrase 'se préparer' in Satie's rubric indicates a solo pianist is unfounded since 'se' can be either singular or plural. Nor do I agree with his interpretation of 'se jouer' as implying the need for a large audience; it could equally well apply to a performance for the player(s) alone (not yet done, to my knowledge). The need for a large audience seems to have generated Racine's aim to play *Vexations* in 840 different places for the largest possible number of people.

Miscellany: 1970-77

On 1 October 1970 Stephen Smoliar recorded a tape piece called *Cambridge Memories: a Programming*

Offering using the PDP 6 computer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Artificial Intelligence Laboratory. Dr Smoliar describes the piece as being 'in three movements with two interludes and an epilogue. *Vexations* is the spinal cord of the entire composition, while Bach's *Musical Offering* is the primary source of flesh.' This computer version of *Vexations* as part of a musical collage involved the use of EUTERPE, a programming language designed 'for the modelling of musical structures'; see his *A Parallel Processing Model of Musical Structures* (PhD, M.I.T., 1971), p.54.

On 27 September 1975 Claude Coppens gave a recital of piano music by Satie at the Villa Olmo, Lake Como. A tape loop of *Vexations* was played before and after the concert and in the interval.

On 2 February 1977 at the Salle Maisonnette, Place des Arts, Montreal, the Pilobolus Dance Theatre presented a 'pas de deux' called *The Four Thursdays*, in which Martha Clark danced with a chair; *Vexations* was used to accompany the dance, which lasted six or seven minutes.

The *Vexations* motif is played once through on the sixth disc in Aldo Ciccolini's set of recordings of Satie's piano works (EMD); the performance is notable for the inclusion of a wrong note.

Notes written by Bryars and Hobbs during 'Vexations'

For me the most interesting document concerning the relationship between Satie's *Vexations* and its performers (and, by implication, between Satie's work as a whole and its performers) is the one that generated my enquiry—namely the correspondence that developed between Christopher Hobbs and me while we were playing the work at Leicester in 1971. The tone is informal since our notes constitute the private, muted conversation of two friends during a sustained period of highly concentrated activity. Since each group of remarks made by one player could be answered only when the other ceased to play, the time-scale of the exchanges is almost the same as that of the piece itself. In fact, however, the opening period is not reflected in the 'conversation' for I wrote my first note only towards the end of Christopher's first session at the piano—I had begun playing nearly two-and-a-half hours before he arrived since I had been able to sleep in the college, while he had had to stay with a friend. In the later stages of the performance we played for more or less equal lengths of time, or at least we played approximately equal numbers of repetitions. The last sentence of the document was written while I was playing for the last time but about ten minutes before I finally stopped.

GAVIN BRYARS: I mark the paper at the end of the piece. Do you? If not, don't forget to allow for this in counting (otherwise we may count one phrase twice). Reply below.

CHRISTOPHER HOBBS: I mark at the beginning, and I'll watch out. Sundry remarks: how easy it is to be distracted; maybe the piece is about errors (little whirlpools out in the middle of the ocean);²¹ a guy from Radio Leicester wants to interview us this afternoon.

GB: When I started at 7 a.m. the only audience for the first 80 minutes was the caretaker who (perfectly) carried on sweeping the floor. I found after an hour or so that I begin to imagine things (I was expecting your

arrival?) and I kept being certain that someone had been standing behind me. I later found out that it was due to my being so conscious of the music that I forget that I also make sounds! (Coat collar on back of neck—hence someone behind.)²² Later I found that the opposite was the case i.e. I heard *more* other things than the piano. One of the students is going to film us (single frame every so often) O.K.? (C.H. Fine). Remember the Cage thing about Indian music 'sobering the mind and rendering it susceptible to divine influence'?²³

CH: My imaginings are restricted to the piano sounds themselves (sometimes a chord sounds completely wrong—the last crotchet chord in the piece always does; and the C at the start sounds very sharp, after the preceding chord. When I make a mistake it's like the end of the world. The music's unnerving because it's impossible to get used to it—the unexpected keeps happening. Why not use these remarks as the basis for the radio interview?

GB: Fine—we simply give them these sheets (and maybe read out the parts we have each written—like the Radio 4 Saturday Night Theatre). It's like you say—the end of the world—like falling asleep while you're driving along the motorway. I nearly fell off my chair with fright when C above middle C (B sharp rather) started to stick. I find I've developed a sequence of finishing the piece—marking the paper—starting the piece and lifting up the B sharp while I play with left hand only and shake my right leg that goes to sleep through pedalling. Apparently Philip Corner said that none of the performers at the 1963 performance emerged unchanged by playing the piece. Don't you find the notation as mystifying as the way the piece is constantly surprising! Apart from B sharps etc. I mean maybe it's just that the sharp signs seem like arrows connecting two notes (and hence the feeling of unnerving since you're never sure that you're playing (or about to play) the right notes). Also I keep seeing flats as sixes and double flats and double sharps start to get very blurred.²⁴

CH: Yes, the notation is really weird. Especially on the 4th system—there are two chords which are the same notes, and occur within a quaver or so of each other. I can't remember what they are, but they're notated completely differently (e.g. F sharp and C flat the first time, G flat and B the second) the effect is of the notation bending the pitch of the notes I have to keep telling myself that if I play the chords with the same fingering they really will sound all right! There's a strong temptation to use a different fingering for each differently-notated identical note. When I went into the canteen, someone had the Daily Telegraph. I glanced at it over his shoulder, and was surprised that there was nothing about 'Vexations' on the first page! I honestly expected to see it. Leaving the room is a nerve-wracking experience, don't you find? Any slight change in the way you listen to the notes is frightening. At one point I suddenly began listening to the bass line when it was in combination with the other parts in the same way that I had when it was on its own. It was shocking; I nearly stopped. It's the same feeling Frankenstein must have had. Suddenly you realise you're not doing what you thought you were at all. I wonder that Satie wrote it (due, no doubt, to experience of his other music). I wonder if the piece would change so much if you were just listening and had never seen the music? Perhaps a listener's reaction would be of interest ('Yes, it's very interesting, the way that...') whereas we're using words like 'shocking', 'unnerving' and so on.

GB: Yes I know what you mean about leaving the room. I went to get some fresh air a while ago and I

found I was walking extremely slowly and not focussing at all. I was simply looking rather blankly. It's an extraordinary intrusion when someone speaks to you (that's not quite right—I probably mean that I feel very much not an integral part of the conversation). When I'd been out for a while I found that it took quite a lot of listening to get really into the piece (although I was convinced that I remembered it very clearly). I found this piece of paper where someone had been *trying to notate* the numbers of the notes (rhythmically, or rather, sequentially). It's nice that it goes back to notation. The pitch-graphs are very nice.²⁵

CH: Yes I like the dot and dash rhythmic notation—especially the way the last note in a phrase is a dash. The form I'd expect would have been

— . . . — .
 — .
 — . — . — . (or .)

i.e. the person hasn't notated how the notes *feel*. I've a fear that my playing may be getting automatic. What it needs is a bad error (like playing the same phrase twice over—something of which I'm constantly in dread—also of forgetting it's the 2nd or 4th system that I've just played). Wonder when, and if, this interview is happening?

GB: I don't worry so much about becoming mechanical—I find that if the notation were to be taken away I couldn't play it! At least not the 2nd and 4th systems. There was quite a startling bit in my last section where the bass suddenly sounded very clear even though, acoustically, it was probably a good deal softer than the upper parts. An Indian student just told me that when he was *listening* (over a ½ hour period) it seemed to grow louder and louder! But if he relaxed—it sounded like the traffic outside.

CH: The guy from BBC Leicester said it got deafening as he listened. I haven't noticed it though. I talked to him for 2½ minutes for an early-morning programme—intentionally fatuous questions (why 840? Is it boring? etc.) to which I gave as honest answer as I could: but as you say it's really difficult to involve yourself in conversation. It's interesting that this (letter) form of communication works. I think perhaps it's not so much not wanting to be spoken to as not wanting to speak (i.e. make sounds other than the music). The radio guy may come back tomorrow and talk to us both together—perhaps then we could read out these sheets. He thought it was rather heavy stuff for the early morning—not that what I said to him was less heavy. He was surprised that we were still using the score. Obviously it's not just the notes (though I couldn't even play the bass line without the music) it's the risk of getting lost. The score's like a lifeline.

GB: I know what you mean about conversation—I feel like going about as softly as I possibly can—and as slowly. I think the writing works for a number of complex reasons—but mainly because we don't want to become involved in non-intentional (i.e. non-Satie) sounds. Doesn't mean that we're not able to hear anything else—quite the opposite. I had a similar experience about the 840—I mumbled something about not knowing and that you've 'got to draw the line somewhere.' (Reminds me of Michael Bentine's '50 Years on the Street' where he talks about Paris on December 31st 1889—the night before the 'gay 90's'—and everything is very boring, drab etc.—someone asks for a second cup of tea and is accused of being gluttonous and when asked about how many sugars says 'one would be scrimping—3 would be an indulgence'.) Cf. 839 and 841!!

CH: Both these replies seem very characteristic of Howard Skempton—he could say them and they'd sound quite natural. My reply was that our act of faith in the composer which had led us to embark on the piece extended also to the composer's instructions. I was going to remark last time but didn't that I found myself talking very softly to the interviewer—you're absolutely right! 839 and 841 simply don't look right. Actually I'm sure we made errors in the counting, but I don't feel that it matters, since it's unintentional. Cold-bloodedly omitting the last repetition or adding one extra, is like Richard Toop repeating the end for TV; belying the composer's trust in *you*.²⁶

GB: Right—we're *not* going to have a recount, that would imply that we were only talking about number. I find now that I hear the last note of the bass part (the E in systems 1 and 3) as an interval with the previous C flat. I'm worried about silly things like whether I might start rushing, or slowing, or fading, or changing key—all of which would be empirically impossible: though the modulation feeling is there all the time—with hearing the C flat held through the E the next chord seems like a radical 'key' change. The second chord in systems 2 and 4 seems to have a radical structure—being the only chord that doesn't have a tritone in it and sounds very strange indeed. It never fails to amaze me how you can count the repetitions as well as mark them on the sheet (like the way your marks are more neatly ordered than mine). I give quite a nervous dash at the paper either on the first B flat or between the B flat and D sharp thus crotchet B flat to crotchet D sharp with the penstroke on the quaver between! Early in the day I once wrote 2 marks because they fell on the first two quavers (I marked early)—so I had to leave the next repetition unmarked.

CH: The chord that I find most amazing is still the penultimate one in systems 2 and 4—possibly because of the minor 9th relation with the previous chord (a high B sharp to a lower C flat—this notation!).²⁷ The general downward movement by semitones of the bass also hits me from time to time, and it becomes very difficult not to emphasise those notes. I'm not sure that you will be last to play. If we go on in 30's the sequence is:— me to 765, you to 795, me to 825 . . . oh yes, so you do. Rather you than me. The urge to hold the last chord through another quaver or so will be quite great I think. Perhaps the easiest thing would be if I keep count in your last session, and when you get to 839 I'll hand you a piece of paper, or write 839 in the book—if I give it to you on 840, you'll immediately start making mistakes, if you're anything like me. Yeah, counting the dashes is difficult (not to say pointless). But there you are. I always have to make a mark as I play a note—usually the first B flat. The key-feel of the first few chords in systems 2 and 4 sometimes seems very clear—then it all blurs again. Likewise the bass—sometimes it's a very gentle melody, but once or twice it's sounded like a Nono first violin part. I think we'll end around 9.30, which is what we expected. I just can't remember this morning's speed (early morning, that is). It must have been very slow, to take us so long to get to 400.

GB: It looks as though I will be last—the best thing is if you keep count of my dashes (I'll still make them) and at 840th repetition you stand at side as though you were going to take over (less dramatic than a tap on the shoulder!!) I agree that penultimate chord is unbelievable; around that seems easiest for mistakes—the chord being unexpected. My earliest speed was 71 for the first 95 minutes!! I told the caretaker just now that it will be around 9.30 and so he's going to stay on, which is rather nice since he was the one who

let me in and he's been in and out all day. I'll play the last quaver absolutely strictly. Apart from Bill Hughes (the caretaker)—our longest listener has been Andrew Miles, a 3rd year sculptor, who's been here most of the day on and off. One of the staff, Peter Kelly, stayed for about 5 hours this morning and said that it was one of the loveliest pieces he'd ever heard. Apparently the hall clock was stopped at 11.40 earlier today (which is why we had no idea of the time of day earlier) and that while you were playing (about 10.30) it suddenly went right round to the correct time!

CH: It was while you were playing; the effect was very metaphorical!!

¹ Patrick Gowers, 'Satie's Rose Croix Music (1891-5)', *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*, vol.92 (1965-6), p.1.

² Letter dated 14 October 1974.

³ The issue of *Contrepoints* containing the first publication of *Vexations* also includes an article by Cage, but he makes no reference to the work.

⁴ 'Erik Satie' was reprinted, though without *Vexations*, in John Cage, *Silence* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), pp.76-82.

⁵ *Silence*, p.78.

⁶ Letter dated 10 September 1974.

⁷ Interview with Michael Nyman, June 1976 (unpublished).

⁸ 'I just couldn't envisage the music at any other speed' (letter dated 14 April 1972). Toop's second performance was perfectly consistent with his first.

⁹ John Cage, 'More Satie', *Musical America*, no.71 (1 April 1951), p.26 [letter to the editor]; reprinted in *John Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), pp.92-4.

¹⁰ This use of as many ways as possible of describing the same note might almost be thought of in terms of the various ways of depicting a three-dimensional object—by means of plan, front elevation, and side elevation. Commentators have occasionally described the three *Gymnopédies* in terms of three different views of the same state of affairs, and Satie characteristically gives a number of viewpoints for the drawings of the 'projet pour un buste de M. Erik Satie'. The activity of the performer's mind in switching from one mode of description to another for successive occurrences of the same event extends these multiple modes so that a level of privacy—that of the performer's mental acts—becomes an integral facet of the piece. The short texts in Satie's later piano works offer a further exploration of the direct dialogue between Satie and his interpreter, to which the listener cannot be privy. It is worth recalling that in the score of *Heures séculaires et instantanées* (June-July 1914) Satie wrote 'I prohibit any person to read the texts aloud during the period of musical performance. Every infringement will arouse my just indignation against the culprit. He will be granted no mercy.'

¹¹ 'Satie's music is handled with great sympathy by experimental musicians, Webern's music was brutally appropriated by the avant-garde.' Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music* (London: Studio Vista, 1974), p.33.

¹² [Irving] Fine, 'Satie Applauded: a Happening in South Dakota', *Clavier*, vol.8, no.3 (1969), p.34.

¹³ The list of pianists was given in the *North Wales Chronicle*, 13 February 1969.

¹⁴ The attentive reader will note that this performance was completed on Satie's birthday.

¹⁵ An account of this performance and the projects that Cage carried out at Davis are given in John Dinwiddie, 'Mewantemooseicday: John Cage in Davis 1969', *Source*, no.7 (1970), pp.21-6.

- ¹⁶ The idea for this form of collage probably came from a concert at the Round House, London, on 4 May 1969. Cage's *Atlas eclipticalis* was played by four percussionists (Tom Phillips, Christopher Hobbs, John Tilbury, and myself) for seven hours, during which a sequence of other compositions was also played: Cornelius Cardew, *The Great Digest, Paragraph 2*; Christian Wolff, *Stones*; Christopher Hobbs, *Voicepiece*; Howard Skempton, *Scumbling*; Eddie Prévoist, *Silver Pyramid*; La Monte Young, String Trio; Terry Jennings, String Quartet; George Brecht, *Candle Piece for Radio*. David Ahern, the organiser of the Australian performance of *Vexations*, played in both Jennings's Quartet and Young's Trio. The latter was particularly effective in the setting of a very sparse and distant accompaniment of *Atlas eclipticalis*, which was played from four parts of the upper gallery.
- ¹⁷ Racine gives an account of his work on *Vexations* in *Parachute*, no.17 (1979), pp.50-53.
- ¹⁸ Racine later learned of two Canadian performances that had preceded his own. The first, in 1975 at York University, Toronto, used a team of six pianists and lasted twelve hours; but since the performers, curiously, decided to play only the two harmonisations and not the entire motif, this was only half a performance and not a valid one. The second was given in Ottawa by a team of pianists organised by Ramon Pelinsky, a member of the music faculty at the University of Montreal; it lasted about 14 hours.
- ¹⁹ Racine undertook, too, to copy the whole of Flaubert's works by hand. The reasons for this are obscure. He may be a latter-day Pierre Menard, the Borges character who wrote *Don Quixote* a second time, or he may be taking an unusual path towards completing *Bouvard et Pecuchet*, or there may be some other explanation.
- ²⁰ The collection *Pages mystiques* consists of *Prière*, *Vexations*, and *Harmonies*.
- ²¹ The reference is to La Monte Young's *Composition 1960 no.15*.
- ²² During the first period of the performance I kept my overcoat on with the collar turned up.
- ²³ For example, in '45' for a Speaker', *Silence*, p.158: 'Years ago I asked myself "Why do I write music?" An Indian musician told me the traditional answer in India was "To sober the mind and thus make it susceptible to divine influences." Same answer is given by some old English composer.'
- ²⁴ It is curious that, in the middle of the performance, I was under the impression that there are double sharps in the notation—there are, in fact, none.
- ²⁵ A member of the audience tried to take down the elements of the piece (not the pitches); his listing began
- 1234(5)
12345(6)
12345(6)(6)
- ²⁶ See the section above on Richard Toop's performances. I sent these notes to Richard shortly after we had played *Vexations*. He said: "The "polemic" doesn't worry me at all; we always have to find some impurity in our predecessors in order to find faith in our own activity (this goes for me just as much as for anyone else: I took a lot of strength from the "impurity" of Cage's team performances, which was very important to me at the time, though naturally it seems trivial now). Actually I have only the dimmest memories of what happened at the end of either of my performances, though I remember being pestered by the media after both. What I do recollect about the ending of the second performance is that the extra rendering for the cameras was disjunct in time from the rest of the performance, i.e. there was a performance of 840 pages followed at some distance by a 1-page "farce d'atelier" for the T.V. men.'
- ²⁷ There are only two chords in the piece that are not diminished: the second chord in each system—an augmented triad (A, C sharp, F)—and the sixth chord from the end—an augmented 6th chord, or a dominant 7th spelled differently (F, A, D sharp).