

PATRICK SIMPSON
#6: VEXATIONS REVAMPED SCRIPT

[ERIK SATIE - VEXATIONS (PERFORMED BY ME, AROUND THE 45 MINUTE
MARK)]

[NICOLAS HORVATH INTERVIEW: “What you’re listening to, it’s a very weird piece of
music.”]

NICOLAS HORVATH, FRENCH PIANIST.

[“There is this old guy named Satie. And he never get out of his house, and he
composes for six months, and he composes very weird music named “Vexation.”
And for the first time in all the history of art, a composer is asking an interpreter to do
something, and what ask Erik Satie? Was to repeat the piece 840 time.”]

NICOLAS HAS PLAYED THIS PIECE, “VEXATIONS,” SOLO, IN ITS ENTIRETY,
ELEVEN TIMES.

[“That’s, quite a lot. And I always do alone, and without any stops, and otherwise I did, I
think the longest “Vexation” ever, or even the longest solo non-stop music, when I
played “Vexation” for 35 hours non-stop.”]

NOW, “VEXATIONS” ISN’T JUST SOME WEIRD, OBSCURE MUSIC THAT
WAS WRITTEN IN THE LAST TEN YEARS OR SO—IT’S ACTUALLY OVER A
CENTURY OLD. AND NICOLAS ISN’T THE ONLY GUY TO HAVE ACTUALLY
PERFORMED IT—RELAY TEAMS AND EVEN OTHER SOLO PIANISTS LIKE HIM
HAVE DONE TENS, IF NOT HUNDREDS OF PERFORMANCES OVER THE YEARS
SINCE IT WAS WRITTEN. THERE WAS EVEN ONE JUST LAST YEAR AT BUTLER
UNIVERSITY.

SO WHY WOULD ANYONE WANT TO REPEAT THIS ALMOST
UNLISTENABLE PIECE OF MUSIC 840 TIMES?

[BLUE WEDNESDAY - REWIND]

WELL, IT'S COMPLICATED. I'M PATRICK SIMPSON, AND THIS IS
MELOMANIA.

[REWIND]

SO LET'S GET SOME CONTEXT. "VEXATIONS" WAS WRITTEN BY ERIK
SATIE, WHO YOU MIGHT REMEMBER FROM THE LAST EPISODE ABOUT
AMBIENT MUSIC. HE NEVER PUBLISHED IT, OR EVEN TOLD ANYONE ABOUT IT
DURING HIS LIFETIME. IT WOULDN'T BE UNTIL 1949, NEARLY 25 YEARS AFTER
SATIE'S DEATH, THAT ANYONE WOULD TAKE NOTE OF IT. A BURGEONING
COMPOSER BY THE NAME OF JOHN CAGE WOULD HAVE THE PIECE BROUGHT
TO HIS ATTENTION BY ONE OF SATIE'S ASSOCIATES.

[REWIND STOPS ABRUPTLY]

OH AND IF YOU HAVEN'T HEARD OF CAGE, HE'S REALLY COOL,
PROBABLY ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT COMPOSERS OF THE TWENTIETH
CENTURY, CHECK OUT HIS STUFF IF YOU CAN.

[REWIND STARTS AGAIN]

SO ANYWAYS, BY THE TIME CAGE FOUND "VEXATIONS," HE'D ALREADY
COME TO ADMIRE SATIE'S ECCENTRICITY AND SCORN FOR THE MUSIC
ESTABLISHMENT. AT THE SAME TIME, HE WAS DEVELOPING AN INTEREST IN
ZEN BUDDHISM. "VEXATIONS" WAS A PERFECT COMBINATION OF THE TWO.

DECIDING THAT A PERFORMANCE WAS NOT ONLY POSSIBLE, BUT ESSENTIAL, HE ORGANIZED A GROUP OF AVANT-GARDE PIANISTS TO PLAY “VEXATIONS” IN TWENTY MINUTE SHIFTS. THEY STARTED AT SIX P-M ON SEPTEMBER 9TH, 1963, AND PLAYED UNTIL LUNCHTIME THE FOLLOWING DAY.

[I’VE GOT A SECRET - “... because I read recently in the paper that there was a very short composition that was played 820 times or something, and were you two involved in that playing of that piece of music?”]

THIS IS A CLIP FROM THE OLD SIXTIES GAME SHOW *I’VE GOT A SECRET*, THE EPISODE THAT AIRED A WEEK AFTER THE PERFORMANCE.

[“I think that is close enough. We’ll give them the entire 80 dollars, and I will tell you panel that this is John Cale, a composer musician who last week performed in a concert to end all concerts.”]

OH AND ALSO, THAT GUY JOHN CALE? JUST ONE YEAR LATER, HE WOULD CO-FOUND THE VELVET UNDERGROUND WITH LOU REED.

[“What was really unusual about this particular concert?

Well, the performance took 18 hours.

18 hours and 40 minutes, to be exact. *applause*”]

AFTER THIS INFAMOUS DEBUT, “VEXATIONS” ONLY GREW IN POPULARITY. IT BECAME A RITE OF PASSAGE, A MOUNT EVEREST FOR YOUNG EXPERIMENTAL PIANISTS. BUT STILL,

[REWIND STOPS ABRUPTLY]

IT BEGS THE QUESTION:

[“What would move a man to say you must play it 840 times for it to be
complete?

I have no idea. *laughter*”]

[DISPARITION - LOJACONO]

WELL, THERE ARE A LOT OF THEORIES, ALL OF WHICH ARE MOSTLY SPECULATION. SATIE WAS KNOWN FOR HAVING A “PECULIAR” SENSE OF HUMOR, SO A LOT OF PEOPLE DISMISS “VEXATIONS” AS JUST ONE OF SATIE’S PRIVATE JOKES.

BUT OTHERS CLAIM THAT IT’S MEANT TO BE A KIND OF MUSICAL MANTRA. YOU SEE, SATIE HAD AN AFFINITY FOR THIS RELIGIOUS CULT CALLED THE ROSICRUCIANS, SO IT MAKES SENSE FOR HIM TO WRITE A PIECE THAT TRIES TO ACHIEVE THE SAME EFFECT AS A ROSICRUCIAN CHANT.

[ROSICRUCIAN CHANT]

SOME ALSO SAY THAT IT’S A PARODY OF THE EXTREMELY LONG AND GRANDIOSE WORKS OF RICHARD WAGNER, PROBABLY THE MOST FAMOUS COMPOSER AT THE TIME. WAGNER INVENTED WHAT HE CALLED THE “UNENDING MELODY” IN OPERA, WHERE THE MUSIC WOULD CONSTANTLY EBB AND FLOW, BUT NEVER STOP.

[RICHARD WAGNER - TRISTAN AND ISOLDE]

“VEXATIONS” COULD ALSO BE A STUDY IN BOREDOM, OR A METHOD OF FREEING YOURSELF FROM THE CONSTRAINTS OF WESTERN TONALITY, OR EVEN SATIE’S WAY OF PUNISHING HIMSELF AFTER A BAD BREAKUP WITH

SUZANNE VALADON, THE ONLY WOMAN HE EVER HAD A RELATIONSHIP WITH
IN HIS LIFE.

[MIKE SCHELLE INTERVIEW - "Maybe he was drunk.

Yeah.

Who knows? I can't answer that."]

THIS IS MIKE SCHELLE, PROFESSOR AND COMPOSER-IN-RESIDENCE AT
BUTLER UNIVERSITY. YOU MAY REMEMBER HIM FROM THE EPISODE ABOUT
QUOTING IN CLASSICAL MUSIC.

["So, just, it doesn't matter?

I don't think it matters. We'll never know. I think it planted the seed for something
that became the 20th century. So, I think in that respect, he'd probably go 'wow, I never
thought it would become *that*,' and influence entire composers, like Cage and La Monte
Young, and that was one of the pieces they would hold up as their mantra, as their god.
So I don't know if he would've thought that. Same way, Ravel, he just wrote Bolero on a

bet, right? Over the weekend."]

[MAURICE RAVEL - BOLERO]

["And now if anyone knows Ravel on the street, they know Bolero. And Ravel
would go 'really? I'd rather you listen to my piano concerto! Or my string quartet...' But
we can't—I know that's not exactly the question, would he feel this way, but we—all
artists, painters, composers, everybody—we do what we do, and we put it out there,
and how you're gonna react, we can't anticipate. We're never gonna know. So we
always take those chances."]

SO WHILE IT'S USEFUL TO KNOW SOME OF THE THEORIES ABOUT WHAT SATIE WAS THINKING WHEN HE WROTE "VEXATIONS," ULTIMATELY THE ONLY THING THAT MATTERS IS WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM IT TODAY. WHICH BRINGS US BACK TO NICOLAS HORVATH...

[NICOLAS HORVATH INTERVIEW: "I had to feel the piano, I had to feel the audience, and there was something very spiritual out of this piece..."]

... THE FRENCH PIANIST FROM THE BEGINNING WHO'S PLAYED "VEXATIONS" SOLO ELEVEN TIMES. NOW, FOR THE LAST PART OF THIS EPISODE, I'M GOING TO STOP NARRATING AND JUST LET NICOLAS DESCRIBE HIS EXPERIENCE PLAYING THE PIECE, AND WHAT IT MEANS TO HIM. OBVIOUSLY, HE KNOWS IT WELL, AND HONESTLY, I THINK IT WOULD KIND OF RUIN IT IF I INTERJECTED WITH MY OWN THOUGHTS WHILE HE WAS TALKING. SO, HERE'S WHAT HE HAS TO SAY.

[VEXATIONS]

["You will start also to enter into the pianist's mind. And to see the little differences because, you know you always try to play exactly the same, but you're not a robot, so you're not able to do it. And, slowly by slowly, because you're inspired by your own metabolism, and your own thoughts, slowly by slowly everything changes. I mean your interpretation change. Because you're really experiencing something. And I think this is the real meaning of the piece 'Vexation,' is a huge journey through the ages, mankind age. I mean, human age. Like from [born? bone?], to anger, to despair, to sorrow, to sadness, and to oblivion, and to the end."]

[VEXATIONS]

["I mean for three days, I stop to eat and drink. To be spiritually ready, and also not to stop myself during my performance to go to the bathroom, because this is something very important too. So, when you arrive to the concert hall, doing the 'Vexation,' you are already like a zombie. Because, three day without food and drink, sometimes you can't even walk properly. Well you start. And slowly by slowly you enter into the piece. And for couple of hours, nothing is really happening. You try to do your best, but that's all. And slowly by slowly, you start to think about yourself, because you know the piece. And, past few hours, and after couple of time you start to express some kind of tiredness, because it's very tiring. Then you start to have problem with your muscles, that you have to unlock, to I mean to, the stress, put away all the cramps. And after a time you simply wonder why you're doing that, I mean, what is the point? You're doing something that few people care, and especially the time in the audience, you know in middle of the night. You simply don't understand the point, and you're only like at 400 or 500, and there is 400 more to go, you're only at the half of it. And even sometime you want to stop."]

[VEXATIONS]

["This is one of the phase. Also, there is another phase that doesn't came often. I call it satori, or nirvana, you can call it whatever you want, and it happens to me the first time I did 'Vexation.' I remember it's like, like a lightning, coming on your head. And I still remember the first time, I got the feeling that all my life, with all my actions, everything was linked together. And I understood that I got this big, not drama but, you know when you have a big friendship or big relation and it stop out of the blue? And you understand that, it's because one day you did that, and you say that, and it's far away,

and you can see all your action, like all your life at one shot. And I feel, even for that,
only for that, the 'Vexation' is worth."]

[VEXATIONS]

["And also there is a last phase, that doesn't also happen everytime, and now especially that I know the piece, and I call that the departure phase. I mean, this is when you arrive at 800. And it's very funny because, in a certain way you always hope to end the piece, because it's long, and it's some time, and you simply don't understand why you're doing it, but you're doing it, and you hope that you arrive at the end, but you see that there are so many page left, that you don't know how it would, when it will finish.

And when you arrive at 800, sometimes, you start to slow down."]

[VEXATIONS BEGINS TO SLOW DOWN]

["Not because you want to make it the longest ever, this is not the point, but simply because you don't want to finish it. In a way, we all experience that, the moment that, when you have someone you really really love, and you bring this person to a train station. And you see this person taking the train and you know in yourself that you will never see this person once again. And this is the end of 'Vexation' for me."]

[VEXATIONS]

["It's strange. And there is no beginning, there is no end. So, instead of a concert, you don't need to be sit down, you don't need to be, to think very deeply about the music, you simply should let yourself go. You should lay down, close your eyes, and relax, and you don't need to listen to the music, you simply need to hear it. And you simply have to let the music go through your ear, your body, and you have to let yourself go. And it's like you're falling into the music, slowly, by slowly, by slowly, by

slowly, by slowly, by slowly, by slowly, by slowly... it's like if you were touching skies, or touching world within your heart. And you simply let yourself talk to the music and talk

with the music.”]

[VEXATIONS]

MELOMANIA IS WRITTEN AND PRODUCED BY ME, PATRICK SIMPSON.

THE TRACKS THAT I USED ARE, IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE, BLUE WEDNESDAY'S REWIND, DISPARITION'S LOJACONO, WAGNER'S TRISTAN UND ISOLDE, AND RAVEL'S BOLERO. MELOMANIA IS A PRODUCTION OF 91.3 WHJE, BROADCASTING FROM BEAUTIFUL, DOWNTOWN, CARMEL INDIANA. THANKS FOR LISTENING.