

J. P. CONTAMINE DE LATOUR

(1867–1926)

Patrice Contamine, as he was known to close friends like Satie, was in reality José Maria Vicente Ferrer, Francisco de Paula, Patricio Manuel Contamine, as Ornella Volta has discovered. He was born in Tarragona in Spain and was a prolific writer of poems, plays, short stories and newspaper articles, which he rather grandly signed 'J. P. Contamine de Latour' or, around the turn of the century, 'Lord Cheminot'. He claimed to be related to Napoleon, but in reality he was as poor as Satie in the 1880s when they discovered the delights of the Chat Noir together. Satie's earliest dedication to Contamine was the *Fantaisie-valse* and it is Latour's apocalyptic verses that appear on the manuscript of the first *Sarabande* in 1887. They continued to collaborate until about 1905 and shared a love of provocative practical jokes, esoteric sects, mysticism and deliberate eccentricity. Satie called him 'Le Vieux Modeste' and Patrice's sister, Barbara, married another of Satie's collaborators, Henry Pacory. Latour's verses are often sentimental and platitudinous, sometimes bizarre, but

he was exactly the sort of catalyst Satie needed at the outset of his career.

When we were young – under 20 – Erik Satie often used to say to me: 'When I'm dead, you'll write *Erik Satie, His Life and Works*.' And he'd burst into fits of loud, honest laughter, so preposterous did the idea seem to him. He even spoke of dying at 25, like the sick romantic hero in the works of the poet Millevoye:* 'They'll put me in a little invalid carriage and you'll take me for walks in the sun.' A simple joke, designed to elicit my protestations (which amused him hugely) against this forthcoming role as nurse.

He did not die at 25, happily for him, for those of us who loved him and for music, which he served with a courageous loyalty; and I never thought I would one day have the melancholy task of fulfilling the duty which he self-mockingly laid upon me.

We were joined in a fraternal friendship. I don't know how it began: probably through one of those vague channels which chance makes use of to unite two beings with the same affinities, and which continue to exercise a considerable influence on our life even after they're no longer part of it.

We were inseparable, spending our days and part of our nights together, exchanging ideas, planning ambitious projects, dreaming of sensational successes, growing drunk on crazy hopes and laughing at our own poverty. I could say we lived out the final episodes of Murger's *La bohème*, transplanted from the Latin Quarter to Montmartre. We didn't eat every day, but we never missed an aperitif: I remember a particular pair of trousers and a pair of shoes which used to pass from one to the other, and which we had to mend every morning before going off in search of the hypothetical publisher who would set the seal on our genius and open up the avenues of riches and fame. It was a happy life.

Even so, Satie could have spared himself these struggles and privations. He came from an excellent family who refused him nothing, and he himself, in the first years of our friendship, proved sensible, level-headed, and inclined to favour elegance and good manners. But his instinct was calling him away from this path. If he had gone on living in this milieu,

*Charles-Hubert Millevoye (1782–1816), a consumptive poet, whose work was often melancholic in a manner later associated with Romanticism.

his personality would never have broken free. It was Rodolphe Salis's Chat Noir which revealed his vocation to him and transformed him completely.

He entered the Conservatoire at the age of 12, going into Georges Mathias's [Émile Descombes'] piano class. To be a pianist, giving lessons and concerts, seemed to him then to be the most enviable of positions. He worked hard at Beethoven and J. S. Bach, at Schumann and Chopin, at Liszt and César Franck: but in so working he remained the slave of an essentially whimsical temperament. When all is said, he was a fairly mediocre student. His teacher, recognising that he had his serious side, used to deplore this lack of application. He would tell him frequently, 'You're a thoroughgoing delinquent!'

Satie couldn't have cared less. The most striking feature of his studies at the time was that they would allow him to get away with one year in the reserves instead of the prescribed five years of military service: and that, for him, was enough.

At that time Massenet was the idol of the young at the Conservatoire, where he was a professor of composition. His pupils saw everything through his eyes and did their best to imitate his style. Satie underwent his influence and, without any study of fugue or counterpoint, of which he was totally ignorant, composed a few songs (*Élégie, Sylvie, Complainte**) which were entirely after Massenet's manner. These were his first attempts at composition, the babblings of a talent which was to develop markedly in the course of time – the kind of pale, beginner's efforts which one disavows in one's maturity. *in etwa, abstrakter*

P. Contamine de Latour

'Erik Satie intime: souvenirs de jeunesse', *Comoedia*, 3 August 1925, p. 2